

History: How have empires throughout history shaped the societies we live in today?

“Empires inevitably fall, and when they do, history judges them for the legacies they leave behind.” - Noah Feldman (American Legal Professional)

Over the past 4,000 years, numerous empires have come and gone, and in its wake, society has undoubtedly experienced both positive and harmful influences. This essay demonstrates how although empires' rule had certain negative impacts, their positive influences greatly outweighed them. It discusses the impact and influence of empires, which are evident in practically every sphere of society and have a cascading effect on the economy and governance system of many a nation. Empires have provided a framework for development, helping countries progress by laying the foundations of, or acting as catalysts for the formation of the present society.

Firstly, an indelible mark has been left on the education system. The Ottoman Empire established more than 300 learning centres, called *medreses*. Students from all over the world came to study there. This is reflected in today's international schools, colleges and universities. The system of grades, standards, or classes, where children are separated into age groups, hiring teachers for specific subjects, organising teaching according to subject curricula, conducting qualifying examinations for pupils, and sending instructors overseas for further education and training, are all developments brought about by the Ottoman Empire in the 17th Century. They were heavily influenced by European missionary-style schools, under the British Empire¹. The British Empire, spreading the English Language over 13.71 million square miles, has played a huge role in

¹ Article, Lessons from the Ottoman Empire by Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, <https://www.scidev.net/global/opinions/lessons-from-the-ottoman-empire/>

transforming education, and hence the global standing of many parts of the world, especially its colonies in Asia and Africa. Credit can be given to the Greek and Roman Empires as Latin and Greek influenced the English we use today. According to ISC Research, as of July 2022, there are 13,180 English-medium international schools in the world². An average of 26% of all Indian school kids study in English-medium schools, reaching more than 60% in cities like Delhi³.

When the British colonial rule ended in India in 1947, India's contribution to the global GDP had decreased from 27% in 1700 to 3%, 90% of the population was living below the poverty line, and only 17% were literate. Despite this, India has indirectly benefited in some ways from the English influence left behind. It has helped Indians get integrated into the global workforce and status because of the knowledge they have of the English language and the Western world. Job outsourcing in the service industry in developed countries has increased job opportunities and helped developing countries like India progress, owing to its large English-speaking workforce. This is also visible in other British ex-colonies where the English language and Westernisation unifies and creates relationships across the entire globe, leading to a developed, interconnected society with confidence in their strength to overcome setbacks of empires they have been ruled by.

Additionally, the trading system is another feature which has been shaped by empires that strengthens relationships between societies and also economically benefits low to middle-income countries by including them in world trading systems, leading to a more prosperous

² News Article, The New International School Data for 2022, <https://iscresearch.com/international-school-data-for-2022/>

³ News, India News, 26% of schoolkids in English medium; nearly 60% in Delhi, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/26-of-schoolkids-in-english-medium-nearly-60-in-delhi/articleshow/84082483.cms>

society with a higher quality of life. The Mongol Empire established trade along the Silk Route in Central Asia. The Pax Mongolica (Mongol peace), assured imperial subjects of safety and freedom while trading. The concept of trade has been prevalent since the Greek and Roman times. People had to rely on other areas for needs such as food and clothing and this is relevant today where countries rely on each other for certain amenities or luxuries. The Pax Romana (Roman peace) also encouraged trade. Trade also established the concept of currency and exchange rates, a ‘critical companion’ of society⁴. Empires like the Qin Dynasty created a standardised system of weights, measurements, and money so that it would be easy to trade and collect taxes⁵. Paper money was introduced during the Tang Dynasty in China and the Mongol Empire and the Napoleonic Empire realised its importance. The trade of ideas throughout history has shaped how society behaves and functions and has given the world access to universal ways to run or entertain themselves efficiently and sustainably.

The ideas invented by different empires throughout history have been passed down to today’s society. The Julian calendar, ordered by the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar in 45 B.C. is the basis of the twelve-month, 365-day, Gregorian calendar we use today, which affects society’s routine or seasonal activity⁶. People these days love listening to new ideas of entertainment, style, and fashion. The Roman poet Ovid once said, “I cannot keep track of fashion. Every day, or so it seems, brings in a different style.”⁷ In the Greek and Roman Empires, theatre acts with singing and dancing were very popular. This has not ceased to this day and with the movie industry

⁴ Money and Society: A Critical Companion, book by Axel T. Paul

⁵ Article, Qin Dynasty, Inna Zheng, Christopher Aiello, Imogen Horn, Henry Rouslin, <https://ancient-china-qin-dynasty.weebly.com/culture.html>

⁶ CT State Library, Colonial Records and Topics, 1752 Calendar Change, <https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/colonialresearch/calendar#:~:text=In%2045%20B.C.%2C%20Julius%20Caesar,March%201%20to%20January%201.>

⁷ Great Ages of Man, A History of the World’s Cultures, Imperial Rome by Moses Hadas and The Editors of TIME-LIFE Books, Page 80

taking inspiration from theatrical plays, there have been over 500,000 movies made worldwide till date. The stadium today is a reflection of the Roman Colosseums. The chariot races and gladiator fights called for team spirit, support, victory, and loss, emotions ubiquitous in the present day. Cricket is the second most popular sport in the world with 2.5 billion fans, which was introduced by the British Empire. Apart from England, nine of the other eleven full members of the International Cricket Council are former British colonies⁸. Ideas of routine entertainment like these spark virtues and characteristics that are present in society today, like patriotism, sympathy, teamwork, and inclusivity.

The ability to express one's thoughts, acquire knowledge, and participate in intellectual exchanges led to a growth in perspective and thinking. Inequality, discrimination, social evils, and injustices began to be noticed. There has been a discernible shift in women's liberation and their status and role in society through the evolving history of empires. Racism, slavery, social inequality, and a caste system have been pervasive in almost every empire, with the Qin Dynasty varying in their treatment of subjects based on their social position or the Roman and British slavery, spreading a lack of respect for the 'inferior'. However, these unfair treatments gave rise to societies that fought back with resilience like the French Revolution and the Civil Rights Movement. The atrocities, hence, helped in unifying societies. Similarly, though the dominance of empires often led to the dilution of culture and tradition, some of them like that of the British, did help in the elimination or decline of social evils like *sati*, female foeticide, and untouchability. This helped societies following these practices to progress and not be held back by cruel traditions.

⁸ Article, Cricket: The Sport of Empire, <https://web.uvic.ca/vv/student/cricket/empire/empire.html#:~:text=Today%2C%20many%20countries%20which%20once,the%20West%20Indies%2C%20and%20Zimbabwe>)

Another way empires have shaped society is by introducing and accepting different religions. Again, though some of them like the Roman Emperor Nero and a few Muslim rulers did persecute other religions, most of these were fueled by personal ambition and selfishness and were abolished later during the empire. The Roman Empire loved having religious and cultural discussions. It also helped Christianity to spread with the Pax Romana and the development of roads, which helped missionaries to travel easily. The Mauryan Empire in India was largely responsible for the spread of Buddhism. Ancient Greece was secular in its governance and then the Tanzimat (1840s to 70s)⁹, which was a reform era that reorganised the Ottoman Empire, encouraged social cohesion, and aimed to integrate non-Muslims and non-Turks more thoroughly into Ottoman society by enhancing their civil liberties and granting them equality throughout the Empire. It included representatives other than Muslims in their Chamber of Deputies¹⁰. Though in today's world, religious tolerance, equity, and inclusivity may not be as evident in practice with ongoing wars among religions and ethnicities, 96 countries are secular in their constitutions and almost all countries have rules against discrimination¹¹. Empires influenced today's secularism and representation of all ethnic and religious backgrounds of people.

Furthermore, empires have left an indelible mark on the fabric of governance and law which has a huge hold on societies today. Even if the mindset in some societies has not changed, the law now prohibits social evils and discrimination. The Rule of Law was introduced in the Roman

⁹ Article, Reformism (historical), Ottoman Empire
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformism_\(historical\)#Ottoman_Empire:_1840s%E2%80%931870s](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformism_(historical)#Ottoman_Empire:_1840s%E2%80%931870s)

¹⁰ Article, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Constitutional_Era

¹¹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/secular-countries>

Empire and is present in 139 countries of the world today¹². The Mauryan Empire invented the system of checks and balances with their council of ministers, preventing corruption in the government and hence protecting the people of the country. A codified legal system, hierarchical organisation, bureaucracy, legal frameworks, and administration, all have some sort of influence from empires. The Greek Empire with Athenian democracy is the father of democracy today. The Greeks are regarded as the founders of Western civilization. According to the Economist Democracy Index, in 2022, 24 countries were full democracies, and 48 of them flawed democracies¹³. The concept of law and order, justice for crimes, punishments, and sentences were present from crucifixion in the Roman Empire, to Legalism in the Qin Dynasty. Although prosecutions are not that brutal now, the concept has remained quite the same and has helped societies develop.

Empires throughout history have left indomitable legacies in especially the societies that we live in. Each empire looked beyond its boundaries, forging relationships with other parts of the world, and contributing to the advancement of society. As historian David McCullough said “History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are.” History has been a great teacher for today’s societies. Humans have always used learning from history to build and develop societies, their relationships, economies, and governments up to the way they are, and empires are a huge part of history. The craftsmanship of empires will last forever, continuously shaping societies.

¹² World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index 2021
<https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-INDEX-21.pdf>

¹³ Article, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Economist_Democracy_Index

“You have to look at history as an evolution of society” - Jean Chretien (Former Prime Minister of Canada)