

How have empires throughout history shaped the societies we live in today? (1500 words)

The world that we thrive in today is, at its core, a product of what we've endured throughout centuries. The sociocultural and political dynamics, as well as the overarching anthropological framework of the world, are moulded by history. Also, considering that we live in contemporary times, it's imperative to acknowledge that years of colonial rule and empires have greatly influenced the sociocultural structure. While aspects such as architecture, art and food reflect the colonial rule of a certain region, it's imperative to note that these aspects are easily evident physical manifestations of the impact of empires. They are merely the tip of the iceberg. There are more aspects, often unseen and unheard which 'shape' the way a society is and functions. This essay aims to delve deeper into those unseen aspects of how empires have chiselled our contemporary and modern society.

One of the most notable and obvious ways in which empires have shaped the societies we live in today is language. Language is the most integral pillar of society as it ensures the preservation of a society of the years, facilitates communication and enables interactions. This aspect can be explored in two forms: one of its existence itself and the other of its prevalence in society today. With 1.5 billion speakers globally¹, English is the third most widely spoken language. The Roman Empire is responsible for the development of modern English. Several Latin words serve as the foundation for English words; even the alphabets themselves are derived from the Latin alphabet. Although below 1% of the world's population² still speaks Latin³, the sustenance and preservation of the language can be seen continuing in English. Another empire, however, is responsible for the prevalence of the English language in our world today: the British Empire. Their geopolitical power had allowed them to widen the scope of English speakers. For instance, in South Africa, British rule began in 1806⁴ and by the end of the 19th century, half a million immigrants had settled in the area, and the majority spoke English. Today, it is one of the 11 official languages of South Africa.

Another extremely fundamental pillar of society, which has been heavily impacted by empires is commerce as well as politics. The origin of the idea of democracy, for instance, can be traced back to the fifth century BCE⁵ in the Greek empire. Today's American government system is a representative democracy⁶, which has been derived from ancient Greece's direct democracy. Even social systems such as taxation and monetary wages were prominent in the Greek empire; this has been trickled down into modern society, back boning the structure of many economies. Even the effects of modern empire politics can be felt even today. The political tensions triggered after years of imperial rule and even, conflict between imperial powers can kindle unrest today. For instance, the chosen P5 members of the UN, who

possess veto power over other countries, were particularly chosen due to the aftermath of World War II⁷. This exclusive privilege they boast creates global inequality during decision-making. Russia's vote in favour of condemning the annexation of Ukraine⁸ is an example of how this power can be misused and pave the way for further political friction. However, the existence of empires themselves and tensions engendered due to territorial acquisitions eventually led to the establishment of the UN, an international organ that facilitates peace-keeping and resolves conflict.

The impact is manifested in the establishment of supra-national organisations and their functioning, as discussed above. Centuries of imperialism are casting shadows on today's international affairs from Brexit⁹ to the Israel-Palestine conflict, stretching to Indo-Pak tensions. The effects of imperialism can be seen, seeping into the cracks of nations' relations with each other. Take, for instance, the surging war between Israel and Palestine; the kindling of this war wasn't due to a singular act which was solely responsible for propelling the tension. The UN proposal of 1947¹⁰ of dividing the land into two halves, in pursuit of them obtaining independence based on religious identities had furied the Arabs; they perceived the proposal as 'too European'. This sprung up the Arab-Isreali war causing reforms in land distribution and a refugee crisis of 7 million Palestinians¹¹, by 1948. This intensified, over the years, into the current state of the war, where over 20,000 people have been killed since October 7th 2023¹². While the history can be traced back to centuries of 'ancient religious hatreds', according to Vox¹¹, the more eminent root cause stems from the division of the land in the 20th century itself. One can notice how historical empires have moulded today's geopolitics and international relations.

A way in which empires have impacted societies, beyond how they institutionally or systematically function is by transforming them genetically or demographically: a rather unheard aspect. South Asians, in comparison to their European counterparts, are two to six times more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes¹³. This stark likelihood of a South Asian being more susceptible to this disease isn't merely due to their lifestyle and dietary habits. Research, spearheaded by Dr. Mubin Syed¹⁴, suggests a correlation between British colonial rule in India and the high rates of diabetes among the population. The precedence of over 25 major famines, causing over 60 million deaths of Indians¹⁵, had made South Asians more starvation-adapted. While the famines were caused by external factors such as drought and weather changes, stern British policies such as land taxes, and the exportation of food from the country had exacerbated the effects. For instance, the Bengal famine of 1943 is infamously known for the death of 3 million Indians due to the incompetency of the British officials who directed their food supply for war efforts. These famines have, epigenetically, made South Asian genes starvation, meaning that their bodies are resistant to insulin which is meant to process and regulate energy in their bodies. Hence, causing sugar

to get stored as fat instead of absorbed by muscle and liver cells. This increases the risk of type 2 diabetes and even, hyperglycemia in forthcoming generations. This example is reflective of how colonial rule, to date, has so severely affected the genetic health and dietary habits of an entire subcontinent. It serves as an example of how unfair policies which favoured deindustrialisation and exploitation of a nation had altered genes and how bodies respond to stimuli.

Culture is what defines the lifestyle that individuals of a society partake in. Aspects such as clothing, food, and festivals are fragments of what a culture comprises but aren't culture itself; While these aspects are imperative in identifying and even, defining a certain culture, they serve as physical manifestations of the values and belief systems that a culture abides by. One can notice how imperial rule has, as its surface, changed those physical manifestations. Hence, the impact of imperial rule in terms of altering and transforming those values and beliefs can be considered far more significant as they hinder the integrity of a society's culture. An example of this can be seen in the pre-British Raj era, where homosexuality was accepted and even, celebrated in Indian society. Several ancient scriptures such as the story of Shikhandini from the Mahabharata and chapter nine of the Kamasutra discuss gender fluidity and sexual activities amongst transgender individuals respectively; if literary examples weren't adequate, even a multitude of temples and worship sites engraved sculptures of men sexually engaging with each other; an example of this is Khajuraho temple, built during 950 to 1050 AD¹⁶. Even the founder of the Mughal empire, Babur, had explicitly expressed his homoerotic preferences in his memoirs. However, when the British colonised India, India's inclusion and acceptance of homosexuality and gender fluidity didn't align with British ideals. In 1861, when India was under British rule, the British criminalised homosexuality, under Section 377 of their penal code¹⁷.

This enforcement led to a paradigm shift in people's mindsets, perceiving homosexuality as sinful and/or immoral. This trickles down to Indian society 'today': while the Indian government decriminalised homosexuality in 2017, the stigmatisation of homosexuality is still prevalent¹⁸. This colonial conditioning can also be mirrored to the act of cosmetic lightening of one's skin to adhere to Euro-centric ideals of beauty, which the British also enforced. These examples reflect how colonial rule had socially conditioned the minds of people colonised, marinating into newly developed ideals and beliefs in their societies. Hence, leaving a colonial hangover and altering the fundamental basics of what a 'culture' was once.

As a result, ancient empires laid a foundation for modern scientific and technological innovation, art and philosophy. While it does impact the functioning of our institutions today, it's imperative to delve deeper

into how the legacies of modern empires have an immediate impact on today's socioeconomic framework. The establishment of empires and their respective histories have carved certain intricacies in our world; as one explores the nuances and complexities of our world's politics, economies and sociocultural dynamics, links to empires can be traced. Thus, revealing their true impact on shaping the societies we live in today.

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