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**A CRITICAL NOTE ON THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL  
BACKGROUND OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IN ENGLAND**

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**Abstract:**

This research paper is an account of a study about the socio-political and cultural background of the eighteenth century in England. This will enrich the understanding about the major conditions and situations which played a significant role in shaping the destiny of eighteenth-century England. Simultaneously, we will look to the cultures, fashions and manners of those times which are an interesting part of this account.

**Keywords:** Commerce, Constituency, Consumerism, Division, Instability, Manufacturing, Renaissance, Unemployment

Political Instability: During the eighteenth century several relevant historical movements and conditions demand our attention. The competition between the Whigs and Tories continues. The Britain faced political instability. After

the death of George II, George III ascended the throne. This new king became the most controversial British monarch. We can imagine the instability of the situation by knowing that in the first ten years of the reign administrations changed seven times. In 1761 Pitt resigned and Newcastle was made to share power with John Stuart, earl of Brute. In 1762, Newcastle resigned and Bute led the government till 1763. Bute was replaced by Grenville who in turn was dismissed in 1765. The next year Watson-Wentworth served as the first lord of the treasury. In 1766, Rockingham was dismissed and replaced by Pitt. From 1768 to 1770 Augustus Henry, duke of Grafton led the government. In 1770 the king found a minister whom he could trust, and that was Frederick, Lord North. Obviously, such political instability creates an obstacle for Britain to tackle the problem of its American colonies.

But division and instability were not just in political systems. This period also witnessed bad harvests, a rise in food prices and irregular unemployment. Such economic and social problems led to the public agitation over Jon Wilkes who was a

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

protestant dissenter. He was an irresponsible and immoral man who failed to obtain a government post. His disappointment pushed him to opposition journalism. In 1763 his papers were marked seditious, and he and some other people were arrested. But Charles Pratt, the chief justice of the court of common pleas acquitted him. In 1764 he was tried for sedition and obscenity. In 1768, he was elected a Member of Parliament for Middlesex, which was the most populous constituency in England.

Wilkes was declared ineligible for election and was imprisoned in the Tower of London. This generated a nationwide agitation. He was seen as a martyr for liberty. Society for the Supporters of the Bill of Rights was founded to introduce parliamentary reforms. It raised the demand for parliamentary representations for new towns like Birmingham and Manchester. English and American colonists were becoming interested in parliamentary representation and the obligation to pay taxes.

In 1778 Parliament made concessions for those British Roman Catholics who were excluded from civil rights. George Gordon launched a movement called the Protestant Association to repeal the Catholic Relief Act of 1778. This movement reached London and

exploded in riots. Many people were killed and property was damaged. In March 1782, the majority of Lord North fell, and he resigned against the wishes of George III. Then a new administration was formed under Lord Ruckingham. When he died, William Petty became the first lord of the treasury. He concluded peace with the Americans and British defeat in the Treaty of Paris . The war brought humiliation and the loss of profitable regions of the Empire. Then Britain again went to war against France in 1793.

In 1783, Britain recovered other West Indian Islands lost during the war. Holland granted freedom of navigation to Britain in its spice islands. A Lord North-James Fox coalition administration planned to strengthen their position by passing a bill to reform the government of British settlements in India, which was previously administered by the East India Company alone. The lords threw the bill out in 1783. This gives an excuse to set aside Fox and North and replace them with William Pitt the younger. He got a parliamentary majority in the election of 1784. In 1786 he signed a commercial agreement called the Eden Treaty with France. In 1790 he demonstrated power and prestige of Britain by negotiating between Austria and Turkey. In 1784 he passed the India Act for regulating affairs of India and the East India Company.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Social and Economic Developments: Though the quality of life in Britain changed but not evenly. Changes were observed in the towns and among the prosperous. Landowners owned estates ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 acres. Such estates belonged to the dukes, earls and barons. Due to such hereditary titles, they have the right to sit in the House of Lords. Such people possessed fine houses in London. The earls spent money on the house and gardens. Expansion of trade and commerce forged powerful mercantile classes like Smiths were associated with banking and Strutts with textile manufacturing.

People associated with various political positions like House of Lords and the House of Commons owned land. Lord Lieutenants were appointed by the kings for maintaining law and order in their counties. For assistance in such tasks they appointed deputy lieutenants and justices. Such people have local influence and status. Middle income-groups were increasing in number. Professional opportunities in medicine, banking and government service expanded. Job opportunities increased in leisure and luxury industries.

The centre of the commerce was the city of London. It was only a real national metropolis and unique in its size and multiplicity of functions. By the mid eighteenth century this city had ten percent

of the total population of Britain. London was the chief port and financial centre of the nation. Simultaneously, provincial towns were also growing in size and importance. The towns became safer and more pleasant places to live in. Supplies of clean water and sophistication of urban planning and architecture were some important features of the town.

Cultural Developments: There was a growing consumer culture, led by newly available products like coffee, tea and porcelain. Provincial centres developed cultural lives of their own, with libraries, assembly rooms, theatres, assembly rooms and coffee houses. Such establishments supplied their customers with newspapers and space for gossip. It served as a base for debating parties, clubs and political activities. Schools developed in towns and nearby areas. The most dramatic advance in communication came in the form of newspaper. Provinces generated their own books, dictionaries, magazines and advertisements.

This age shows a minor Renaissance that reached nearly all Europe. Increase in comfort and luxury coincided with a general uplifting of the human intellect.

In England the new learning took several branches. In literary writings we saw the revival of Romanticism. Research into literary forms like ballad, new editions

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

of the old authors like Shakespeare and Geoffrey Chaucer were an important feature of it. The publication of the *Reliaues* by Bishop Percy contained beautiful specimens of ballad literature which is a landmark in the Romantic Movement. Pope and Johnson edited Shakespeare. This age witnessed the rise of historical literature.

We have the astonishing development of the novel which concerned domestic incidents. Henry Fielding dealt with human life in sordid detail. British literature acquired several of its most abiding fictional characters like Robinson Crusoe and Lamuel Gulliver.

Poets and writers were no longer favourites of ministers. Walpole openly despised the literary breed. Now, writers have to depend on their public. The period witnessed the rise of men of letters like Samuel Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith. Such writers wrote to satisfy the demand of the public. Johnson wrote his book *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755. It was the first authoritative treatment of the language and brought stability to spelling. He also produced a work called *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*.

The British cultural tradition became stronger in the later part of the century. The Royal Academy was established in 1768.

Music, like literature and painting, readily lent itself to the consumerism of the eighteenth century. People purchased books, paintings and musical instruments. Solo works enjoyed much popularity and music and manuals were produced accordingly.

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