

The Native American Civilizations and their confrontations with the Old World

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Abstract

The new developments in technology in the fifteenth century helped the European navigation excel at its best. The invention of the magnetic compass and the building of larger and stronger ships for voyages leading to carriage of huge quantity of cargo with safety, fostered the discovery of new lands. The Spanish and the Portuguese became the first to venture across the Atlantic in search of raw materials, trade and spreading their faith. In their venture to control trade politically, they established colonies and exploited their natural resources. This paper aims to explore the ruthless means adopted by the Europeans to colonize the American continent leading to the devastation of the traditional cultures, beliefs and civilizations there. The paper outlines the magnificence of the Native American Civilizations which they lost to the assailants from the Old World.

Keywords: Native American Civilizations, Conquest of Americas, European Colonialism.

I

Introduction

After the European discovery of the New World, the American civilizations which were symbolic of long prevailing traditions were ransacked by armed men from Spain. The impact of this destruction can be felt even in the present times. Even today the issues more relevant to Native Americans in the contemporary world include societal discrimination and racism, poverty, historical trauma and challenges related to poverty, crime among youth, education and public health covering alcoholism and suicidal tendencies.

Native Americans, however, were among the first people to discover much of the popular stuff today-

- Aztecs introduced the Popcorn to the Spanish invaders, who shared it with the rest of the world.
- The Aztecs used the passion flower / *Krishna Kamal*, now used in herbal medicine, to calm people, relax them.
- The indigenous people used cacao beans to make a hot drink flavoured with chili. In Europe it was called "drinking chocolate" and now popular around the world.
- The Incas built bridges to cross deep rivers. They made suspension bridges using plant fibres. These bridges were sturdy and safe.

We need to look at the sad and painful historical facts related to the Native Americans. The world history portrays that, Spain sponsored the voyages of Columbus and it was these voyages which led to the discoveries of the great ancient civilizations of the Americas. We also need to understand that the history of colonization of the New World was written mostly by the Conquistadors or conquerors. We rarely get to learn about these events from the point of view of the inhabiting peoples of the Americas. The ruthless Europeans always stated that they colonized a new land after bearing great difficulties. Contrary to this, for the native people who were already living in the Americas, this was an invasion of their native land. The Europeans were interested only in the exploitation of resources in the New World.

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To point out the examples-

- In the Andes of South America, Francisco Pizarro led the conquest of the Inca Empire.
- In Mesoamerica, Cortes led the destruction of the Aztec civilization of Central Mexico.
- Pedro de Alvarado, led the first conquest of Maya civilization in the highlands of Guatemala.

The heavy loss incurred due to these conquests is hard to imagine today.

Historians have concluded that at point of time the combination of European domination and unknown Old World diseases caused the deaths of millions of native people on the American continents. Further it needs to be mentioned that other European countries like Portugal, England, and France along with Spain wanted to dominate the New world that is the Americas. The Europeans had a significant advantage in any conflict with the natives because they possessed better weapons than the primitive spears and arrows possessed by the natives. The natives believed in gaining prestige by humbling their enemies but the Europeans believed in aggressively destroying and killing enemies. What we get to realize here is that although the natives defended themselves with bravery, they could not defend themselves against unknown diseases like Smallpox. Gradually, the natives were weakened and defeated by the European invaders. There was visible destruction and also attack on the pride and identity of the native people. A misconception was spread to justify European subjugation of the so called savages. Rather, it was claimed, all things civilized originated in the Old World.

Then after all, what was the European explanation of - How did civilization come to the Americas? It was imagined that voyagers from the Old World who had arrived in the Americas before Columbus had taught the ways of civilization to the natives. Thus, the Aztec, Inca, and Maya civilizations were considered as the offshoots of forgotten people who travelled from different parts of the world like colonists from Egypt or Rome or India. The story of the origin and growth of civilization in the Americas is an amazing story largely supported by archaeological proofs.

II

Native American Civilizations

1. Ancient Maya Civilization

Let us now peep into the world of Maya. The Maya inhabitants can be located in the present-day countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras. The ancient Maya civilization dates back 4,000 years, around 2000 BCE. Major change all over Mesoamerica, central America, began after 2000 BCE in the Formative period of the Maya Civilization. The Maya natives began as nomadic reapers. They gradually settled in villages by 1000 BCE. The period between 2000 BCE to 1000 BCE marks the beginnings of agriculture. The earliest evidence of slash and burn cultivation of maize can be found in Guatemala. These early agriculturalists began to grow maize, fruits, cacao and a some root crops. They also did hunting and fishing for survival. Since social hierarchy was uncomplicated based on subsistence. The native led a family-oriented life. There was increase in population and settlements between 1000 BCE and 300 BCE. Also there is evidence of public architecture during this period.

From 300 BCE to 250 CE, Maya civilization began to evolve more complex and elaborate mechanisms to support the growing populations. The important institution of Maya Kingship was formed during this time frame. The period from (250 CE to 900 CE), also called the Classic Period is considered the height of the Maya civilization, featured by great accomplishments like:

- unique writing system believed to be the only complete writing system in Mesoamerica
- unique calendar
- polychrome ceramics
- earliest use of rubber was made in 1600 BCE by the Mayans much before the modern method of making rubber was invented.

The seven centuries of the Classic Period displayed huge developments in Maya civilization along with gradual increase in population. The huge stone buildings and pyramids were built during this period.

Throughout the golden age, the Maya civilization flourished in tandem with the prevailing environment. After the Classic period, followed the “mysterious” slump of the Maya from (900 to 1000 CE). The Maya abandoned their spectacular temples, pyramids and palaces which were the cornerstones of the Classic period. Often, The Maya have been accused of overpopulating and mismanaging the environment and natural resources. But today, the historical evidences indicate that the Maya’s agricultural practices continued into the colonial period and persist even today.

In the Post Classic Period (1000 AD TO 1521 CE), once the Spanish established their base in northern Yucatan peninsula (Central America) by 1546, they began to impose their views and customs upon the Maya. This was a time of great disruption. The Maya people suffered because of:

- introduction of European diseases
- native customs were looked at scornfully by intruders
- they were enrolled and exploited as labour.

Catastrophically, the vast majority of Maya documents were destroyed by Spanish religious preachers. This created a huge vacuum depriving the world of information about this advanced Maya civilization. In 1696 that the Spanish conquered the last of the independent Maya city-states.

Today, the Maya way of life has greatly changed over the long span of time since European colonization and subjugation. Earlier the native institutions were replaced by a Spanish colonial civil and religious administration. The old Maya social hierarchy of elites was destroyed and their glory snatched. Conversion to Christianity was done cruelly. Colonization was justified by declaring it as a means of spreading faith. Many of the intellectual achievements of Maya civilization were also lost. The arts of painting, sculpture, metallurgy, and feather work disappeared from Maya society. Native Maya books (called codices) were burned. A great deal of knowledge was lost. The information about Maya history, religion, medicine, and commerce was also lost. The Maya economy was altered forever.

However, inspite of all, it needs to be mentioned that the Maya readily accepted much of the new European technology. There were environmental consequences. The land was exploited by colonizers for valuable resources—especially gold and silver. Yet, even after centuries of exploitation traditional Maya way of life have survived. The institutions of marriage and kinship that governed family life persisted because they were out of the reach of Spanish administrators. Several Mayan languages are still spoken today. Today, posterities of the ancient Maya live throughout southern Mesoamerica. The population is estimated to be roughly eight million. They have adapted to the modern lifestyles of the 21st century.

From the foregoing account it becomes explicit that the ancient Mayan civilization which existed in the region of present day Mexico and Central America from as early as 2000 BCE till the Spanish intrusion in the 16th century was one of the most advanced civilizations in the Americas and we know this through their outstanding achievements. Indeed “The modern mocha is a bittersweet concoction of imperialism, genocide, invention and consumerism served with whipped cream on top” (Sarah Vowell 56).

2. The Inca Empire on the Andes

Atahualpa, Inca Chief, on hearing Pope Alexander VI declaring Peru a possession of Spain uttered the following painful words:

“Your emperor may be a great prince; I do not doubt it, seeing that he has sent his subjects so far across the waters; and I am willing to treat him as a brother. As for your pope of whom you speak, he must be mad to speak of giving away countries that do not belong to him. As for my faith, I will not change it. Your own God, as you tell me, was put to death by the very men He created. But my God still looks down on His children.” (Minister)

The Inca civilization was founded in 1200 CE and it highly flourished in the Andean highlands between 1400 and 1533 CE. The rule of Incas spread from Quito in the north to Santiago in the south in South America. It covered diverse landforms - plains, mountains, deserts, and tropical jungle. They built impressive buildings wherever they expanded. Their civilization is known for – terrace farming, building highways, and mountaintop settlements. The Incas in South America were the hugest and the most formidable ancient empire.

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They rose to prominence in the 12th century CE and remained in power for over four centuries. At its peak, the Inca Empire comprised twelve million people hailing from more than hundred different ethnic groups. It was initially a relatively cohesive unit, due to a centralised language, government and common religious belief system. The historians mention two most surprising aspects of the Incas:

- They achieved their glory without the use of the wheel, cast iron, or any form of writing.
- In the end, they became helpless against the Spanish conquerors.

Inca Empire was on the Andean Highlands. The Incas regarded themselves as the special children of Sun. The Inca ruler was the representative of The Sun on earth. According to a Legend the Incas were created by Inti, the sun god, however, the historians state that the Incas were initially a small tribe which lived in Cusco, Peru. They lived in relative anonymity during the reign of their earlier Kings. From the late 14th century CE, and from the early 15th century CE, Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui began to expand his empire in search of resources, first to the south and then in all directions. The Incas called their empire as "Tawantinsuyo" meaning 'The Four Parts Together'. Sapa Inca was an absolute ruler and lived a life of extreme luxury. Incas mummified their rulers. Social structure was hierarchical. Local administrators reported to eighty regional administrators who further reported to a Governor. The Governors of four parts reported to the supreme Inca ruler in Cuzco.

The Inca society had well-defined social setup. Kinship within the Inca society was unique as it followed a parallel line of descent. The Inca had a polytheistic religion. The Incas built shrines and temples, where the priests performed animal and human sacrifices to appease the gods. This was to ensure good crops and victory in battles. Religious ceremonies took place according to astronomical calendars. Interestingly, they worshipped ancestors and performed sacrifices.

The formidable legacy of the Incas includes:

- Ceramics were painted using the polychrome technique portraying numerous motifs including animals, birds, waves and geometric patterns. Incas made highly polished metalwork, ceramics, and textiles- with the textiles being considered the most prestigious by the Incas themselves.
- The Inca saved information on knotted strings, known as Quipu. They can no longer be decoded. It was thought that Quipu were used only to record numerical data. This tool was also used to record history and literature.
- Inca Tunics were created by skilled Incan textile-makers as a piece of warm clothing, but they also symbolized cultural and political status and power. According to historians Kenneth Mills, William B. Taylor, and Sandra Graham, the textile patterns- "seem to have expressed concepts of commonality, and, ultimately, unity of all ranks of people, representing a careful kind of foundation upon which the structure of Inkaic universalism was built" (15).
- The Inca road network covered over 40,000 km for the easy movement of armies, administrators, and trade goods.
- The Incas constructed large buildings using blocks of stones which were fitted together precisely and no mortar was needed. These structures have easily withstood the powerful earthquakes which frequently hit the region.
- Machu Picchu, one of the seven wonders of the world is called as an ancient Inca city in clouds. It is at the top of approx. 9000 feet high mountain. It is a well-preserved Inca site located in Peru. It was built around 1450, when the Incas spread their empire outwards from the capital Cusco led by their leader Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui.

Spanish conquistadors led by Francisco Pizarro reached the Inca terrain from Panama in 1526. They knew that they had reached with abundant wealth. Pizarro went to Spain for royal sanction to control the region and be its ruler. The Spanish returned to Peru in 1532. The spread of Smallpox from Central America enfeebled the kingdom. Pizarro did not have a formidable army. In 1532 Hernando de Soto was sent inland to explore the interior. He returned with an invitation to meet the Inca, Atahualpa, who had defeated his brother in the civil war and had an army of 80,000 troops.

When Pizarro met the Inca King, he through interpreters demanded that the Inca King get converted to Christianity. A legend tells that Atahualpa was given a Bible but he threw it on the floor. This was a reason for war with the Spanish. Regardless, the Spanish attacked the Incas capturing Atahualpa. Pizarro demanded ransom in the form of gold. Atahualpa presented enough gold to fill the room he was confined in and also twice that quantity of silver. The Incas fulfilled this ransom. Over four months, almost eight tons of gold was collected. Pizarro did not set the King free although the payoff was given. Rather, he strangled the King in public.

The new Spanish rulers intimidated the people and their customs. Many facets of the Inca culture were thoroughly ruined, including their complex farming methods. The major language of the empire, Quechua was employed by the Catholic Church to evangelize in the Andean region. The main reasons for the collapse of the Inca Empire were a combination of factors - a perfect storm of rebellion, disease, and invasion. They brought the downfall of the mighty Inca Empire, the largest and richest ever seen in the Americas.

- The Inca language Quechua lives on today and is still spoken by a sizeable people.
- There are also a good number of buildings, artefacts, and written accounts which have survived the attacks of conquerors, looters, and time.
- These remains are indisputable witnesses to the wealth, ingenuity, and high cultural achievements of this great civilization.

Thus, the influx of European intruders marked the commencement of the end of the Inca Empire. The Spaniards captured the capital Cusco without any severe clash. The last remaining crumbs of the Inca kingdom retreated to southern Ecuador where they were finally conquered and defeated in 1572.

The history of the Incas highlights their progressive attributes, not only in governance and self-rule, but also their collective achievements. The discovery of Machu Picchu in 1911 helped the Incas get international recognition. Interestingly, they had no major writing system, legends and stories were passed on by professional orators and much of their history has been collated with what was discovered in ancient citadels and temples. The history of the Incas is still a mystery which needs to be solved.

3. The Aztec Legacy

Another great empire in the Americas was that of the Aztecs. The Aztec Civilization depicted a rich mythology and cultural heritage. They built huge pyramids and temples. "Today we are at last beginning to understand the intricacies of this amazing culture, which was the equal of any in Europe in moral refinement, artistic sensibility, social complexity, and political organization." (*Klor de Alva, J. Jorge*)

The term *Aztec* means "people from Aztlan", Aztecs as per their myth referred to it as their *ancestral home*. They were a Nahuatl speaking tribe who migrated south from northern Mexico due to drought. After migration, in about 1250 CE, the Mexica came to the Valley of Mexico and stayed surrounding Lake Texcoco. The Aztec Empire prospered from 1345 and 1521 CE in northern Mesoamerica. We find that the Aztec history is well-recorded. Our sources include-

- archaeological evidences
- books or Codices
- narratives of Spanish Invaders both armed and religious men.

What we know about the Aztecs from these sources is the existence of a great empire. Its society, culture, religion and other advancements. Although the efforts of archaeologists and scholars through the present century are constantly adding on to our knowledge bank. The Aztecs have been famous because they were conquered by the Spanish conqueror named Hernan Cortez but their Pre-Columbian civilization with its accomplishments has an exemplary place in world history. Aztecs settled in the huge basin called Valley of Mexico. The floor of the huge basin was 2,500 metres above sea level and it was surrounded by high mountains. Although the land was not suitable for farming, but through intensive and innovative agriculture they supported a very large population. Its altitude and climate did not favour cultivation of cotton and tropical products. However, the valley of Mexico was rich in mineral and forest resources and the main reason for the Aztec's military conquests was to gain control on trade of products which they could not produce.

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The Aztecs settled in the valley of Mexico. And They further went on to build a powerful empire on the American continent. The Mexica people arrived in the valley of Mexico in about 1250 AD. The city of Tenochtitlan was formed in 1325 AD. They allied with the city states of Texcoco, Tlacopan in 1427 to form the Triple Alliance. Tenochtitlan rapidly emerged as a dominant power. The alliance expanded rapidly controlled most of central Mexico about five hundred towns and cities. It became the most powerful ruling entity in the history of Central America before the European conquest. Aztecs had military strength but they were also skilled engineers. They built the city of Tenochtitlan in 1325 on a difficult geographical landform. It was a small marshy island in Lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico. The only means to go from Tenochtitlan to the mainland was by the boat. The Aztecs joined their city to the mainland by constructing three causeways. Tenochtitlan was the largest city It had twice the population of London or Rome . Even the Spanish were fascinated to see the city. It was like a dream for them.

Their engineering achievements include:

- the construction of the *aqueduct*, to bring clean water through channels to their city from the springs on the mainland
- construction of a massive dam , causeways
- artificial islands (Chinampas)- The Aztecs used Lake Texcoco and marshland as extra farms. They made "floating fields" called *chinampas*. On chinampas they could produce up to 7 crops a year allowing enough food for the rising population of the Aztec cities.

Among other things, the Aztecs had a number system, a calendar, great knowledge of medicine and a rich tradition in poetry and sculpture. They had a well-developed socio-political structure. The political expansion of the kingdom was implemented either by warfare or by marriage alliances. They had an extensive network of informants and spies to maintain control over their vast territory.

For the Aztec, the universe was unstable, and death and destruction continually threatened. People believed that gods controlled all life on Earth, from the weather to wars. They worshipped gods in temples and offered sacrifices to keep the gods happy. Sacrifice—was required to avoid catastrophe. In Aztec mythology, even the gods had been required to sacrifice themselves in order to maintain the universe. The national god of the Aztecs was their sun god, *Huitzilopochtli* who was also god of war. The Aztec thus worshipped numerous gods and goddesses. A person's duty was to fight and die for the gods and, therefore, for the preservation of universe.

The Aztec Empire reached its greatest height under the rule of Moctezuma II , who was the ruler when the Spanish arrived in 1519. The last Aztec emperor was Cuauhtémoc who was captured by the Spanish in 1521. To briefly describe the conquest- Hernán Cortés, a Spanish conquistador, arrived at Yucatán in present day Mexico in early 1519. He led a contingent of eleven ships carrying around six hundred and thirty men. After defeating the local warriors by allying with other natives, he reached Tenochtitlan on November 8, 1519. The Aztec king of Tenochtitlan, Moctezuma II Cortes. He allowed him to stay in his city. On May 20, 1520, the Spaniards under Pedro de Alvarado junior to Cortez attacked unarmed Aztec nobles congregated at the Festival of Toxcatl and slaughtered thousands, including much of the leadership of Tenochtitlan. This resulted in a rebellion in Tenochtitlan and Moctezuma II was killed. Cortes and his people had to leave the city. He was forced to withdraw on 30 June 1520 CE in what became known as the Noche Triste. Along with local allies Cortes returned ten months later. In 1521 CE he surrounded the city. Due to lack of food and weakened by disease, the Aztecs led by Cuauhtemoc, gave up on 13 August 1521 CE. Tenochtitlan was sacked and its monuments destroyed. The Spaniards and their Indian allies went on a rampage, plundering homes and palaces, and massacring thousands. Women were inhumanely enslaved. Subsequently, the Valley of Mexico was hit with two more epidemics, smallpox (1545–1548) and typhus (1576–1581), which wiped out more than eighty percent of the indigenous population of the region. Thus, Mexico City was built on the ruins of Tenochtitlan.

How did this Spanish military conquest take place so swiftly and thoroughly against the numerical superiority and home- town advantage in favour of the Aztecs? The Aztec empire fell because of a combination of forces that worked against them.

- Firstly, the massive rebellion of other Indian communities who allied with the Spanish.
- La Malinche of native origin played a critical role in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec civilization. Apart from serving as an adviser and interpreter of Cortes, she played an important role in diplomacy helping the Spanish ally with the native tribes.
- The Spaniards also had formidable weapons, including horses, attack dogs, crossbows, cannons and steel-bladed swords.
- The impact of European diseases cannot be overestimated in understanding the process of this conquest.

In Central America there were 25 million people in 1519 but only 1 million native Americans were living in the same territory in 1592. Analysts warn us that It is not appropriate to define the Aztecs, based purely on their European conqueror's judgements. We need not accept facts as per the records left behind by the Spaniards, whose language, culture and world view vastly differed from the people they conquered. We need not miss the rich and multi-faceted Aztec history in doing so.

Finally, there are about 2.5 million Nahua people living in Mexico today. The Nahua people of Mexico, the descendants of the Aztecs in Mexico speak Nahuatl which comes from the Aztec language. Some of them are farmers and others are artisans, like their Aztec ancestors There is no doubt that the Aztec civilization in Meso America has left a rich legacy in the form of some great accomplishments in various fields of human concern.

In the words of Needham and Lu:

'To put it in a nutshell, the Central and South American high cultures of antiquity were entirely worthy of comparison with what the Old World had achieved ...The fact is that the Amerindian high cultures were a human modality of their own, ... But it was real, and the Amerindian achievements deserve all our sympathy and praise.' (64)

Rightfully in the words of Edward Burnett Tylor "Everything that is really Mexican is either Aztec or Spanish." (50)

III

Conclusion

After the discovery of the Americas, excess gold and silver was dispatched to Spain from South America between 1560 to 1600. It resulted in the growth of international trade and industrialization. The countries like England, France, Belgium and Holland took the advantage of these discoveries. Their merchants set up companies and sent out trading expeditions, established colonies and introduced Europeans to the products of the New World, including tobacco, potatoes, cane sugar, cacao and rubber. The development of European Colonialism became inevitable atrocious historical reality.

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