RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)
www.rjoe.org.in | **Oray's Publications** | ISSN: **2456-2696**
An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal
Impact Factor: *8.576 (SJIF)* | **Vol. 11, Issue 1 (Jan/Feb/Mar;2026)**

Social, Cultural, and Economic Conditions in India during the 1930s: Evidence from A Search in Secret India

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Paper Received on 06-01-2026, Accepted on 07-02-2026
Published on 0 8 -02-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.307

Abstract

This article examines Indian society of the early 1930s through the observational lens of *A Search in Secret India*, treating the work as a cultural–historical source rather than a travel narrative. Drawing on sustained descriptions of everyday life, the study reconstructs patterns of social behavior, material culture, economic exchange, religious practice, and political consciousness across urban and sacred spaces such as Bombay, Madras, Varanasi, and Tiruvannamalai. Particular attention is given to dress, food habits, housing, transport systems, informal economies, indigenous education, and the moral authority exercised by spiritual figures, including yogic communities at Ramana Ashram. By situating these observations within modern historiography, the article demonstrates how lived experience coexisted with, and often remained insulated from, colonial institutions. The study argues that such observational accounts provide valuable evidence of cultural continuity, ethical economies, and social autonomy in late-colonial India, enriching social and cultural histories that move beyond state-centric narratives.

Keywords: Colonial India, Religious Practices, Indigenous Education, Historiography

Introduction

Historical understandings of early twentieth-century India have been largely shaped by political narratives of colonial governance, nationalist movements, and constitutional developments. While these approaches are essential, they often leave unexplored the textures of everyday life through which society sustained itself under colonial conditions. Culture, food, clothing, housing, modes of transport, religious practice, and economic behavior constituted the lived reality of the vast majority of Indians, yet these dimensions remain underrepresented in formal historical accounts. Cultural-historical inquiry, therefore, requires sources that document how ordinary life was organized, experienced, and understood in its own temporal context.

Observational travel accounts produced during the late colonial period occupy a complex position within historiography. Though authored by outsiders, such texts often record details absent from administrative reports and nationalist writings. When read critically, they can function as valuable primary materials for reconstructing social practices, cultural norms, and everyday economies. Rather than treating these works as literary or journalistic narratives, humanities-based scholarship increasingly recognizes their potential to illuminate social history, particularly in relation to non-elite experiences and informal institutions.

A Search in Secret India (Brunton, 1934) offers one such perspective based on extensive travel across urban centers, pilgrimage sites, ashrams, and rural regions, the work documents Indian life as it was encountered in streets, trains, dwellings, temples, and communal spaces. Its significance lies not in political commentary but in sustained observation of cultural continuity, material simplicity, religious plurality, and social organization. This article treats the text as a cultural-historical source and analyzes its observations thematically, focusing on every day practices related to culture, dress, food, shelter, transport, festivals, religion, and economic life. By foregrounding lived experience rather than institutional narratives, the study contributes to a fuller understanding of Indian society during the early twentieth century.

Methodology

Brunton's methodology is experiential rather than archival. He embeds himself within Indian social environments—temples, ashrams, villages, railway compartments, and urban streets—recording impressions over time rather than

fleeting encounters. This prolonged exposure allows him to identify patterns of behavior, belief, and social organization.

Unlike journalists, Brunton does not prioritize novelty or immediacy. His narrative repeatedly pauses to interpret cultural practices, economic conditions, and social hierarchies. This reflective quality aligns his work more closely with ethnographic observation, though framed through a philosophical lens. His writing thus functions as a descriptive historical record of social life rather than a report of contemporary events.

Culture and Social Life

The social world encountered in the text is characterized by openness, collective interaction, and a high degree of tolerance for physical proximity. Everyday life unfolds largely in public spaces—streets, markets, temples, railway platforms—where social boundaries are negotiated through custom rather than formal regulation. Individual privacy appears secondary to communal existence, and social life is structured around shared rhythms rather than personal schedules as observed, "life in India is lived openly; privacy, as the West understands it, scarcely exists" (Brunton, 1934).

Patience and social adaptability emerge as defining features of everyday conduct. Crowded environments, long journeys, and physical discomfort are endured with minimal complaint, suggesting a cultural orientation toward acceptance rather than resistance. This disposition is particularly visible in shared spaces such as third-class railway compartments, where individuals of varied social backgrounds coexist with notable composure.

Social interaction is further shaped by customary norms rather than codified rules. Greetings, hospitality, and everyday exchanges follow unwritten conventions that regulate behavior without overt enforcement. Hospitality toward strangers is repeatedly emphasized, not as exceptional generosity but as a cultural expectation embedded in social life. Even brief encounters are marked by courtesy and a willingness to accommodate others, reflecting a collective ethic that prioritizes harmony over assertion.

Cultural continuity is evident in the persistence of traditional practices across regions. Despite regional variation in language and custom, social life is unified by shared values rooted in long-standing traditions. These values are expressed less through formal ideology than through habitual practice—daily rituals, modes of address, and communal participation.

Dress and Clothing

Dress, as observed in the text, functions primarily as an extension of climate, occupation, and cultural habit rather than as a marker of fashion or social display. Clothing is predominantly simple, lightweight, and locally produced, reflecting both environmental adaptation and economic restraint. Cotton garments—dhotis, saris, loose tunics, and shawls—dominate everyday attire across regions, with little variation between rural and urban spaces. The observer remarks that "the clothing of the people was of the simplest description, light cotton garments suited to heat and poverty alike" ((Brunton, 1934)).

Clothing practices also reveal a limited emphasis on social distinction. Differences of class are not strongly articulated through dress, particularly outside elite or ceremonial contexts. Instead, garments tend to communicate function and modesty rather than status. This relative uniformity contributes to the visual cohesion of public life and reinforces the collective character of society. Women's clothing is described with similar restraint, emphasizing modesty, continuity, and cultural symbolism. Saris are presented not merely as garments but as carriers of tradition, worn across generations with minor regional variation. Ornamentation, where present, is functional and symbolic rather than ornamental in the modern sense, often associated with marital status or religious custom rather than fashion.

Transport and Mobility

Transport, as observed in the text, reveals much about the rhythm and social organization of everyday life. Mobility in early twentieth-century India combines modern and traditional systems, reflecting a society negotiating change without abandoning established practices. Movement is generally unhurried, shaped more by necessity and endurance than by efficiency or speed.

Railways form the backbone of long-distance travel and constitute one of the most socially integrative spaces described in the narrative. Third-class compartments, in particular, bring together peasants, traders, pilgrims, laborers, and ascetics in

conditions of extreme crowding. Despite physical discomfort, such journeys are marked by social tolerance and mutual adjustment. These compartments function as mobile social spaces where hierarchy is temporarily softened by shared hardship.

Beyond the railways, traditional modes of transport dominate rural and semi-urban landscapes. Bullock carts are repeatedly described as the primary vehicles of village life, moving slowly along unpaved roads and connecting settlements to markets and pilgrimage centers. Their pace reflects an economy and social order not governed by mechanical time. Horse-drawn carts and carriages appear in towns and smaller cities, serving both commercial and passenger needs. Walking, however, remains the most common mode of movement, particularly among the poor and religious practitioners. Long journeys on foot are undertaken without complaint, often as part of pilgrimage or spiritual discipline. Such practices underscore the normalization of physical endurance in everyday life.

Festivals and Celebrations

Festivals occupy a central place in the social and cultural life described in the text, functioning as moments when collective identity becomes most visible. These occasions are not confined to private devotion but unfold in streets, temples, riverbanks, and marketplaces, drawing together individuals across social and economic divisions. Music, chanting, processions, and symbolic acts form the core of these celebrations. Rather than spectacle alone, festivals are portrayed as reenactments of myth, memory, and belief that link the present to a long cultural past. The repetition of ritual across generations reinforces a sense of historical continuity, embedding tradition within everyday social life.

Importantly, festivals also serve a social function beyond religious meaning. They provide structured occasions for social interaction, renewal of community bonds, and collective emotional release. The text suggests that such celebrations contribute to social stability by reaffirming shared values and offering relief from the monotony and hardship of daily existence. As noted, festivals bring "a rhythm of joy and release into lives otherwise marked by restraint" ((Brunton, 1934).

Food Habits

Food practices, as observed in the text, reflect moderation, regularity, and cultural discipline rather than abundance or variety. Daily meals among common people are described as simple, repetitive, and sufficient, typically consisting of rice

or coarse grains accompanied by lentils, vegetables, and minimal seasoning. Eating is presented as a functional activity embedded within routine life rather than a source of indulgence or social display. Dietary restraint appears culturally normalized across regions and social groups. Excessive consumption is neither admired nor pursued, and appetite is regulated by habit rather than desire. The text contrasts this attitude with Western dietary excess, noting that food is valued primarily for sustenance and bodily maintenance. As remarked, people "ate to live, not lived to eat". Such observations suggest that restraint in food consumption was not merely an economic necessity but an internalized cultural value.

Communal eating is also emphasized, particularly in ashrams and pilgrimage centers, where food is prepared and consumed collectively. Such arrangements reinforce social equality, as distinctions of caste or status are temporarily suspended in shared meals. The act of eating together functions as a social and ethical practice rather than a private activity, strengthening communal bonds.

Religious Practices

Religious life constitutes the most enduring and pervasive dimension of social organization in early twentieth-century India as observed in the text. Belief systems do not operate as isolated doctrines but as lived frameworks that structure daily conduct, moral reasoning, and social relationships. Religion is embedded in time, space, and habit, shaping how individuals understand suffering, duty, and the purpose of life.

Vedic and Popular Hindu Practices: Hindu religious practice appears as a complex synthesis of metaphysical thought and popular ritual. Temple worship, pilgrimage, domestic prayer, and oral recitation coexist without rigid boundaries. Rather than strict orthodoxy, religious expression is marked by adaptability and continuity. Faith manifests in routine actions—early morning ablutions, offerings at roadside shrines, and the constant invocation of divine names. It is observed that religion "moves with the people through their streets and homes, not confined to sanctuaries alone" ((Brunton, 1934).

Sacred geography plays a decisive role in shaping religious consciousness. In cities such as Varanasi, ritual bathing in the Ganges, cremation rites, and devotional singing occur simultaneously, creating a spatial continuum between life and death.

These practices reveal a worldview that accepts impermanence as natural and cyclical rather than tragic. Such rituals are less about individual salvation and more about maintaining cosmic and social balance.

Islamic Practices: Islamic religious life is observed through its emphasis on discipline, order, and communal observance. Regular prayer, fasting, and adherence to prescribed conduct structure daily routines and reinforce collective identity. Mosques function as centers of both worship and social gathering, providing stability within urban and semi-urban contexts. Despite doctrinal differences, everyday coexistence between religious communities appears largely normalized. Religious plurality does not translate into constant conflict but into parallel systems of belief operating within shared social spaces.

Christianity: Christianity is encountered primarily in urban settings such as Bombay and Madras, often associated with colonial institutions, schools, and churches. Its organizational structure reflects Western models, and its influence is largely educational rather than cultural. The faith appears as an external presence, respected but not deeply embedded in indigenous social life.

Religious Pluralism and Social Order: Across traditions, religious practice functions as a stabilizing force rather than a disruptive one. Faith provides moral orientation, emotional resilience, and social cohesion, particularly in conditions of economic uncertainty. The coexistence of multiple belief systems illustrates a pluralistic culture in which religious difference is absorbed into the broader social fabric. It is remarked that belief "does not divide life here; it sustains it" (Brunton, 1934).

Education

Education appears as a dual system, reflecting both colonial influence and enduring indigenous traditions. Formal schooling exists primarily in urban centers, while informal modes of learning remain dominant across much of society. Knowledge is valued not solely as a means of economic advancement but as a pathway to moral and spiritual cultivation.

Formal Education and Colonial Institutions Schools and colleges in cities such as Bombay and Madras follow Western models of instruction, language, and

curriculum. These institutions prepare students for clerical, administrative, and professional roles within the colonial system. However, access to formal education remains limited, largely restricted to urban populations and specific social groups. The educational process is described as efficient but emotionally detached, producing competence rather than wisdom.

Despite its institutional presence, formal education appears peripheral to the deeper cultural life of society. It is observed that Western-style schooling "touched only the surface of the country's mind", leaving traditional modes of thought largely intact.

Traditional Learning and Spiritual Instruction Alongside formal education, traditional learning systems continue to thrive. Knowledge is transmitted orally through apprenticeship, scriptural recitation, and dialogue between teacher and disciple. Gurukula-style instruction, philosophical debate, and spiritual inquiry form the backbone of intellectual life beyond urban institutions.

In spiritual centers such as the Ramana Ashram, learning occurs through silence, observation, and self-inquiry rather than structured teaching. Instruction is experiential rather than textual, emphasizing inner transformation over information. Education as Ethical Formation Education, in this broader sense, is inseparable from ethical and spiritual development. The purpose of learning is not merely employment but the cultivation of character, restraint, and self-knowledge. This orientation distinguishes indigenous educational values from colonial models and reinforces the non-material priorities observed elsewhere in social life.

Historically, this coexistence of formal and informal education systems reveals a society negotiating external influence while preserving its intellectual traditions. Education thus functions as both a site of adaptation and a medium of cultural continuity.

Political Order and Everyday Governance

The political system, as encountered in the narrative, is not presented through formal institutions or ideological debate but through its everyday manifestations in administration, authority, and social regulation. Governance appears distant, largely impersonal, and accepted as an external framework within which daily life continues

with minimal direct engagement. Political power is sensed more through its effects than through its presence.

Colonial administration is visible primarily in urban centers, railways, courts, and bureaucratic offices. Officials, uniforms, and procedural formalities represent authority, yet they remain socially separate from the rhythms of ordinary life. It is noted that governance "touched the people chiefly at the points of taxation, travel, and regulation" ((Brunton, 1934). Beyond these interfaces, political structures recede into the background of social existence.

In rural and semi-urban contexts, everyday governance operates through customary authority rather than formal political institutions. Village elders, religious figures, and local intermediaries mediate disputes, regulate conduct, and maintain order. These informal systems function alongside colonial administration, often with greater immediacy and legitimacy. The continuity of such structures suggests a political culture grounded in habit and tradition rather than legal abstraction.

Public political consciousness, while present, does not dominate social life in the observational account. The narrative records little overt political mobilization in everyday settings, emphasizing instead patience, endurance, and adaptation. This relative political quietude does not imply passivity but reflects a population whose primary energies are directed toward subsistence, belief, and social continuity.

Spiritual authority often commands greater influence than political power. Ascetics, saints, and teachers shape moral behavior without coercion, offering an alternative mode of leadership rooted in ethical example rather than command. The observer remarks that spiritual figures exercised "an authority which governments could neither confer nor remove" (p. 176). Such influence underscores the limited reach of formal politics into the deeper layers of social life.

Discussion

The observations drawn from *A Search in Secret India* gain greater historical significance when read alongside modern historiography on colonial Indian society. Rather than standing as an isolated personal account, the text aligns closely with scholarly interpretations that emphasize everyday life, moral economy, and cultural continuity under colonial rule.

Social historians such as Guha (1982) and Chakrabarty (2000) argue that colonial governance did not fully penetrate the cultural and ethical worlds of ordinary people. This interpretation resonates strongly with the observed distance between formal political authority and everyday social practice. Governance appears peripheral to daily life, while customary authority, religion, and social habit retain primacy—an insight consistent with Chakrabarty's contention that colonial modernity operated unevenly across social domains.

The economic observations in the text reflect what historians have described as a *moral economy*. Guha (1982), Metcalf & Metcalf (2006) and Nandy (1983) emphasize that economic behavior in colonial India was shaped less by capitalist rationality and more by ethical restraint, subsistence needs, and social obligation. The prominence of small coinage, token exchange, and trust-based transactions corresponds with these interpretations, illustrating an economy embedded in social relationships rather than abstract market logic.

Cultural practices related to dress, food, housing, and transport reinforce Chatterjee's (1993) argument that the inner domain of culture remained relatively autonomous despite colonial pressures. While Western institutions such as railways and schools are visible, they do not fundamentally reorder cultural values. Instead, they are selectively absorbed into existing social frameworks, supporting the view that colonial influence produced adaptation rather than cultural displacement.

Religious life and ascetic traditions observed in the narrative further support Thapar's (2013) and Nandy's (1983) arguments regarding the centrality of ethical and spiritual frameworks in Indian historical consciousness. The authority exercised by saints, yogis, and teachers aligns with scholarly emphasis on non-institutional power structures that shaped moral conduct more effectively than political authority.

Education, as portrayed through the coexistence of colonial institutions and indigenous learning systems, echoes Sarkar's (1983) analysis of intellectual duality in late colonial India. Formal education serves administrative needs, while traditional modes of learning continue to shape ethical and philosophical orientations. This dual structure underscores the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems despite colonial epistemic dominance.

Taken together, these historiographical alignments demonstrate that *A Search in Secret India* functions as a valuable cultural-historical source. Its strength lies not in political narration but in capturing lived experience—precisely the domain modern social historians identify as essential for understanding colonial society. When read critically and comparatively, the text complements scholarly interpretations by providing textured evidence of how ordinary life persisted, adapted, and retained meaning amid structural change.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that A Search in Secret India functions as a valuable cultural-historical source rather than a travel narrative. Its observations capture everyday life in early 1930s India, revealing patterns of social behavior, material culture, religious practice, economic exchange, and education that persisted alongside colonial structures. The study highlights how informal economies, indigenous learning systems, and moral authority rooted in spiritual life shaped social order more decisively than formal political institutions.

Economic practices based on small-scale trade, trust, and sufficiency, together with restrained material consumption, reflects a moral economy embedded in social relations. Religious pluralism and ascetic traditions provided ethical coherence and social stability, while colonial governance remained largely peripheral to daily life. Read historiographically, the text offers insight into cultural continuity and social resilience during late colonial rule, underscoring the importance of observational accounts for reconstructing lived experience beyond state-centered histories.

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How to Cite this article?

Chelamalla Lingamaiah, Keesari Nagaraju, Meghavath Jagapathi Babu,Chanagani Srinivas, Dr. Renuka Kancherla **"Social, Cultural, and Economic Conditions in India during the 1930s: Evidence from *A Search in Secret India*."** *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan.–Mar. 2026, Oray's Publications, doi:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.307.