George Floyd Protests - King Leopold II

Why in news?

- The Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd is making people in various countries re-engage with their violent colonial histories.
- In Belgium, protestors have been calling for the removal of statues of King Leopold II.

What is the protest all about?

- Recently, George Floyd, an unarmed black man, died in the hands of Minneapolis police in the U.S.
- The anti-racism protests following his death have spread to several other countries in Europe.
- In places like the UK and Belgium, people are re-engaging with their violent colonial histories.
- Protesters in the UK pulled down the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol and threw it into a nearby river.
- Winston Churchill, whose colonial policies devastated the Indian subcontinent, was defaced in London.
- King Leopold II's statue in Antwerp, Belgium was defaced and removed.
- The ongoing protests may lead to other statues of the king being removed from public spaces and cities across the country.

Defaced statue of King Leopold II in Brussels

Who is King Leopold II?

- King Leopold II was Belgium’s longest-reigning monarch.
- His reign lasted between 1865 and 1909.
- His reign was notorious for his treatment of the Congo Free State in the African continent, which he owned.
- [The Congo Free State is today known as Democratic Republic of the Congo.]
- There have been brutal murders and violence against the Congolese, including children, and sexual violence against women.
- King Leopold II exploited Congo’s wealth and natural resources, and his

exploitative policies were used to enrich Belgium.
- In 1908, Leopold II sold the Congo Free State to the Belgian government.
- After this, the territory became a colony of the Belgian government, and it was called the Belgian Congo.
- The Democratic Republic of the Congo achieved its independence in 1960.

How far was the exploitation?

- It is difficult to estimate the exact number of Congolese who perished due to colonial violence.
- But researchers peg the number at approximately 10 million, with speculations of even higher figure.
- Belgium now stands as a proof much like other nations that engaged in colonial plunder.
- The wealth and resources looted from the Congolese people can still be witnessed in Belgium's public buildings and spaces.
- Several cities and towns, including the capital Brussels, were largely built and developed using funds that Leopold II looted from the Congo.

Is this controversy new?

- The Belgian monarchy has never apologised for atrocities committed during its years of colonisation.
- Campaigners have been trying for years to get statues of Leopold II removed from various public places in Belgium.
- There are calls for removal of other commemorations of the country’s colonial history as well.
- Now, the Black Lives Matter movement has brought these issues to the forefront.

What is the contention however?

- Some believe Leopold II statues should be removed because of his own actions and role in the Congo.
- Others believe that the statues should be removed because Leopold II was representative of the country’s violent colonial past.
- So, there are disagreements as to the colonial past and its impact in the first place.
- Many believe the situation in the Congo Free State under Leopold II was different from that under the Belgian government.
- Some say it was worse, while others disagree.
- Yet others are critical of Belgium’s colonial policies altogether.
- This lack of consensus is perhaps a reason why Belgium’s violent colonial

history has not been more severely and widely criticised in the country.

Is there any opposition to anti-racism protests?

- Following the defacement and removal of Leopold II's statue in Antwerp, some Belgians themselves began criticising the protestors.
- These oppositions are allegedly coming from those whose ancestors socio-economically and politically benefitted from Leopold II's colonial policies.
- Some are unwilling to fully acknowledge the inherently violent nature of colonialism.
- Such people attempt to project colonisers in a more favourable light.
- This dispute goes on in the colonised Congo as well.
- E.g. Leopold II's statue in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was removed after its independence in 1960.
- In 2005, however, the country's culture minister Christophe Muzungu decided to reinstate the statue.
- This was justified by implying that Leopold II's policies, when the country was still called the Congo Free State, brought in economic prosperity.
- Notably, till 1966, the capital Kinhasa was called 'Leopoldville' after Leopold II, when it got its present name.

Source: Indian Express

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