

## 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 Kinshasa was called 'Leopoldville' after Leopold II, when it got its present name.

**Source: Indian Express**

