Debt of honour: Why the European impact on India must be fully acknowledged

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Midst of a whirlwind

Considering the scale and range of problems in modern India

There used to be a term for breezy, simplistic books written by Western men doing a stint for a high-profile newspaper or magazine in difficult and complex places such as India or Africa or the Far East: the Foreign Correspondent Book. While its title doesn't exactly trip of the tongue, Superfast, Primetime, Ultimate Nation: The relentless invention of modern India by Adam Roberts, the former South Asia correspondent for the Economist, is saved from falling into that old, almost colonialist trap by several things. First, there is the author's intelligence and research, through which he makes the thick complications of recent Indian history lucid and comprehensible. His focus is on the Hindu nationalist government which came to power under the leadership of Narendra Modi in 2014, and whether Modi's government can deliver the vast and deep reforms that India needs if it is to fulfil its potential. Necessarily, his book also looks back on the complex set of economic and social issues that resulted in such a huge mandate for Modi and in the crushing defeat of the Congress Party.

Second, Roberts's book brings a lot to the table by way of numbers and statistics friendly to the non-specialist reader; you would, of course, expect this from a senior writer at the Economist. There is, on every page, an apposite and eloquent use of figures: overall Indian spending on health is a pitiful 1 per cent in China and 21 per cent in Africa; 30 per cent of Indian children are underweight (compared with 3 per cent in China and 21 per cent in Africa); remittance by Indians overseas in 2016 amounted to $70 billion, equal to 3.5 per cent of the country's GDP, "often outstripping flows of foreign investment"; as late as 2015, "around 130 million Indian households [in a population touching 1.3 billion] lacked toilets"; women's labour accounts for only 17 per cent of the formal economy (compared to China's 40 per cent). These numbers nail a truth that remains outside the scope of any solely discursive genre.

Each chapter follows a pattern: a quick, informative and sound tour around a particular topic, such as the position of women in Indian society, or the corruption that is rife in the country's elections, always substantiated with interesting and helpful data, but with pulled-punches commentary on how awful the situation is, then a brief, Pollyanna-ish conclusion, which is inevitably along the lines of "some glimmers of hope". The problems of India are so vast, and on such a vast scale, that some glimmers are not going to cut it. Roberts seems to be hamstrung by what I can only call a kind of politeness; he seems to understand that because of his nationality, historical forces stop him being openly scathing about India. But if he appears to pull his punches in the beginning, there are some later chapters, particularly the ones on election fraud, sanitation, public health, women and sectarian violence, in which even this cautiously optimistic foreign correspondent cannot turn away from his own evidence.

Chapters fade out on the bathetic diminuendos of India "can do a lot more". This is a measure of Roberts's truthfulness: the data, wherever you look, is utterly damning. Take, for example, job creation. The time-tested way of getting the economy going is to get more people into factories. But India is largely reliant on capital-heavy manufacturing, and Roberts admits that it is "unlikely that such new factories [such as Apollo Tyres, or Tetrapak] would really create tens of millions of jobs". He even taps up the human cost of India's failure to catch up with the rest of East Asia in the manufacturing sector: "India missed out on many millions – perhaps tens of millions – of formal jobs". Another example: a Goods and Services Tax (GST), designed to create a single market for India and make it easier for factories and producers to sell to the whole country, gives Roberts some hope. It became law about a year ago. In a recent op-ed in the Economist, the author (who may well be Roberts) admits that the opportunity has been wasted.

Like all observers of India, Roberts is confronted by a reality that flies in the face of upbeat official data. When the value of exports from the country had diminished for eighteen consecutive months in May 2016, "official statistics claimed the economy was thriving more than any other big one on the planet". It is worth quoting Roberts fully on this point:

"Some writers would defend them by saying: wait and see; give the Modi government a little more time. But I don't think it will work its magic. Much of this is unarguable. So many of India's problems can be laid at the door of the country's gigantic, interfering, corrupt, lumbering, radically inefficient state. 'India's perennial problem', Roberts notes, 'despite being a democracy, has been the failure of its state to deliver basic services of all sorts.' He is particularly good at putting his finger on the problems, but less expansive on how the reforms he suggests could be implemented, or what they would yield. Make it a business-friendly country. Let foreign investment pour in. Create jobs. Build infrastructure. Enact radical economic reforms in the domains of tax, labour, banking, bureaucracy, land... you name it. While earlier in the book Roberts seems to be on the side of Amartya Sen in the notorious spat between him and the right-wing Indian economist Jagdish Bhagwati – a debate between Sen's idea of the development of "human capital" and Bhagwati's fetishization of rapid GDP growth – later in the book the author's prescriptions would seem mostly to be about growth, something that can become sclerotic, even hypostasized, if it isn't directly linked to redistribution. Roberts doesn't have much to say about how growth translates into benefits for all and a safety net for the most vulnerable in society.

Creating wealth does not mean a more equal nation; in fact, long-term trends would

A hologram of Narendra Modi, 2014

Talking sensibly about India's economy was tricky, however, partly because of doubts about new official statistics, introduced in 2015 [by the Modi government], that appeared to be divorced from experiences of businesses and consumers in the real world. Official statistics showed India's economy racing at well over 7 per cent a year, a much giddier pace than a slowing China. (The same method suggested it had rattled on almost as fast in the final years of [Mannmohan] Singh's government [the previous one], which nobody believed.) On the ground, however, India felt more like an economy in the relative doldrums, growing at perhaps 4 or 5 per cent.

Roberts provides various examples of the visual markers of a slowing economy, including abandoned construction sites, half-finished projects, silent malls, armies of casual labourers out of work, stalled domestic spending and broken infrastructure.

Modi, however, has a firm understanding of fake news and image manipulation. From 2012 he began to project 3D holograms of himself at several election rallies simultaneously. The images were simple optical tricks but they succeeded in wowing illiterate rural voters. A sure touch with the meaningless soundbite ("less government, more governance"); "men, machines, and money must work together") and an avid use of social media are, however, no substitutes for the real work that will actually bring about the change the population wanted when it voted him to power. Again, in Roberts's own words, "Modi seemed to believe much would change in India if only perceptions of the country were different – missing the point that facts also had to change on the ground".

The solutions to India's seemingly infinite problems that a correspondent for a centre-right publication would come up with are somewhat predictable: shrink the state, let the market work its magic. Much of this is unarguable. So many of India's problems can be laid at the door of the country's gigantic, interfering, corrupt, lumbering, radically inefficient state. "India's perennial problem", Roberts notes, "despite being a democracy, has been the failure of its state to deliver basic services of all sorts." He is particularly good at putting his finger on the problems, but less expansive on how the reforms he suggests could be implemented, or what they would yield. Make it a business-friendly country. Let foreign investment pour in. Create jobs. Build infrastructure. Enact radical economic reforms in the domains of tax, labour, banking, bureaucracy, land... you name it. While earlier in the book Roberts seems to be on the side of Amartya Sen in the notorious spat between him and the right-wing Indian economist Jagdish Bhagwati – a debate between Sen's idea of the development of "human capital" and Bhagwati's fetishization of rapid GDP growth – later in the book the author's prescriptions would seem mostly to be about growth, something that can become sclerotic, even hypostasized, if it isn't directly linked to redistribution. Roberts doesn't have much to say about how growth translates into benefits for all and a safety net for the most vulnerable in society.

Creating wealth does not mean a more equal nation; in fact, long-term trends would
Lacking a credible exit strategy

JOHN KEAY

Barney White-Spunner

PARTITION

The story of Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan in 1947

358pp. Simon and Schuster. £25. 978 1 4711 4800 2

In case of India and Pakistan commonly refer to the past seventy years not as the “post-Independence era” but the “post-Partition era”. It is as if the achievement of freedom was eclipsed by the territorial division that accompanied it. The 1947 dissection of Britain’s Indian empire into a diminished India and a two-part Pakistan (itself dismembered into Bangladesh and a smaller Pakistan in 1971) is seen as a high price to have paid for self-determination and as a source of lasting hostility between the principals, both now nuclear powers. If it is worse, though, was the human tragedy that Partition occasioned. Around 15 million people were forced to flee their homes. Hundreds of thousands were raped, mutilated or forcibly converted. And in what ranks with the Holocaust as one of the twentieth century’s worst cases of blood-letting, perhaps a million former countrymen horrifically massacred one another. The imprecision of the figures is testament not just to the scale of the tragedy but to its still contested nature.

Three of these fraught processes – the independence struggle, the acceptance of partition, and the genocidal madness it unleashed – are addressed in Barney White-Spunner’s grim but admirably impartial Partition. Like everyone else, White-Spunner wonders why it all went so wrong: who was to blame, why was the violent fallout not foreseen, and why did the killing go unchecked? But unlike other writers on the subject, White-Spunner is neither an academic, an old India hand, nor an empire disloyalist. He is the lieutenant general who commanded the British forces in Basra in 2008 and later mustered the Barbour-clad battalions of the Countryside Army. He understands the limitations of deployment, knows the challenges of disengagement, and feels strongly about the political constraints under which military commanders are expected to help to keep the peace.

These insights serve him least well when assessing the British response to the freedom struggle. “It was [Britain’s] refusal to compromise, while not having the resources nor the real willingness to administer and develop India in the way the country so badly needed, that was the main cause of the tragedy in 1947.” In India, as in Iraq, the British outstayed their effectiveness. The moment to have disengaged was in August 1947.
early 1919. India’s expectations of recognition for their wartime contribution should have been met with an offer of the Dominion status already enjoyed by Canada and Australia. There would then, says White-Spunner, have been no call for partition. “India would have stayed as a united nation in the Commonwealth, with a British governor general and a British hand, albeit a light one, in defence and foreign policy but essentially self-governing.” Would it, though? Gallipoli and Mesopotamia had already undermined the mystique of imperial invincibility. Brigadier Dyer’s massacre of peaceful protesters in Amritsar was about to radicalize the communal sentiment. Would figures such as Dyer have loyally accepted Indian direction? And would self-governing Indians have happily sunk their communal differences, approved the country’s massive military budget, and signed up to fight the Axis powers in 1939? The counter-factual is counterintuitive.

Partition is on firmer ground when dealing with Partition itself. Thirty years ago it was generally accepted that if any individual was responsible for dividing India it was the spineless and inflexible Muhammad Ali Jinnah. His leadership of the Muslim League certainly mobilized Muslims in favour of the creation of Pakistan while apparently rejecting any compromise. But since the publication in 1985 of Ayesha Jalal’s biography of Jinnah (The Sole Spokesman), a new orthodoxy has gained acceptance. White-Spunner endorses it. Jinnah’s insistence on India’s “Muslim nation” having its own independent Pakistan is seen as a bluff; he would seemingly have preferred a Pakistan consisting of British India’s Muslim-majority provinces grouped within a loosely federal but unitary India. Indeed, he indicated as much by accepting a proposal along those lines from the 1946 Cabinet Mission. But the Cabinet Mission plan fell foul of Congress leaders such as the secular socialist Jawaharlal Nehru. Perhaps rightly, Nehru insisted that only a strong central government could address the urgent challenges of integration (especially of the princely states), social justice and grinding poverty. So Jinnah’s bluff was called. In the final negotiations it was not he who argued for Partition but Congress. Push came to shove when, as the last Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten lent it his imprimatur and cherished reputation.

More intriguing are White-Spunner’s military insights into the mayhem that followed. The violence was not unanticipated. It had been erupting for over a year; in Calcutta, boots were already on the pavements. But they were not in the Punjab. There the Governor, Evan Jenkins, repeatedly warned of the conflagration to come. So did the British commander of the Indian Boundary Force, Major General T. W. Rees. This was a supposedly neutral and 50,000-strong peacekeeping unit that never reached half that number, and whose neutrality was so compromised by its composition that it was disbanded before it was effectively deployed.

The warnings were there, but they were ignored. White-Spunner blames everyone. Militarily ignorant politicians like Nehru and Jinnah were simply out of their depth. Mountbatten was not as personally culpable as is often supposed. Suprisingly, the man he blames most is Claude Auchinleck, the Indian army’s much-loved commander-in-chief. “The Auk”, it seems, saw Partition as a threat to his army rather than to the Indian public. He starred the Punjab of troops and, even when the scale of the tragedy was apparent, declined to deploy British regiments on the grounds that their job was to protect British personnel, not Indians. In Barney White-Spunner’s highly readable account, this is probably the greatest surprise. Coming from the pen of another likeable general it carries conviction.

Debt of honour
Why the European impact on India must be fully acknowledged

During her official visit to New Delhi in April this year, Federica Mogherini, the EU’s high representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, stressed that even after Britain pulls out, the European Union will remain “the most relevant partner for India”, continuing to be “the biggest market on earth, the largest development donor” and a “global power and a reliable partner”. While a number of leading pro-Brexit British politicians appear to entertain the idea of a future Britain as nothing more than an “Asian partner”. What the British did to India

ELIZABETH BUETTNER
Sanjay Subrahmanym
EUROPE’S INDIA
Words, people, empires, 1500–1800
416pp. Harvard University Press. £31.95
(US $39.95).
978 0 674 97226 1

William Dalrymple and Anita Anand
KOH-I-NOOR
The story of the world’s most infamous diamond
978 1 4088 8841 4

Shashi Tharoor
INGLORIOUS EMPIRE
What the British did to India
295pp. Harv. £20.
978 1 84904 808 8

Native informants” to the motley array of Europeans who left their texts and manuscript collections scattered in archives across Western Europe.

An intellectual and cultural history thoroughly rooted in the politics and institutions of changing times, Europe’s India charts the social, occupational and ideological differences that marked Europeans who travelled to pre-modern India, together with their diverse regional origins and convergences. Initial Portuguese pre-eminence gave way to an increasingly international European presence that included not just the Dutch, French and English (all countries that sponsored East India Companies) but also a significant early contingent of Scots along with Venetians, Germans and others. This was already apparent even in the earliest years of regular European maritime contact, as an anonymous first-hand Flemish account of Da Gama’s second voyage in 1502–03 attests. This multi-national European co-presence remained important well after Britain’s ascendency became undeniable over the second half of the 1700s, an aspect of South Asia’s connected history with the West that all too readily becomes marginalized or altogether ignored by studies that focus exclusively on bilateral British–Indian relationships with an eye towards the transition to Crown rule and the British Raj after 1858. Subrahmanym reminds us of the need for different prisms. His lucid insights deserve to be far better known to non-experts.

In Britain, the history of the Indian subcontinent and its ties with the wider world is rarely far from the media spotlight. The 1930s costume drama Indian Summers began on Channel 4 two years ago, later to be joined by Gurinder Chadha’s film Viceroy’s House and Joanna Lumley’s India on ITV. The seventieth anniversary of Indian and Pakistani independence and Partition will be greeted with further documentary films as August 15 approaches. Scholars and popular historians have been even more consistent in seeking to shed further light on India’s history and contemporary condition as it has grown increasingly powerful and visible on the world stage over the past twenty years.

Although the prodigious written output of William Dalrymple about India has drawn considerable academic attention, much of his work is targeted at a wider readership. Co-authored with Anita Anand (best known as a radio and television presenter for the BBC), Koh-i-Noor: The history of the world’s most infamous diamond offers memorable tales of Indian courtly intrigue and violence, and explores the shifting fortunes of South Asian dynasties, the consolidation of British power in the subcontinent, and the British monarchy during and after Queen Victoria’s reign. Dalrymple and Anand connect us with the series of marathons and princes through whose hands and lands this mystique-laden and allegedly cursed gemstone successively passed en route to its current contentious resting place in the Queen Mother’s crown in the Tower of London. From competing and unverified myths of its origins, its adornment of Shah Jahan’s Peacock Throne and stints in Persia and Afghanistan, to its status as a symbol of Sikh sovereignty in Punjab between 1813 and 1849, the Koh-i-Noor achieved renown in multiple, far-flung cultural contexts. Readers are treated to fascinating asides on everything from the cultural importance of diamonds, rubies and other gemstones in South Asia, the gruesome murders, maimings and extravagant lifestyles prevalent in competing factions in Indian power struggles behind palace doors, and the popular legends that made the diamond familiar to the British public who eagerly queued in masse to see it for themselves when it was first placed on display in the Great Exhibition of 1851.

The Koh-i-Noor’s journey from Sikh into British royal vaults in the middle of the nineteenth century lies at the crux of Dalrymple and Anand’s story. When the ten-year-old Maharajah Duleep Singh of Lahore signed the treaty of April 1846, he ceded his kingdom to Britain, and the popular legends that made the diamond familiar to the British public who eagerly queued in masse to see it for themselves when it was first placed on display in the Great Exhibition of 1851.

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i-Noor’s capture, passage to England and recutting to enhance its brilliance (after the crowds at the Great Exhibition considered it disappointingly lacklustre) rendered it an emblem of Britain’s possession of the subcontinent (it first became a “jewel in the crown” after Victoria’s death, when it was set in the crown of Queen Alexandra). Dalrymple and Anand movingly pair the next phase of the diamond’s British existence with that of the deposed Duleep Singh himself once the British authorities separated him from his mother and sent him to be brought up by a Scottish doctor’s family in Fategarh, North-West Provinces. Duleep Singh’s subsequent voyage to England, his youthful Anglicization and years in British aristocratic circles ended with a thwarted attempt to regain his throne and the return of the Koh-i-Noor, together with a downward trajectory from royal favourite to embarrassing outsider, a man who squandered his state allowance and died in poverty in Paris at the age of fifty-three.

Dalrymple and Anand do not ignore continuing controversies over the Koh-i-Noor’s legitimate ownership and periodic demands that the British relinquish it, not least since the end of the Raj. At one time or another, India, Pakistan, Iran and even Afghanistan under the Taliban have all proclaimed the diamond to be stolen goods and asked the British to give it back, so far to no avail. Debates among Indians about rightful possession, compensation and restitution have reached new heights even in the past year. As Dalrymple and Anand note, the Koh-i-Noor today serves as a “lightning rod for attitudes about colonialism” and pushes us to reflect on “the proper response to imperial looting. Do we simply shrug it off as part of the rough-and-tumble of history or should we attempt to right the wrongs of the past?”

These are excellent questions, but the authors temptingly broach these topics in their introduction and conclusion only to shy away from exploring them in adequate detail, let alone daring to take a political stand. They stop short of in-depth engagements with the Raj’s divisive legacies and the contemporary conditions that have generated such drastically different ideas about what should happen to the diamond and about Britain’s past in India more generally. Instead, they often retreat into repetitive descriptions of what the gemstone looked like, gratuitous and graphic depictions of the violence meted out by Indian rulers, digressions about Prince Albert and excessive and irrelevant trivia about Wellington ceremonially making the first cut as the famous stone was recast according to British tastes in 1851. Koh-i-Noor is entertaining but it will ultimately disappoint readers seeking further analysis of the disagreements about Britain’s past role in India and what it now means, seven decades after independence.

Shashi Tharoor shows no such reluctance. His title Inglorious Empire: What the British did to India immediately leaves us in no doubt about his own verdicts. A widely published author of fiction and history, former Indian diplomat and government minister and former Under-Secretary General at the United Nations, Tharoor currently sits as a Congress Party MP in India’s Lok Sabha. Inglorious Empire originated in the wake of a speech he delivered at the Oxford Union in May 2015, in which he rigorously condemned Britain’s record in India; a film of the speech put online later attracted millions of viewers and a flood of comments that by turns supported or heaped abuse on his arguments. Written with the aid of several research assistants who draw on a wide range of respected scholarship, Inglorious Empire both reiterates long-standing, persuasive and well-founded critiques of the British Raj’s callous and exploitative activities and the damage done under colonialism, and expresses his surprise and disappointment that such basic points still need to be made anew today.

Chapter by chapter, the book convincingly demolishes the nostalgic, self-serving arguments voiced by imperial apologists (most but not all of them British, with Niall Ferguson being only the most prominent of recent contributors to this resilient narrative), who remain wedded to the conviction that Britain selflessly gave India its political unity, provided sorely needed good governance and “enlightened despotism,” and imported modern economic development and built the railways for Indians’ benefit. British rule is shown in all its racism, arrogance, geopolitical self-interest, extractive greed, violence and callousness towards Indians who suffered under its yoke. Tharoor combines his detailed case with pleas for Britain to take long-overdue official measures to confront this sordid past directly and start to make amends. Alongside calling for critical versions of imperial history to be taught in schools, he asks Britain to issue an apology, make a symbolic reparations payment of £1 a year (and thus formally acknowledge its moral debt as distinct from a financial one), and return appropriated artefacts – the Koh-i-Noor among them – that retain deep cultural significance to many Indians today.

Given the voluminous evidence available to support most of his assertions, it is regrettable that Tharoor’s book at times runs the unnecessary risk of becoming bogged down in its own polemics, is over-reliant on sweeping generalizations, and contains a number of vague and problematic historical analogies about other empires and regimes that serve no useful purpose. Comparisons between violence and deaths in British India and what happened in Maoist China or the Soviet Union under Stalin – or the suggestion that Britain might learn post-colonial lessons from Germany’s manner of addressing its Holocaust past – are not always warranted, and appear more likely to provoke further controversy than to persuade sceptical or hostile readers to adopt a more critical understanding of colonialism in South Asia (or anywhere else). In this regard, Jon Wilson’s India Conquered: Britain’s Raj and the Chaos of Empire (2016) – a book Tharoor greatly admires and on which he explicitly draws – deserves to be read alongside his own, providing more of the nuance and subtlety that Inglorious Empire often lacks.

The public response to Tharoor’s Oxford Union speech as well as to arguments made in Inglorious Empire itself serve as further evidence of how divisive British imperialism in the subcontinent remains. In Britain, for example, his proposals have been applauded in some quarters while attracting a predictable torrent of abuse in others. In this respect, the Oxford Union statement available via YouTube, the international social media response to it, the follow-up book and the media commentary its publication has generated collectively give us not simply the latest reiterations of an established anti-colonial stance but also constitute primary sources in their own right, which document international public attitudes about British imperialism over the past two years – a two-year window, moreover, in which Britain’s former Empire and Commonwealth have acquired new political meanings in the context of Brexit.

Hopeful British politicians and trade negotiators are not just likely to find that they are considerably more interested in India than India is in them: they also operate in an arena filled with other international competitors, European and non-European alike, for India’s attentions, allegiances and rupees, none of which is similarly encumbered by recurrent controversies about colonialism liable to flare up at any moment and potentially jeopardize future relationships. Apologizing and attempting to atone for colonial misdeeds, as Shashi Tharoor and others propose, might well be a strategically good move for post-Brexit Britain, although one hopes that such gestures, if they are ever made, will extend from something more than the same spirit of self-interest as the one that lay behind colonialism itself in the not so distant past.