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

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Adam Roberts
SUPERFAST, PRIMETIME, ULTIMATE NATION
The relentless invention of modern India
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Vivek Shanbhag
Ghachar Ghochar
Translated by Srinath Perur
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Chapters fade out on the bathetic diminuendo 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 tots 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:

Creating wealth does not mean a more equitable distribution of jobs. He even tots 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:

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.

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 free 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, 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 sterile, 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
point exactly to the opposite outcome, as Thomas Piketty has notably shown. Hasn’t the ‘trickle-down’ model been confined to the dustbin of rubbish economic theories? Here is Roberts’s own data: in the six years between 2009 and 2015, the number of Indians with investable assets worth over $1 million rose from 127,000 to 200,000; “India was wealthy had increased by nearly 30 trillion. But their wealth did not trickle far [my italics].” Roberts may advocate job creation would help to bring about a well-needed expansion of demand – but the Indian middle-class would not in itself address the problem of welfare for the very poor.

How does Roberts envisage a radically dysfunctional and corrupt state such as India creating the right regulatory environment for those private sectors to deliver the magical free-market gains? What about price inelastic sectors where bad, light or unenforced regulation would create unimaginable misery? Take one such example: India’s health care is private, yet the percentage of patients that is a racket; it has failed the poor, which form a very large part of the population, and there is no evidence that it delivers the best to the people who can pay for it. Even in the West, with its (mostly) efficient markets and a (mostly) sound regulatory framework, privatization has been beset by problems. Just look at Britain’s railways, OR US health care. And India is exactly the kind of place where the class of people that economists call rent-seekers will create the worst of depreciable private sectors which will plunder unchecked. Let us not forget the 2G spectrum scam in the auction of frequency allocation licences to (private) telecom companies in 2010 – a rigged sale that is estimated to have cost the treasury nearly $40 million in lost revenues.

Throughout Roberts’s book, China’s success story provides the contrasting template to India’s failure. The version of state capitalism that has delivered such gains to China is inseparable from its authoritarianism. Roberts deplores this aspect of state power, yet the triangle between him, Sahgal, and the novelization of the theoretical model of Indian democracy (in practice, it is somewhat different), the investing of all hopes in the “strongman” (read: authoritarian) Modi to bring in economic reforms, and the examples of China’s success creates a unique vector. In which direction does it point? Towards the spectre of authoritarianism in India, but with a crucially new factor thrown in. When not actively instigating, aiding and abetting, the current government has dangerously fanned the flames of what he calls “the Middleman”. There is a level-headed chapter on the carnage in Gujrat in 2002, when Modi was the Chief Minister of the state, the even tone only serving to emphasize Roberts’s condemnation and fears for the future. There are now deeply troubling signs that it delivers the best to the people who can pay for it. Even in the West, with its (mostly) efficient markets and a (mostly) sound regulatory framework, privatization has been beset by problems. Just look at Britain’s railways, OR US health care. And India is exactly the kind of place where the class of people that economists call rent-seekers will create the worst of depreciable private sectors which will plunder unchecked. Let us not forget the 2G spectrum scam in the auction of frequency allocation licences to (private) telecom companies in 2010 – a rigged sale that is estimated to have cost the treasury nearly $40 million in lost revenues.

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early 1919. Indians' 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 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 sparse 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 supposedly 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 tary 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 Punjab 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, but surprisingly, the man he blames most is Clausewitz, 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 starved 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 fantasies of a globally oriented “Empire 2.0” as Britain explores its options for enhancing trade and diplomatic ties with its former colonies, it is timely to be reminded of the historic and present-day links that connect India with many other European countries – as well as the EU itself, currently India’s number one trading partner.

In Europe’s India, Sanjay Subrahmanym, Distinguished Professor at UCLA, builds on his many previous studies of Portugal’s Asian empire, the Mughal state and courtly culture, and changing understandings of South Asian religions. Covering the three centuries between Vasco da Gama’s arrival and the consolidation of the English East India Company’s trading and political dominance by the end of the 1700s, Subrahmanym evaluates in intricate detail how selected European individuals engaged with the subcontinent over time, and the extent to which common “European” modes of understanding South Asian society gradually emerged. “Knowledge production” and the eventual consolidation of a “knowledge complex” about Indian religion (particularly the set of beliefs and practices that ultimately became conceived as Hinduism), the caste system and other subjects involved a great many parties ranging from national 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-emience 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 contacts, 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 ascendancy 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 Indian on ITV. The seventieth anniversary of Indian and Pakistan 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 Maharajahs 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 thrones 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 en 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 for his kingdom after Britain prevailed in the Anglo–Sikh wars, the diamond’s loss greatly exceeded its extraordinary monetary value, symbolizing the fundamental surrender of princely power and Sikh statehood. Becoming a “metaphor for British supremacy,” the Koh-
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 repetitious 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 Sahba. 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 heapied 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 exploitation 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.