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

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Published in:
The Times Literary Supplement

Citation for published version (APA):
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 $75 per person (compared to $420 in China and $947 in Brazil); 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.

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.

Roberts, 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 private sector in, create a stable and light regulatory environment, then 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, 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 controversial 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...
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point exactly to the opposite outcome, as Thomas Piketty has notably shown. Hasn’t the “trickle-down” model been a disaster? Roberts is not even thinking of it as a model; it is a racket; like most private markets, it is a racket; and it has been set 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 deplorable 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 triangular relationship between China’s communist government and its capitalist enterprises has been set 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 deplorable private sectors which will plunder unchecked. Let us not forget the 2G spectrum scam in the auction of frequency allocation licences to (private) telcom companies in 2010 – a rigged sale that is estimated to have cost the treasury nearly $40 million in lost revenues.

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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 Subrahmanyam, Distinguished Professor at UCLA, builds on his many previous studies of Portugal’s Asian empire, the Mughal state and courts, 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, Subrahmanyam 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 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 its 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. Surprisingly, 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 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

William Dalrymple and Anita Anand
KOH-I-NOOR
The history of the world’s most infamous diamond

The French professor of South Asian history, Elizabeth Buettner, has produced a book that is as lucid as it is timely. In Elizabeth Buettner, Sanjay Subrahmanyam
EUROPE’S INDIA
Words, people, empires, 1500–1800
416pp. Harvard University Press. £31.95 ($US 39.95)
978 0 674 97226 1

The Koh-i-Noor’s journey from Sikh into Indian hands has been the subject of much speculation, but in her new book, The Koh-i-Noor, William Dalrymple and Anita Anand piece together the story with meticulous research and a keen eye for detail. The result is a gripping account of one of the most famous diamonds in the world, and the people who have coveted it over the centuries. The Koh-i-Noor was first presented to the British crown by the Maharaja of Lahore in 1780, after he had defeated the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh in a battle near Amritsar. The diamond was subsequently acquired by the British East India Company, and it has since been worn by every British monarch until the present day.

William Dalrymple and Anita Anand
INGLORIOUS EMPIRE
What the British did to India
978 1 84904 808 5

The Koh-i-Noor has been a source of national pride for India, and its history is intertwined with the country’s struggle for independence. But the diamond also represents a darker chapter in Indian history, as it was worn by British monarchs throughout the colonial era. In Inglorious Empire, William Dalrymple and Anita Anand explore the Koh-i-Noor’s role in the British Raj, and the ways in which it was used to reinforce imperial power.

The Koh-i-Noor is not the only diamond that has been the subject of controversy. The Koh-i-Dunya, for example, was once owned by the Shah of Persia, and it was said to be cursed. But the Koh-i-Noor is perhaps the most famous diamond of them all, and its history is a testament to the power and influence of the British Raj. In Debt of Honour, William Dalrymple and Anita Anand have written a book that is as compelling as it is thought-provoking. It is a story of love and loss, of power and ambition, and of the ways in which diamonds have shaped the course of history.
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 Fatehgarh, 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 periodical 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 countless 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 histories to be taught in schools, he asks Britain to issue an apology, make a symbolic reparation (payments 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 from 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.