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


Buettner, Elizabeth

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.

Chapters fade out on the batiche 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 create 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:

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.

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 [Manmohan] 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 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 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
point exactly to the opposite outcome, as Thomas Piketty has notably shown. Hasn’t the “trickle-down” model of growth 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 is surely a country of $1 million dollar rich people.”

Roberts may advocate job creation to help bring about a well-needed expansion of the Indian working classes. But he 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 crucial private market is a racket; it has failed the poor, who form a vast majority of that 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 depredatory 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 his valorization 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 active instigating, aiding and abetting, the spectre of authoritarianism in India, but with an unostentatious dosa restaurant the parents of the family, becomes its troublesome conscience.

A s always, fiction encapsulates a kind of truth with an immediacy and vividness that no amount of data and historical summaries can begin to approach. Ghachar Ghochar, the first work by the Kannada novelist Vivek Shanbhag to be translated into English, is the story of one shabby-genius, lower-middle-class family in Bangalore that moves up the economic ladder; in just over a hundred pages it distills the course of related experience with money. Without Srinath Perur’s precisely fluent and beautiful English translation, this jewel of a novel would have been little known even in India. (I should add that I was approached last year by Shanbhag’s US publisher to provide a quotation for the novel’s dust jacket. I agreed, after finishing the book in a single sitting. I do not know the author, the translator, or the publisher. This review offers a welcome chance to expand on my earlier enthusiasm.)

The opening chapter sounds the prevailing note of subterranean, occluded menace as the first-person narrator, a young man in his late twenties, sits in his regular haunt, Coffee House, killing time, “desperate to unburden” himself to the waiter, Vincent, who seems to know him the fount of all wisdom. But then, as the narrative loops back in time to give us the story of the family to which our narrator belongs, this note is buried, only to be released again in perfectly calibrated measures over the course of related experience, until it subtly explodes in the final pages.

The family comprises the unnamed narrator, his mother Amma, his father Appa, his sister Malati and his uncle Chikkappa, the younger brother of Appa. In the very recent past, described in an unobtrusive back story, their circumstances have been straitened: at the occasional Sunday afternoon meal out in an unostentatious dosa restaurant the parents must share a single cup of coffee. They live in a house – precisely described – with very few possessions. “In the time that has never opened because they give onto an open drain; from the other side, strong cooking smells spill from their neighbour’s kitchen.” Appa is the only earning member, a tea salesperson, in the one room of a flat which everything works by implication, colloquialism and suggestion, of a signification that remains just outside the margins of the page, the darkening is both moral and symbolic of a real threat to the family. Shanbhag uses a pathetic fallacy in a not dissimilar manner: in the final, shocking chapter, as the core family (minus Amma) gathers to trade gossip anecdotes about traceless murderers and how easily they can be achieved, the “clouds thickened outside; the trees bent at their roots as in a storm and it was as if all the world fell over”.

There are other costs:

It’s true what they say – it’s not we who control money, it’s the money that controls us. When there’s only a little, it behaves meekly; when it grows, it’s the money that controls us. Money had swept us up and flung us in the midst of a whirlwind.

The unravelling happens in small increments: Malati descends into incivility (we will understand the full implications of how Chikkappa and Appa have to cut out the middle class). Malati and Malati gang up against a woman who comes to the house to see Chikkappa, claiming to know him (this chronologically later episode occurs early in the novel, setting the interpretative parameters of the novel’s unspawning morality). Shanbhag is doing something cleverer with his female characters, around whom Ghachar Ghochar can be seen to revolve – characters typically designed as ethical barometers in fiction of the sort that leads, as in the satirical films of Satyajit Ray’s, for example, use this trope. In The Middleman, a film that seems particularly pertinent to Shanbhag’s novel, the protagonist’s first successful steps in the material world occur with a bribe that he reluctantly arranges for a prosperous client, and that time with a prostitute. It turns out that the woman is his poor best friend’s sister; she will become the mirror for the hero’s compromised soul. In Ghachar Ghochar, too, the narrator’s wife Anita, an outsider who enters the family, becomes its troublesome conscience, but not in any quiescent way. She upsets the unquestioning power structures based on money, questions notions of leisure and labour, tears up the cardinal rule that the “well-being of any household rests on selective acts of blindness and deafness”, and even gives the novel its title (a nonsense word meaning “a hopeless, unsolvable tangle”).

But the truly progressive soul of the book lies not in any simplistic and insidious equation of women with virtue, yet in a deliberate challenge to the trope of the Middleman ends with a characteristic Ray touch, a song on the radio in the background – Tagore’s “Shadows are thickening in the forests” – that functions as a particular metaphor for the darkness that has now blotted the protagonist’s soul. Shanbhag uses a pathetic fallacy in a not dissimilar manner: in the final, shocking chapter, as the core family (minus Anita) gathers to trade gossip anecdotes about traceless murderers and how easily they can be achieved, the “clouds thickened outside; the trees bent at their roots as in a storm and it was as if all the world fell over”.

India is commonly referred to 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 pay for self-determination and as a source of lasting hostility between the principal, both now nuclear powers. In the worst, 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.

All 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 Alliance. 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 for 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. Worst of all, White-Spunner doesn’t believe the ‘trickledown’ model of distribution has been able to deliver the magical growth that has always satisfied the Western promise, and been the source of lasting hostility between the principal, both now nuclear powers. In the worst, 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.
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 intolerable, and being preferably presented as a Pakistani 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 secularist 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 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 so 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 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

EUROPE’S INDIA

William Dalrymple and Anita Anand

Koh-i-Noor

The history of the world’s most infamous diamond


978 0 408 88481 3

Shashi Tharoor

INGLORIOUS EMPIRE

What the British did to India


978 1 84904 808 8
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 impoverished exile. 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 impoverished exile.

Shashi Tharoor, who discusses the Ruby’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). Tharoor and Anand note, the Koh-i-Noor today serves as a counterpoint to the displacement of the Mahabharata’s Draupadi, who was cast out of her husband’s court, the Pandavas’ home and the land to which they were entitled. The Koh-i-Noor, like Draupadi, has been degraded from its original place of importance.

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. 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 some quarters while attracting a predictable torrent of abuse in others.