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 $75 per person (compared to $420 in China) and more than 100 million rural 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 politicalit; 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) admits that the opportunity has been missed out on many millions – perhaps tens of millions – of formal jobs”. Another example: “India’s perennial problem”, Roberts notes, “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:

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 project 3D holograms 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 [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 vowing 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 if it was 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 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

NEEL MUKHERJEE
Adam Roberts
SUPERFAST, PRIMETIME, ULTIMATE NATION
The relentless invention of modern India
978 1 78125 645 9

Vivek Shanbhag
GHACHAR GHOCHEAR
Translated by Srinath Perur
128pp. Faber. £10.
978 0 571 33607 4

A hologram of Narendra Modi, 2014
point exactly to the opposite outcome, as Thomas Piketty has notably shown. Hasn’t the “trickle-down” model, which has 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’s wealthy had assets worth nearly $1 trillion. But their wealth did not trickle far [my italics].” Roberts may advocate job creation to help bring about a well-needed expansion of India’s middle class, but that 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 within the cynical market, it is a racket; it has failed the poor, who 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 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 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.

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-gen- teel, lower-middle-class family in Bangalore that moves up the economic ladder; in just over a hundred pages it distills a century 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 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 the novel, 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 artefacts,Appa is the only earning member, a tea salesman; like most private markets, it is a racket; instead his enthusiasm.)

The Middleman

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 gossipy anecdotes about the wedding, the moonlight spills from their neighbour’s kitchen.

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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 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 often supposed. More significantly, 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 staved 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 EU 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” and the EU’s high representative for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, during her official visit to New Delhi in April this year, Federica Mogherini, stressed that even after Britain pulls out, the EU 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”.

**William Dalrymple and Anita Anand**

**Koh-i-Noor**

The story of the world’s most infamous diamond continues to captivate interest. The Koh-i-Noor, a diamond familiar to the British public who watched its journey from the subcontinent, and the British monarchy 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 accounts of 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 over to Queen Victoria together with 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-

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**Shashi Tharoor**

**INGLORIOUS EMPIRE**

What the British did to India
295pp. Hurst. £20.
978 1 84094 808 2

**Lord Mountbatten and colonial administrators discuss Partition, 1947**
The public response to Tharoor’s Oxford Union speech as well as to arguments made in Inglorious Empire itself serves 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.