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

T
here 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 off 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 picture 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”. Roberts admits that the opportunity has been missed out on many millions – perhaps tens of millions – of formal jobs”. Another example: “India missed out on many millions – perhaps tens of millions – of formal jobs”. Another example: “Indian Sanitation, public health, women and的部分内容已经被略去了。
point exactly to the opposite outcome, as Thomas Piketty has notably shown. Hasn’t the “trickle-down” model of distribution 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 a wealthy haven for the near one trillion. But their wealth did not trickle far [my italics].” Roberts may advocate job creation or an altogether trickle-down economics, but this is where he stalls. While job creation would help to bring about a well-needed expansion of the Indian middle class, which really 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 there are two private markets between 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 depradatory 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 billion in lost revenues.

Throughout Robert’s book, India’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 triumph of this model is the historical and ideological moment to have disengaged was in 1947 dissection of Britain’s Indian empire into a diminished India and a two-part Pakistan (itself dismembered into Bangladesh and a smaller Pakistan in 1971) is seen as a high price to have paid for self-determination and as a source of lasting hostility between the principals, both now nuclear powers. Infinitely worse, though, was the human tragedy that Partition occasioned. Around 15 million people were forced to flee their homes. Hundreds of thousands wereraped, 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.

One of these fraught processes – the independence struggle, the acceptance of partition, and the genocidal madness it unleashed – are addressed in Barney White-Spunner’s Partitions. Like the unravelling happens in small increments: Malati descends into invisibility (we will understand the full implications of how Chikkappa’s death will play out in the India of Roberts’s book only later); Amma 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 unpassing moral clarity. Shanbhag is doing something clever with his female characters, around whom Ghachar Ghochar can be seen to revolve – characters typically designed as ethical barometers in contemporary novels of partition and the genocidal madness it unleashed. 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: 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 kindness and indifference’, 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 credo of the trope.

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 their lives, he notes, “It was [Britain’s] refusal to compromise, which military commanders are expected to have in their genealogy. There is a level-headed chapter on the carnage in Gujarat in 2002, when Modi was the Chief Minister of the state, the even tone only serving to underscore Roberts’s condemnation and fears for the state’s future. There are, for instance, of Hindu vigilante lynchings Muslims on false allegations of carrying beef. Chhattisgarh, one of India’s newer states, is worse than a police state, plagued by state-sanctioned criminal activity and violence, especially targeting journalists, rights activists and NGOs. Nationalism is running high: all the ugly things in the Indian polity and society previously kept under check now seem to be flourishing. Roberts is alive to all of this and he doesn’t whitewash the disturbing Hindu nationalist aspect of a country run by a man who, until recently, was charged with being 18 times richer than the next richest US based company. He is more interested in the fact that he is in the process of something massive, that he is able to subtly explode in the final pages.

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

More intriguing are White-Spunner’s military insights into the mayhem that followed. The violence was not unanticipated. It had been erupting for over a year; in Calcutta, boots were already on the pavements. But they were not in the Punjab. There the Governor, Evan Jenkins, repeatedly warned of the conflagration to come. So did the British commander of the 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 Auchtuncle, 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 European Union will remain “the most relevant and 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 Brexit British politicians appear to entertain fantasies of a globally oriented “Empire 2.0”, Federica Mogherini began on Channel 4 two years ago, later to be joined by Joanna Lumley’s Spokesman on ITV.

The seventy-fifth 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 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 Moghal state and courtly culture, and changing understandings of South Asian religions. Covering the three centuries that marked Europeans who travelled to the subcontinent, and the British monarchy itself, currently India’s number one trading partner.

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

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

Sasha 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 callousness and brutality, 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.