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


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Midst of a whirlwind

Considering the scale and range of problems in modern India

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here used to be a term for breezy, sim-

plistic books written by Western men
doing a stint for a high-profile news-

paper 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, Super-
fast, Primetime, Ultimate Nation: The re-

tless 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 toi-

lets”; women’s labour accounts for only 17 per cent of the formal economy (compared to China’s 40 per cent). These numbers nailing a truth that remains outside the scope of any genre.

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dos of India “can do a lot more”. This is a measure of Roberts’s truthfulness: the data, wherever you look, is utterly dam-
ting. Take, for example, job creation. The time-tested way of getting the economy going is to get more people into factories. But India is largely reliant on capital-heavy manufactur-
ing, and Roberts admits that it is “unlikely that such new factories [such as Apollo Tyres, or Tetrapak] would really create tens of mil-

dions 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 con-
fronted 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:

“Indian society, or the corruption that is rife in it, are so vast, and on such a vast scale, that some glimmers are not going to cut it. Roberts seems to be haranguing 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 scath-
ing 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.

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“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

g 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 economic thinking 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 investible 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 but this is where he stops. While job creation would help to bring about a well-needed expansion of the Indian classes, which 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 triangulation between the cost and the quality of health care 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 predatory 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 depletes this aspect of state power, yet the triangulation between the marketization of the theoretical model of Indian democracy (in practice, it is somewhat different), the investing of all hopes in the “strongman” (read: authoritarian) Modi to bring in economic reforms, and the examples of China’s success creates a unique vector. In which direction does it point? Towards the spectre of authoritarianism in India, but with a crucially new factor thrown in. When not actively instigating, aiding and abetting, the current government has dangerously fanned the fire of “communalism”. 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 emphasize Roberts’s condemnation and fears of the spectre of authoritarianism in India, but with a crucially new factor thrown in.

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. Ghuchar Ghochar, the first work by the Kannada novelist Vivek Shanbhag to be translated into English, is the story of one shabby-genre, lower-middle-class family in Bangalore that moves up the economic ladder; in just over a hundred pages it dissects India’s commercial relationship with money. Without Sarinath 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 some point exactly to the opposite outcome, as Thomas Piketty has notably shown. Hasn’t the “trickle-down” model of economic thinking 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 investible 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 but this is where he stops. While job creation would help to bring about a well-needed expansion of the Indian classes, which would not in itself address the problem of welfare for the very poor.

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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 undermine colonial 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 spare 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 presumably 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 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 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.
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 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 return it. Duleep Singh himself once the British deposed Duleep Singh himself once the British were willing to issue an apology, make a symbolic reparation – the Koh-i-Noor among them – to Indians today.

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.