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 1 per cent in China and 2 per cent in India; the amount of fake news and image manipulation. From 2012 he began to project 3D holograms of himself at several election rallies simultaneously. 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 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, “I was unable 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 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 hamstringed by what he can only call a kind of politicalite; 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.
point exactly to the opposite outcome, as Thomas Piketty has notably shown. Hasn’t the “trickle-down” model left the poor behind? Has it not also 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 help to bring about a well-needed expansion of the Indian economy, but this 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 and very expensive. There are over 200 million people in the country who have no access to primary healthcare. This is a problem which every Indian is aware of, and yet the government has been slow to address it. 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) telecommunication 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 triangle of power between him and his idealization 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 Muslim “threat” in India. Instead, 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 for India’s future. There are, of course, instances, for example, of Hindu vigilante mobs lynching 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, right 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 whitewashing. 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 himself a suspect in one of the biggest cases of his involvement in the massacre in 2002. This is a responsible introductory tour of the problems and choices facing present-day India, the kind of thing that intelligent journalism does well. One of Roberts’s winning qualities is his clear writing style: he makes his arguments into something that fulfills its huge potential. But hopes and realities pull in opposite directions in the book – so much so that a fine, productive tension comes to exist between the two, making me wonder if the mouthful of the title isn’t after all profoundly, albeit perhaps unintentionally, ironic.

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 Kanada novelist Vivek Shanbhag to be translated into English, is the story of one shabby-gen- teen, lower-middle-class family in Bangalore that moves up the economic ladder; in just over a hundred pages it distills a lifetime of relationships and 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 subterfuge, 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 writer Vincent, who sees in 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 achieved, the “clouds thickened outside; the house turned a shade darker”. In a chapter in which everything works by implication, collo- sion, the genocidal madness it unleashed. This is a responsible introductory tour of the problems and choices facing present-day India, the kind of thing that intelligent journalism does well. One of Roberts’s winning qualities is his clear writing style: he makes his arguments into something that fulfills its huge potential. But hopes and realities pull in opposite directions in the book – so much so that a fine, productive tension comes to exist between the two, making me wonder if the mouthful of the title isn’t after all profoundly, albeit perhaps unintentionally, ironic.

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Lacking a credible exit strategy

INDIA & PAKISTAN

John Keay

The story of Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan in 1947

538pp. Simon and Schuster. £25. 978 1 4711 4800 2
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 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 starred 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 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 Subrahmanym, Distinguished Professor at UCLA, builds on his many previous studies of Portugal's Asian empire, the Mughal state and courtly culture, 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 intimate 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 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 courteously intrigue and violate, and explores the shifting fortunes of South Asian dynasties, the consolidation of British power in the subcontinent, and the British monarchy during and after Queen Victoria's reign. Dalrymple and Anand connect us with the series of maharajas and princes through whose hands and lands this mystique-laden and allegedly cursed gemstone successively passed en route to its current contentious resting place in the Queen Mother's crown in the Tower of London. From competing and unverified myths of its origins, its adornment of Shah Jahan's Peacock Throne and throns in Persia and Afghanistan, 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 asides on 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 starved the Punjab of troops and, even when the product 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.

ELIZABETH BUETTNER
Sanjay Subrahmanym
EUROPE’S INDIA
Words, people, empires, 1500–1800
416pp. Harvard University Press. £33.95
(US $59.95) 978 0 674 97226 1

William Dalrymple and Anita Anand
KOH-I-NOOR
The history of the world’s most infamous diamond
352pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99
978 1 4088 8841 0

Shashi Tharoor
INGLORIOUS EMPIRE
What the British did to India
295pp. Harv. £20.
978 1 84904 808 3

In Britain, the history of the Indian subcontinent and its ties with the wider world is rarely far from the media spotlight. The 1930s costume drama Indian Summers began on Channel 4 two years ago, later to be joined by Gurinder Chadha's film Viceroy's House and Joanna Lumley's India on ITV. The seventieth anniversary of Indian and Pakistan independence and Partition will be celebrated 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

Lord Mountbatten and colonial administrators discuss Partition, 1947

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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 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 issue an apology, make a symbolic repayment 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 other 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.

Procession of Cornelis van den Bogaerde, Golconda, c.1687; from Sultans of Deccan India 1500–1700: Opulence and fantasy by Navina Najat Haidar and Marika Sardar (368pp. Metropolitan Museum of Art. $65. 978 0 300 21110 8)