

As Britain struggles with Brexit and evokes “imperial nostalgia”, Shashi Tharoor’s book, “An Era of Darkness: the British Empire in India”, demolishes at least three common myths. First, the myth of the beneficence of British colonialism. Then there is the notion that 18th century England was a promising model of democratic governance.

And lastly is the myth of the English gentleman. For example, Robert Clive, the once (in)famous “Clive of India”, was a juvenile delinquent who arrived in Madras in 1744 as an 18-year clerk, but found his vocation as a thuggish fighter in the small security force of the East India Company.

The story of British colonisation of India is in fact at least two stories. First, through the 18th century, much of India was progressively conquered by the East India Company, a violent and rapacious enterprise, supported by the British crown. But then, the East India Company’s own army (mainly comprising Indians) led an uprising against it in 1857 — known as the Indian Mutiny or the First War of Indian independence. This uprising was ultimately unsuccessful, and following this, the British Crown took over governing India from the East India Company until India’s independence.

## **Britain’s devastation of India**

Tharoor provides us with a devastating portrait of how the British decimated the Indian economy through these centuries. In 1700, India was the world’s richest country, accounting for some 27% of global GDP. But in 1947, when India achieved its independence, India had been reduced to one of the world’s poorest countries, with just over 3% of global GDP.

The British took thriving industries — like textiles, shipbuilding, and steel — and destroyed them through violence, taxes, import tariffs, and imposing their exports and products on the back of the Indian consumer. They taxed the Indian peasantry at a level unknown under any other rulers, and through torture and cruelty, they extracted vast sums of money which they shipped off to England.

Tharoor quotes the young American historian and philosopher, Will Durant, who visited India in 1930: “The British conquest of India was the invasion and destruction of a high civilisation by a trading company utterly without scruple or principle, careless of art and greedy of gain, over-running with fire and sword a country temporarily disordered and helpless, bribing and murdering, annexing and stealing, and beginning that career of illegal

and 'legal' plunder which has now gone on ruthlessly for one hundred and seventy-three years."

According to Tharoor, much of Britain's prosperity was built on the drainage of resources from India. He is convinced that India would have been a much richer, prosperous, educated country without the British. Most importantly though, Tharoor is not seeking to blame colonial history for India's current situation. Independent India is guilty of many policy shortcomings.

In addition to decimating the economy, the British inflicted massive suffering on the Indian people. Tharoor estimates that some 35 million Indians died because of British policy in a succession of famines. The Bengal famine of 1943/44 was one of the most egregious where some 4 million died, as Churchill shipped grain from Bengal to Britain to buttress reserve stocks for British soldiers in Europe while Bengalis were starving to death. When apprised of the consequences of his actions, Churchill retorted: "Why hasn't Gandhi died yet?" Tharoor puts Churchill in the same class as Hitler, Mao and Stalin, despite the idolising of him in Britain.

Tharoor also highlights the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (also known as the Amritsar massacre) as one of the great atrocities of British rule. It took place on 13 April 1919 when Acting Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer ordered troops of the British Indian Army to fire their rifles into a crowd of unarmed Indian civilians in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, Punjab, killing at least 400, including 41 children, one only six weeks old. Over 1,000 were injured.

## **Myths of British beneficence**

There are many apologists for the Empire who argue that the British gave many things to India, like the very idea of India, democracy, the English language, the railways, tea and even cricket. But Tharoor has answers for all these claims.

Were the British responsible for the idea of India? No! In history, there had been various rulers who had consolidated much of India, including the Moghuls who were ruling at the time of the arrival of the British. Moreover, Tharoor argues that there was always a shared sense of a civilisational heritage on the sub-continent, a sacred geography of India, knit together by tracks of pilgrimage.

He speculates as the Moghul empire was disintegrating, there is no reason why a new

knitting together of the country could not have occurred. In the mid-18th century, the Maharashtras were in the ascendancy, and they could have done it. He imagines a consolidation of the country under Maharashtra rule with the Moghul emperor as a constitutional figurehead, and with strong regional autonomy.

He argues that democracy would have been inevitable in this country of the "argumentative Indian" and in this world where most countries enjoy at least some degree of democracy. He also argues that it is a bit rich of the British to claim that they bequeathed democracy to India, after 200 years of exploiting and abusing the country.

Rather than uniting India, the great British achievement was to divide it. Tharoor argues that India's Hindu/Muslim divide only began under the British colonial rule, and that partition between India and Pakistan would never have happened without the British. In 1857, the British were horrified to see Hindus and Muslims fighting together against the British during the Indian Mutiny. So the British launched a divide and rule policy along religious lines. They sought to forment a separate Muslim consciousness.

The British were also disturbed to see that when the Indian National Congress was first formed, and its first presidents included Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and Parsis. The British then lobbied for and financed the creation of the Muslim League as a rival body, deliberately to split the nationalists along religious lines, that being the easiest way to divide and rule. In 1905, the British partitioned Bengal, explicitly telling Muslims that they were giving them a Muslim majority province.

Tharoor also argues that while India long had the caste system, it was a rather fuzzy thing. But the British took the caste system and codified and entrenched it, to use as a means of social control.

The English language was not given to India for the country's benefit. The British taught English to only a narrow stratum of Indian society which they could use to enhance their control of India. (Even today, only about 10% of Indian speak English.) The British had no incentive to educate Indians as that they might learn of the injustices of the British. The fact that the Indian elite has seized upon English, educated themselves in it, and turned it into an instrument of their own liberation is to the credit of the Indians, not the British.

Overall, Tharoor reluctantly concedes that there have been some benefits for India from British colonialism, but that this is not because of the British of magnanimity. They were basically indirect consequences of British self-serving actions. But he also argues that India suffered from the colonisation of the mind, something which it is much more difficult to

overcome.

How then did this poor little country of Britain manage to conquer India? At the time of the East India Company's arrival in India, the Moghul regime was disintegrating, and several Indian local powers were rising. But they never managed to unite themselves. Indeed, the British were able to collaborate with some of these local Indian groups, and bribe them for support. Thus, Indians were very much complicit in their own oppression. The British could not have ruled India without Indian complicity. The British also succeeded thanks to its superior military technology.

## What to do

Tharoor's book grew out of a speech he made at an Oxford Union debate on the proposition that "Britain Owes Reparations to Her Former Colonies". He does not believe that reparations would make any sense. But he does believe that a formal apology is due. Britain has a moral debt.

Tharoor believes that Britain is suffering from historical amnesia about the time of the Empire, abetted by rose-tinted television shows like "Indian Summers", "Far Pavillions" and "The Jewel in the Crown". He argues that the colonists at the time had no illusions about what they were doing. They were most clearly in it for the money.

He is thus perplexed that British schools do not teach colonial history. According to opinion polls, many young English people are strangely proud of the empire and would like to have it back. Further, London, a world capital of museums, does not even have a museum of British colonialism.

There are still very many apologists for the British Empire who criticise Tharoor's writings and seek to justify all the British actions. But virtually all of his information comes from highly respected sources and passes the test of academic credibility. It is also true that Tharoon offers several speculative opinions and scenarios. But even if only half of his material were reliable, it would still represent a very shameful period of British history.

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