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## Imperial Illusions

India, Britain, and the wrong lessons.

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I.

As I entered secondary school in the mid-1940s in what was still British India, I remember thinking that, despite our irritation with the British, it was rather agreeable that the favorite military music of the British Army was "Beating the Retreat." There was little sign in 1944 that the British were about to evacuate the country, despite the swelling torrent of the Indian national movement led by Gandhi and other political leaders; but the decisive moment was not far off. It came rather abruptly in 1947, sixty years ago, ushering in the beginning of the end of "the biggest empire ever, bar none," as Niall Ferguson describes it in his book *Empire*, a guarded but enthusiastic celebration of British imperialism. While this year the Indian newspapers have been full of festivity for what has been achieved in six decades of independence, it is worth remembering more soberly that this is also the anniversary of the end of a very long imperial relationship.

As the year 2007 trails away, it is a good time to take a general look back at the history of the domination of a hot, sunny, and vast subcontinent in the Orient by rulers from a small kingdom in rainy, windy, cool--and very far away--islands on the western coast of Europe. In India, indeed, this is a year of anniversaries. Not only did that imperial rule of the subcontinent end sixty years ago, it also began 250 years ago, with a small but hugely repercussive event in 1757. On June 23 of that year, Robert Clive led the forces of the East India Company to defeat the Nawab of Bengal in the battle of Plassey, thereby initiating British control of state power in India. The battle lasted all of a day, but it is still seen as a memorable event both in Britain and in the subcontinent; and when I gave a commemorative lecture last June in the London City Hall, the mixed nature of the large audience made it vividly clear to me that the recollection of that one-day war a quarter of a millennium ago still interests people of diverse ancestry and origin, living now in post-imperial Britain.

And there is another momentous anniversary that broaches the question of what imperialism did for, and to, India. It is now exactly one hundred fifty years since the first armed battle for the end of the British domination that engulfed the subcontinent. The uprising, which united very different rebellious groups under one banner of revolt, started in March 1857 in Barrackpore, on the outskirts of Calcutta, not far from Plassey, and spread across India. It was ultimately crushed by the British, with the help of Gurkha, Pathan, and Sikh troops, who were not involved in the revolt. The squashed rebellion, which has variously been called "the Sepoy Mutiny" (the official term used by the British) and "the first war of independence" (favored by many Indian nationalists), was in fact responsible for the British decision to make India directly a part of the empire, rather than continuing to rule it indirectly through the East India Company.

The story of British rule in India is of more than historical interest. It has been suggested that the annals of the British empire are relevant to significant policy issues in the world today. The British empire is invoked persistently these days to discuss the demands of successful global governance. It is used to persuade the United States to acknowledge its new role as the unique imperial power today, an invitation and an inspiration--and perhaps even an instigation--for which Ferguson speaks powerfully in his ultimately rather didactic book on the British empire. Ferguson is concerned that despite America's leading role in the world today, which could be exercised with pride and responsibility rather than with embarrassment and confusion, America is evading its true historical task. In his view, the United States now runs a de facto empire "that dare not speak its name." He calls it "an empire in denial."

Ferguson asks an important question: "Should the United States seek to shed or to shoulder the imperial load it has inherited?" We may doubt whether America's effective power in the world today is comparable to that of Britain in its imperial heyday, and we may not agree with him that this is "the most burning

contemporary question of American politics"; but it certainly is an urgent query and an interesting one. Ferguson is also right to argue that the question cannot be answered "without an understanding of how the British Empire rose and fell; and of what it did, not just for Britain but for the world as a whole." So the cluster of anniversaries of British rule in what was the largest part of the empire--"the jewel in the crown"--is a good occasion to try to get some clarity on those questions, too.

How tidy and how regular were the processes that led to the emergence of the largest empire in history? How great were the achievements of this empire that was emphatically not "in denial"? The latter is a tricky question to answer, and even to formulate adequately, since it is extremely difficult to judge the effects of specific developments in history. The temptation to compare the subcontinent in 1947, when British rule ended, with what India was in 1757, at the time of the battle of Plassey, is hard to resist, and this forms the subject matter of a good deal of the analysis of what British empire did--and did not--achieve. But in fact that comparison tells us little about the consequences of the empire, since the subcontinent would have moved on over that long period to something different from what it was in 1757 had India not been conquered by the British.

To illustrate the ground for my skepticism, consider another comparison--a hypothetical scenario, what philosophers call a counterfactual assumption. Imagine if Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States Navy, who steamed into the bay of Edo in Japan with four warships in 1853, had been not the leader of a pure show of American force (as was actually the case), but instead the front guard in an assumed American conquest of Japan. If we were to assess the achievements of this supposed American rule of Japan by comparing Japan before that imagined American domination in 1853 with Japan after that domination were to end, we would omit all the effects of the Meiji restoration in 1868, as well as all the other globalizing changes that were yet to come, which radically transformed the nature of Japan as a country and a society and of course as an economy. Dates--1757, 1853--are stationary, but the process of history is not.

It is not easy to guess with any confidence how the history of the subcontinent would have gone had the British conquest not occurred. Would India have moved, like Japan, toward modernization in an increasingly globalizing world, or would it have stayed resistant to change, like Afghanistan, or hastened slowly, like Thailand? We could not assess "the results of the British rule" without being sure what the alternative would have been (rather than simply assuming that India would have stayed locked for two centuries into whatever it was in 1757). Still, even in the absence of such big comparisons of alternative historical scenarios, there are more limited questions that can be asked--and to a considerable extent answered--which may help us to an intelligent understanding of the role that British rule actually played in India.

## II.

**What were the challenges** that India faced at the time of the British conquest, and what happened in those critical areas during the British rule? To recognize a need for some change in India in the mid-eighteenth century does not require us to deny the achievements of India's ancient civilization, with its rich history of accomplishments in philosophy, mathematics, literature, arts, music, medicine, and a variety of academic studies such as linguistics and astronomy. India also had much success in building flourishing economies with large trade and commerce--both internal and external--well before the colonial period, and the economic wealth of India was plentifully acknowledged by British observers and commentators.

Yet it is hard to doubt that India had fallen well behind the modernization that was occurring in Europe by the eighteenth century. In some insightful essays on India that Karl Marx published in the *New York Daily Tribune* in 1853, he discussed the constructive effects of British rule in India, on the ground that India needed some serious shaking in its stagnant pause at the time of the British conquest. Without disputing Marx's thesis about the need for substantial change in eighteenth-century India (a thesis that is, I think, basically correct), one could question his further assumption that the British conquest was the only window to the modern world that could have opened for India. What was needed at the time was more global involvement--but that is not the same thing as imperialism.

It is worth noting here that throughout India's long history there were persistent exchanges of ideas and commodities with the outside world. Traders, settlers, and scholars moved from India to the east--Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and elsewhere--for a great many centuries,

beginning nearly two thousand years ago; and the far-reaching influence of these movements, especially on language, literature, and architecture, can be seen quite plentifully even today. There were also huge avenues of global influence coming into the country through India's open-frontier role in welcoming fugitives and other settlers from abroad, from very early days. Jewish immigration into India began right after the fall of Jerusalem in the first century, and continued over many centuries. (Baghdadi Jews, such as the highly successful Sassoons, came in large numbers even as late as the eighteenth century.) Christians started coming in the fourth century, and Parsees in the late seventh century (as soon as persecution commenced in their homeland). Muslim Arab traders began to settle in coastal India in the eighth century. Persecuted Bahais came much later. In fact, India has for most of its history played a similar role to modern Britain and America, as a home for fugitives.

It is difficult to conclude, therefore, that India had to depend only on Britain as its sole guide to the changing contemporary world in the eighteenth century--or at any other time. In fact, there were long-established trading connections, stretching back nearly two thousand years, of people in the exact locality, near the mouth of the Ganges, from where the East India Company launched its first conquest of India in the eighteenth century. The evidence for this can be found not only in Indian accounts, but also in the writings of such authors as Claudius Ptolemy in the second century, who treated this region in some detail, and identified a number of towns and cities that were engaged in trading and other economic activities for a global economy. Pliny the Elder also provided descriptions of the open and flourishing economy of this region.

When the East India Company undertook the battle of Plassey and defeated the Nawab of Bengal, there were businessmen, traders, and other professionals from a number of different European nations already in that very locality. Their primary involvement was in exporting textiles and other industrial products from India, and the river Ganges (or Hugly, as it is more often called in that part of India), on which the East India Company had its settlement, also had (further upstream) trading centers and settled communities from Portugal, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, Prussia, and other European nations.

Being subjected to imperial rule is not the only way of learning things from abroad, no matter how necessary such learning may be. When the Meiji restoration established a new reformist government in Japan in 1868 (which was not unrelated to the internal political impact of Commodore Perry's show of force in the previous decade), the Japanese went full steam into learning from the West, sending people for training in America and Europe, and making institutional changes that were clearly inspired by western experience. They globalized themselves voluntarily. They were not coercively globalized by others. The shaking of India, too, could have come in non-colonialist ways.

**It is true that** it was Britain that did, in fact, play the role of India's pre-eminent Western contact, and this was certainly connected, and quite intimately, with the empire. To recognize this, however, is not in any way to rule out the alternative scenarios that could have occurred in the absence of India's colonial subjugation--that is a separate question altogether. But what did actually happen deserves our special attention, as the process of change that in fact occurred. Consider Christopher Bayly's important point (in his definitive book *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914*) that the Calcutta intellectual Ram Mohun Roy, born in 1772, "made in two decades an astonishing leap from the status of a late-Mughal state intellectual to that of the first Indian liberal," who "independently broached themes that were being simultaneously developed in Europe by Garibaldi and Saint-Simon." To understand Roy's creativity, it is necessary to see that his far-reaching deliberations were influenced not only by his traditional knowledge of Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian texts, but also very strongly by the growing familiarity of Indian intellectuals with English writings circulating in Calcutta under the East India Company's patronage.

Related to the general question about what India needed at the time of the British conquest, there is also an important thesis about the need for uniting India, which is often presented by theorists of British imperialism as one of the great services that the empire performed. It is argued that India was not one country at all, but a divided land mass and a fragmented population spread over an area of the size of a continent, and that it was the British empire that welded India into a nation. It can certainly be argued, with considerable plausibility, that the kind of change that happened in Japan after the Meiji restoration would have been very hard to organize for a country as large and as fragmented as India. When Robert Clive's forces of the East India Company defeated the Nawab of Bengal in 1757, there was certainly no unifying power ruling all of India.

Yet it would be a gigantic leap from there to the British claim that they united India, a thesis that is usually garnished by such observations as Winston Churchill's remark that India had been no more a country than was the Equator. In fact, the ambitious and energetic emperors of India from the third century B.C.E. onward--Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, the later Chandragupta of the Gupta dynasty, Alauddin Khilji, the Mughal emperor Akbar, and others--did not accept that their regimes were complete until the bulk of what they took to be one country was united under their rule. Indian history shows a sequential alternation of large domestic empires and clusters of fragmented kingdoms. As it happens, British rule began at a time when the Mughals had declined in power, though formally even the Nawab of Bengal, whom the British defeated, was a subject of the Mughal emperor. The Nawab still swore allegiance to the Mughal emperor, without paying very much attention to the formality of the empire.

In that special situation, then, the British did make a big difference. The most likely successors to the Mughals, the newly emerging Hindu Maratha rulers from near Bombay, periodically sacked the Mughal capital of Delhi and continued to exercise their military power across the country. (The East India Company had already built a huge ditch in 1742, called "the Maratha ditch," at the edge of Calcutta, to slow down the lightning raids of the Maratha cavalry, coming across much more than a thousand miles.) But the Marathas were still quite far from putting together anything like the design of an all-India empire.

Like previous Indian emperors, the British were not satisfied until they were the dominant power across the bulk of the subcontinent, and in this regard they were not bringing a new vision of a united India so much as acting as the successors to previous domestic empires. For an adequate understanding of what was happening at the time of the British conquest, it is important that we do not make the mistake of assuming that the fragmented governance of mid- eighteenth-century India was exactly the state in which the country typically found itself throughout its history, until the British came along helpfully to unite it; and at the same time we must not fail to see what the British did actually accomplish as they filled up the imperial vacuum, through a sequence of conquests that began in Plassey.

Why was it so easy for the British to defeat the Nawab of a part of India, namely Bengal, that was quite well-known in Europe as a rich kingdom? The battle was swift, beginning at dawn and ending close to sunset on that June day in 1757. It was a normal monsoon day, with occasional rain in the town of Plassey, situated among mango groves between Calcutta, where the British were based, and the capital, Murshidabad, of the Nawab of Bengal. It was in those mango groves that the British forces faced the Nawab Siraj-ud-Doula's army and promptly defeated it. The British, with a much smaller army, had much greater fire power, but perhaps more importantly, Robert Clive had taken the precaution of making use of--and to a great extent fostering--a treacherous development within the Nawab's government. The person at the center of the treason was Mir Jafar, the Nawab's uncle, who had a leading role in the conspiracy against young Siraj, and whose desire to seize the throne was both strong and strongly encouraged by Clive.

Mir Jafar's role was quite crucial for Clive's early victory. Right in the middle of the battle of Plassey, the big division of the army that Mir Jafar commanded on the Nawab's side suddenly left the fight and quit. In the evening of the battle, after Clive had won, he received a felicitating letter from Mir Jafar: "I congratulate you on executing your design." Clive killed Siraj, the defeated Nawab, and put Mir Jafar, the key conspirator, on the throne, with nominal power, at the mercy of his British guardians. The empire began, then, in an event that can hardly be seen as a regular and straight military conquest. If Plassey had been a cricket match, it seems plausible that Skipper Clive would have been disallowed from participating in further games for many years to come.

But it was not a cricket match, and not only did Robert Clive continue to command British operations in India, building up the company's empire, he also waxed eloquent on his achievements in Plassey in his deposition before a Parliamentary Committee in London in 1772:

Consider the situation in which the victory at Plassey had placed me! A great prince was dependent on my pleasure; an opulent city lay at my mercy; its richest bankers bid against each other for my smiles; I walked through vaults which were thrown open to me alone, piled on either hand with gold and jewels! Mr. Chairman, at this moment I stand astonished at my own moderation.

III.

**The location of the** early imperial events in Bengal reflected the deep interest of the British merchants in the trade and commerce of the region. Since the British search for political control was clearly driven by financial interests, the regional connection is indeed important. The trading and commercial activities of the region had flourished under the strong state power of Hindu and Buddhist rulers, and then of Pathan and Mughal Muslim kings. By the time Clive arrived in Bengal, those days of strong state power had dimmed substantially. There now came the days of political and military insecurity, in which the intermixing of trading and civil and military power was so extensive that the idea of doing business without having a pliant political regime would have appeared increasingly naive.

The British did not create the entanglement in India of state power and commerce. It had already existed in politically decadent but hugely prosperous Bengal. What was special about the early period of the East India Company's rule, the early imperial innovation, was the way the company used the mixture of trade and state power. Clive and his associates, and then his immediate successors, used state power to make huge sums of money, for the company and for themselves. The money came not only from the state treasury of Bengal (the puppet Nawab had no choice in the matter), but also from the conspirators, including the local bankers, whom the British had helped.

What has been widely called "the financial bleeding of Bengal" began very soon after Plassey. With the Nawabs under their control, the East India Company made big money from territorial revenues, and also from the unique privilege of duty-free trade in the rich economy of Bengal--all this not counting bribes and so-called gifts that the company was also in a position to extract from local merchants. If Americans are to be inspired by the disciplined regularity of early British rule in India, they would do well to avoid reading Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, particularly Smith's discussion of the abuse of state power by a "mercantile company that oppresses and domineers in the East Indies. " While most of the loot accrued to British company officials in Bengal, there was widespread participation in all this by the political and business leadership in Britain. Indeed, nearly a quarter of the members of Parliament in London owned stock in the East India Company in the 1760s, the decade that followed Plassey (as Robert Travers discusses in his illuminating book *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal*). The commercial interests at the beginning of the empire in India reached far into the British establishment.

The robber-ruler synthesis eventually did give way to the emergence of what would soon become classical colonialism, with the recognition of the need for law and order and for a modicum of reasonable governance. The early misuse of state power by the East India Company put the economy of Bengal under huge stress. What the leading English cartographer John Thornton had described, in his famous chart of the region in 1703, as "the Rich Kingdom of Bengal" experienced a gigantic famine during 1769-1770. Contemporary estimates suggested that about one-third of the Bengal population died in the famine. This is almost certainly an overestimate, but even if the mortality was quite a bit lower than that, it was clearly a huge catastrophe, with massive starvation and death--in a century that had seen no famine in the region before the rule of the East India Company began.

**The disaster had at** least two strong effects. First, the economic decline of Bengal eventually damaged the company's business as well, hurting the British investors; and so the powers in London had reason to change the running of their part of India into more of a regular state-like operation. Second, the iniquity of early British rule in India began to receive considerable political criticism in Britain itself, as its disastrous consequences became clear. By the time Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, penned his famous judgment that the East India Company was "altogether unfit to govern its territorial possessions," there were many British voices making the same point. The strongest indictment came, of course, from Edmund Burke, in his eloquent parliamentary speech at the impeachment of Warren Hastings in 1789. Even though it can be argued that Burke's thesis about Hastings's personal perfidy was seriously misplaced (Hastings tried and to some extent succeeded in stopping comprehensive British pillage, in contrast with his predecessors in charge of the company), Burke's general diagnosis of the extent of nastiness of the company's rule of India was not mistaken. The period of so-called "post-Plassey plunder" with which British rule in India began was by then giving way to the sort of colonial subjugation that would soon become the imperial standard, and with which the subcontinent would become more and more familiar over the following century and a half.

The spread of British rule to the rest of the country happened on the basis of that unsavory foundation. As the East India Company's power expanded across India, Calcutta became the capital of the newly emerging empire (it occupied that position from the mid-eighteenth century until 1911, when the capital would again

be shifted to Delhi, this time by the British themselves), and it was from Calcutta that the conquest of other parts of India was planned and commanded. The profits made by the East India Company in its economic operations in Bengal to a great extent financed the wars that the British waged across India in this period of colonial expansion.

Indeed, by the time of Plassey, quite independently of the British, power was slipping away from Mughal hands in Delhi. The Mughal authority had been weakened by other local forces, in particular Afghan invaders, as well as the Marathas from the west of India, who periodically raided and captured Delhi. Even though schoolchildren still read in history books that the British seized the running of India from the Mughals, the British did not in fact have to take on the Mughals when they really were a power.

And yet the status of the Mughal authority over India continued to be widely acknowledged. When the so-called "sepoy mutiny" shook the foundations of the British administration of India in 1857, the diversity of forces participating in that anti-British revolt could agree only on the formal legitimacy of the Mughal emperor--who was himself extremely reluctant to get into all this. The rebels declared that the emperor of all of India was the hesitant eighty-two-year-old Mughal monarch Bahadur Shah II, known by his pen name Zafar, whose authority did not extend very far beyond the city walls of Delhi, and who was far more interested in reading and writing poetry than in fighting and killing. Zafar, who would be banished to Burma after the end of the mutiny, could do little even to help the 1,400 unarmed civilians of Delhi whom the victorious British killed as the city was effectively destroyed. (The complexities of the poet-emperor are brought out beautifully by William Dalrymple in his biography *The Last Mughal*). The British saw their massacre of non-combatant citizens of Delhi as retaliation for the butchery earlier committed by the mutineers.

So the British did place India eventually under a unifying administration--something it lacked earlier in the eighteenth century. The process through which this was done was hardly regular or admirable, but a political unity was indeed achieved. Yet there remains the matter of the unity of the subcontinent across its religious divisions--a matter that reverberates in our own day as well. Under the period of the British rule of the subcontinent, much would be made of the allegedly irreconcilable hostility between Hindus and Muslims in India, and it may be tempting to conclude that this was what ruined Siraj, the Nawab of Bengal, and aided Clive in his victory. Such a suspicion could be fed further by the fact that while Mir Jafar, the Nawab's uncle and obviously a Muslim, was the ringleader of the conspiracy against Siraj, Clive did have the backing of many of the Hindu and Jain bankers who were largely responsible for the financial operations of Murshidabad, the Nawab's capital. In fact, the highly influential banker Jagat Seth (this was a title originally given by the Mughal emperor, meaning "the banker to the world") and his cousin Swarup Chand were directly in league with the British.

And yet it would be a huge mistake to see the political divisions in Indian society as a Hindu-Muslim rift. The establishment of the empire involved many irregular and not particularly honorable events, but the exploitation of some pre-existing Hindu-Muslim political rift was not one of them, for there was no such rift to exploit. The mutiny of 1857 found Hindu and Muslim rebels in a joint front, with a shared recognition of the unique legitimacy of the Mughal emperor as the formal royal authority over India. It was much later, as the empire ran its course and the national movements for independence became powerful, that religion-centered political conflicts emerged in particular ways--in the development of which it would be hard to ignore the role of the British rulers, as Gandhi complained, in providing encouragement to religious divisions, which gave the British good grounds to stay on and run the subcontinent.

Much earlier in the history of the subcontinent, with invasions from West Asia, there had been battles in which mainly Muslim invaders had fought mainly Hindu locals. But that situation changed radically over the centuries, and by the eighteenth century the Hindu-Muslim mixing was fairly ubiquitous at the political level. Sometimes even the religious divisions themselves were systematically breached--for example, in the constructive hybrid religiosity of poets such as Kabir and Dadu, and later the Bauls of Bengal, who combined Muslim (mainly Sufi) ideas with Hindu (mainly Bhakti) notions. At the political level, there were variations over time. While the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb did subject non-Muslims to extra taxes, Akbar, the "great Mughal," had spurned such an approach, and had even given the command of his army to a Hindu general.

Religious distinctions did not play an especially divisive role at the time of Clive. The domestic divisions that led to the easy victory of the British in Plassey were based on the expectations of economic gain and political power. Both Hindus and Muslims were on all sides of this divide, some of them on both sides simultaneously. Siraj's chief minister, Mohan Lal, was a Hindu who was particularly keen on suppressing

Jagat Seth, who in turn saw his main rival to be another member of the same Hindu-Jain business clan, Omi Chand. The battle for financial privileges in Murshidabad was mainly between members of the same clan.

When Clive was marching toward Plassey for the battle (but still pretending, with some success, to be seeking peace with Siraj), he wrote to Siraj proposing that their disputes could be arbitrated by people whom the young Nawab trusted, namely, as Clive put it, "Jagat Seth, Raja Mohan Lal, Mir Jafar, Rai Durlabh, Mir Madan, and the rest of your great men"--a list of one Muslim and four Hindus in the top inner circle of the Muslim Nawab. Siraj's governance did not have any policy of giving priority to Muslims. Siraj had placed a Hindu, Mir Madan, in a high position in his court. Madan and Mohan Lal were among the few commanders to remain loyal to the Nawab to the very end, and they died fighting, in Plassey. The divisions within the Indian establishment, which Clive exploited, were entirely on different lines from that of religion.

#### IV.

**India needed less inwardness** and more global interaction than it had in the eighteenth century, and these the British did provide. But India received these attainments in the special form of imperial dominance--that is, with a huge lot of other baggage. India's traditional industrial advantage, reflected in its export surplus in industrial goods in the eighteenth century, was soon replaced by its becoming a large importer of industrial products. The industrial revolution and the increased need for mechanized production called for domestic change and technical modernization--but this came far too slowly, and so the greatest exporter of textiles in the world became a large importer from Manchester and elsewhere in Britain. Indian agriculture remained stagnant for a very long period--indeed, right up to independence. And India's indigenous capacity for the independent delivery of law, order, and administration was replaced, under colonial rule, by foreign control, with a very subsidiary role given to Indians in the hierarchy of power.

There occurred also a general collapse of Indian self-confidence, linked with the basic colonial attitude of the masters to the subjects under their rule. As it happens, in the early period of British dominance in the eighteenth century, the extent of racial prejudice, when present, was relatively low, despite the ongoing economic plunder of India. At the cultural level, there was considerable British interest in India's ancient civilization. William Jones, an East India Company officer, was a great pioneer of studies of India's past, including its ancient history, and Warren Hastings, so reviled by Burke, was a patron of Indian scholarship (he tried to acquaint himself with local culture, learned some Bengali, Urdu, and Persian, and encouraged Sanskrit studies). But in the subsequent phase of regular colonialism, racism was fairly rampant within the British administration of India.

James Mill's book *History of British India*, published in 1817, written by Mill without ever visiting India and without knowing a single Indian language, became something of a bible for all British officials sent to India to run the country. "Our ancestors," Mill explained in his hugely influential book, "though rough, were sincere; but under the glosing exterior of the Hindu, lies a general disposition to deceit and perfidy." Mill was also convinced that the natives had "in reality made but a few of the earliest steps in the progress to civilization," and that Indian civilization was on a par with other inferior ones known to Mill--"very nearly the same with that of the Chinese, the Persians, and the Arabians." He also put in this category the "subordinate nations, the Japanese, Cochin-Chinese, Siamese, Burmans, and even Malays and Tibetans." Mill was impressively even-handed in his contempt for non-Western cultures. But it mattered greatly more in the case of India, since his views made a critical difference to the way India was governed by the British.

The leading British administrator of India in the mid-nineteenth century, T. B. Macaulay, who wrote the famous "Minute" on "Indian Education" in 1835 that would govern the structure of what Indians would be taught over a century, thought that Mill's thoroughly prejudiced book was "on the whole the greatest historical work which has appeared in our language since that of Gibbon." Macaulay's own approach and inclinations fitted well with Mill's: "I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic.... I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."

If the lessons to be taught to Americans about how best to run their de facto empire are to be based on the character and balance of British administration and the actual beliefs that influenced it, a certain amount of make-believe history would be needed. When the British left India in 1947, after nearly two

hundred years of imperial rule, the proportion of adult literacy was around 13 percent. This abysmal figure reflects a certain view of the needs of the subject nation as seen by the dominant administrators from the ruling country--a country that had done so much to make its own population completely literate. The only regions in India with comparatively high literacy in India were the "native kingdoms" of Travancore and Cochin, which since Indian independence have constituted the bulk of the state of Kerala. These kingdoms, though dependent on the British administration for foreign policy and defense, had remained formally outside the British empire and had enjoyed a great deal of freedom in domestic matters, including educational policy.

The gap between theory and practice remained strong throughout the history of imperial relations between Britain and India. Rudyard Kipling issued his own invitation to the United States to follow Britain's alleged imperial success, in his famous poem "The White Man's Burden," published in McClure's in 1899 under the subtitle "The United States and the Philippine Islands." He may have caught the self-perception of the British administrator well when he explained, "Take up the White Man's burden/The savage wars of peace/Fill full the mouth of Famine,/And bid the sickness cease." And yet British governance of India had little success in its self-congratulatory role to "fill full the mouth of Famine." Indeed, British rule began with a gigantic famine in Bengal in 1769-1770; there had been none in that century before British conquest. And there were famines in India throughout the period of British rule, ending with another large famine in Bengal, the famine of 1943, in which close to three million people died, just before independence in 1947. There has been no such famine in India since British rule ended sixty years ago.

**In assessing Britain's relation** with India in this year of anniversaries, we must make a clear distinction between the positive contributions of the British in bringing India more closely into the global world (including many domestic institutional changes) and the plentiful presence of inequity and negligence in British imperial rule. It is important to appreciate the positive impact of India's British association, but also to recognize that the changes that were important for India could have come without the colonial adversities. India's approach to the contemporary world was certainly aided by many initiatives that can be linked to British influence, and many of these potentials have come into their own only after the end of the colonial rule.

This applies to the practice of democracy, with its elaborate institutional structure. Even though "government by discussion" has had a long tradition in India that makes democracy blossom well (as I have discussed in *The Argumentative Indian*, and also in these pages in "The Global Roots of Democracy," October 6, 2002), the British did make a big contribution, which was of particular use only after the British left. India's media, often censored and penalized in the imperial days, now flourish in a freer and more supportive atmosphere, but they do carry clear marks of British influence (mostly of Britain itself, rather than of the Raj). So do many legal institutions, often restrained and repressed in imperial days but now in fuller use. And if India is a flourishing world economy today--with its rapid growth including such oddities as the Indian industrial company, the Tatas, buying up what is nearly the bulk of the British steel industry--the foundations of many of the facilitating changes go back to the period of British rule, even if the alien rulers very often did the opposite of helping those facilities as part of their colonial policy. In 1906, the Tatas had been completely rebuffed by the London money market in their unassisted efforts to raise the funds for setting up a steel mill in India, and had eventually received the money they needed for this pioneering project from subscriptions from 8,000 Indian investors, mostly very small ones, by appealing to their nationalism about the need for industrial progress. The dialectics of British imperial rule has to be fully grasped to see what contributions did eventually emerge from the hostile fields of the empire, mostly after the end of what the historian Ranajit Guha has described as the "autocracy set up and sustained in the East by the foremost democracy in the Western world."

**Rabindranath Tagore, the great** Indian writer, discussed the contrast between Britain's importantly positive contributions to Indian thought and the empire's largely repressive and negative role. Tagore's criticism of imperial rule was consistently vigorous, but he made a special effort to dissociate the criticism of the Raj from any denunciation of the British people, or of their positive influences on Indian culture and society in India. Gandhi's amusing quip in reply to the question, asked in England, about what he thought of British civilization ("it would be a good idea"), could not have come from Tagore, who greatly respected British people and society, including Britain's leading role in democratic thought, enlightened reasoning, and literary and scientific creativity.

In Tagore's powerful indictment of British rule in India in 1941, in a lecture on the occasion of what proved to be his last birthday (published as a pamphlet under the title *Crisis in Civilization*), he maintained that distinction. While he described India as having been "smothered under the dead weight of British administration" (and "another great and ancient civilization for whose recent tragic history the British cannot disclaim responsibility is China"), he also pointed to what India had gained from, for example, "discussions centered upon Shakespeare's drama and Byron's poetry and above all ... the large-hearted liberalism of nineteenth-century English politics." The tragedy, as Tagore saw it, came from the fact that what "was truly best in their own civilization, the upholding of dignity of human relationship, has no place in the British administration of this country."

It is sometimes argued that, given the coercive nature of capitalism and the demands of the market economy, the British influence in taking India into the global world could not have come in any form other than imperialism. While I do think that unrestrained capitalism has huge shortcomings, I do not believe that the thesis of a necessary and inevitable connection between the market economy and imperialism is correct. Indeed, many of the leading theorists of the market economy at the time of its global emergence firmly rejected this allegedly inescapable connection. I have already quoted Adam Smith's indictment of British rule in India, but he was by no means alone in thinking that global economic connections through exchanges of ideas and commodities need not be parasitic on global imperialism. In fact, the most vocal British advocate of the global market economy, Richard Cobden, the leader of the activist Manchester League, argued explicitly for non-imperial development of market connections by declaring their object to be "to change the face of the world, so as to introduce a system of government entirely distinct from that which now prevails," where "the desire and the motive for large and mighty empires and gigantic armies and great navies ... will die away ... when man becomes one family, and freely exchanges the fruits of his labor with his brother man."

The world did not go quite in Cobden's direction. Perhaps it could not have done so. And yet it is important to distinguish between the obvious blessings of greater global interaction and integration, and the penalties of inequity and imperial asymmetry. It is a distinction about which there is need for more clarity not only in India and Britain, but also in America, given its perplexing role as the sole superpower in the contemporary world.

AMARTYA SEN is Lamont University Professor at Harvard University. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998.

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