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The New Republic

Imperial Illusions

by Amartya Sen

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| Posted by J. M. Rice

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For my India myths I prefer the Mahabharata to Amartya Sen. Ah, let me count the ways! And since TNR's vandalism of Talkback precludes paragraphs, a long one is unavoidable. First, Sri Sen creates the false premise of a nation -- which India was not -- of lotus-eating lovers of democracy and equality and enterprise -- which Indians were not. He is correct, that Mughal rule was in decline, which the Brits took advantage of, much like the Mughals had taken advantage of Vedic decline centuries earlier. But the Brits were no invaders. Because of the vacuum they were free to waltz right in to do business. They did not like to be robbed and murdered by bandits in the process, so Clive helped fix that, for a while. The notion that he or the East India Company corrupted a hitherto upstanding chamber of commerce is beyond idiotic. They merely adapted to the local corruption -- corruption that so offended Adam Smith. Let's skip to the talk of British racism. Sen reveals monumental hypocrisy by not once mentioning the word "caste". And he conveniently neglects mention of, among other examples, the slow genocide, by the Hindi oppressors, of the indigenous Naga of North-East India. And he barely escapes further mendacity by a throwaway line about the "butchery" of the Sepoy mutiny, in particular the Cawnpore massacre, one of the most disgusting acts of savagery in human history, for which those British reprisals Sen deplors were justice. And speaking of bibighars, the usual practice of East India Company agents was in fact not to impose their Britishness on the locals but to go native. Truth is, the East Asia Company residents made earnest efforts to assimilate. Another of Sen's lies is his claim of Hindu-Muslim amity. If the Hindus and Muslims were so cozy, then why did the Muslims split the first chance they got to form Pakistan? No doubt a British contrivance. And then, there's the little matter of Kashmir. Yeah, blame it on the Brits. Let's see, there were also the charming Thuggee. And what was it that one of those nasty Brit generals replied, when Sen's cultured locals objected to his interfering with their customs, when he stopped a widow's being coerced into suttee? "In my country we also have a custom: we hang murderers." Whatever their motives and whatever malign spin Sri Sen seeks to give the Raj, this is the truth: whatever is civilized about India -- from the civil service, to democracy, to English to Bombay's box wallahs to reliable trains to due process to cricket -- is thanks to the Raj. Not just to individual Englishmen, which Sen generously allows the Indians are fond of, but to British institutions, customs and mores that were imposed. Sen talks proudly of the high literacy of Kerala without mentioning its grinding poverty due, he'll somehow rationalize, to the vestiges of the Raj. Then, Sen mentions Richard Cogden. It should be pointed out that the same Christian zeal which motivated Cobden's reforms was also what helped check the assimilation of British



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residents in India. A quicker route to India, via the isthmus of Suez, was laid in the early nineteenth century (before the canal) – thus obviating the voyage around the Africa – and India was now accessible to a flood of evangelists and, worse, the wives of the British agents. And by the way, Admiral Perry did not ask the Japanese nicely to open up to Western trade. Had the Japanese balked, Perry would no doubt have thought of Clive. Finally, Sen, a purported expert on famine, says that there was no famine before the Raj, famine during the Raj, and no famine since the Raj, the implication being that there's a connection. However, he furnishes no evidence to back up this extravagant claim. He just expects us to assume that since the Brits are guilty of imperialism, they are somehow responsible for famine. I know you can't bear the thought, Old Chap, but without the Raj India today would be an enormous Pakistan. And what's this about "the coercive nature of capitalism"? What's he raving about?

| Posted by blackton

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excellent and balanced article by Amartya Sen. I would also like to recommend the excellent "A History of Britain" and its episodes regarding British colonial experiences in India.

| Posted by s4200

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I agree with J M Rice. India was and is not a civilized place. The independence was not a good step before a fundamental civility was adopted. Sri Sen is a hypocrite - talk openly about the castes and the Hindu and Muslim religious craze. Even Gandhi should have had to invest more energy into civility programs. Too many immigrants in UK lack a mature civility. It makes them hated, and many of them are not immune to Jihadi calls.

| Posted by amral

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J.M.Rice: "He just expects us to assume that since the Brits are guilty of imperialism, they are somehow responsible for famine." I think Sen's point about there being no famine before the Raj is that whilst there were aperiodic crop failures before the Raj, the devastating effects were usually mostly avoided by good planning (stock-piling and communal relief in times of need). However, under the Raj and the polices enforced by Lord Lytton, when the crops failed in 1877, relief for the poor was outlawed, as was any attempt to regulate the market price of grain. This was an inhumane and blind application of Adam Smith's (theoretical and clearly wrong) injunction that the market should determine grain prices even in times of famine. Consequently, most of the grain was shipped to the more profitable markets of Europe, while many millions died in India. Those who defied these policies (and there were brave souls on both sides who did this) managed to save many tens of thousands - these deaths were clearly preventable. I've taken this information from Mike Davis' book "Late Victorian Holocausts".

| Posted by PJ

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It was really interesting to read the responses to Sen's comments. It seems that Sen and JM Rice represent the two extreme poles of the thoughts on the idea whether British "colonialism / imperialism" was beneficial to India. </p> I am of the opinion that the nasty truth lies somewhere in between. Indians still struggle with the vestiges of their caste and religious traditions, and it is not clear how they could have ever overcome it without a great external push. Sen's thought experiment is whether India could have moved forward without the cloak of British colonialism, and he thinks the culture had enough positives to nudge it forward, but it was perhaps not very outward looking. The British may not have helped the culture organize externally but helped it in creating the global interactions. The items and people that Sen incessantly cites, are not unique to India (which is a subtle hint that India would have done alright). It is only the law of natural distribution that any large country such as India will have a few brilliant people in its midst. </p> One should also note that in spite of Sen's great praise for everything Indian (is there anything that could possibly be abhorring about the sub-continent or its people?), he has chosen to make his home in British and American universities. </p> On a side-note to Rice's discussion of Pakistan, one should note that Pakistan was as much a British colony as India, with the same institutions in place. The fact that it has deteriorated to such an extent has to do with perhaps the notion of social capital (or the lack thereof).

| Posted by Sumantra Roy

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JM Rice's comment was so full of mis-characterizations of Sen's article, and so full of an inherent belief that all things British are good and all things non-British are automatically uncivilized, that it would take me a few hours to point them all out, time that I don't have. Instead, I'll take just a few: He says: "whatever is civilized about India -- from the civil service, to democracy, to English to Bombay's box wallahs to reliable trains to due process to cricket -- is thanks to the Raj" So, Mr. Rice seems to be saying that only if someone can speak English can that person be said to be civilized. Does this mean that anyone in the world who cannot speak English is somehow uncivilized and that all the native Indian languages are somehow uncivilized? Also, it seems that Cricket is the only sport that a civilized person can play. So, if India did not play Cricket and had stuck to our traditional sports of Kabaddi and Hockey, we would still be uncivilized under Mr. Rice's warped world view of civilization. And, just to correct Mr. Rice's assumption that the only reason India is a democracy is because of Britain, he needs to note that the people who designed India's constitutional democracy at the time of independence did NOT only take their ideas of democracy from Britain - they took their ideas in equal measure from other democracies like the U.S. So, it's a gross exaggeration to say that the only reason we have

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democracy in India today is because of Britain. Rice also says: "If the Hindus and Muslims were so cozy, then why did the Muslims split the first chance they got to form Pakistan? No doubt a British contrivance." Mr. Rice, although you were trying to be sarcastic, you've actually hit the nail on the head. If you've read any unbiased history of the Raj (and by that I don't mean the history books that are given to students in England these days), you would come to know of Britain's policy of divide and rule, a policy that was primarily responsible for fostering enmity between Hindus and Muslims. Enough said.

| Posted by Sumantra Roy

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s4200 says: "India was and is not a civilized place." I don't know where you are from, but I'm assuming you are from the U.K. In that case, old chap, what would you call the splendid behaviour of English football fans? The epitome of "fundamental civility" perhaps?

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