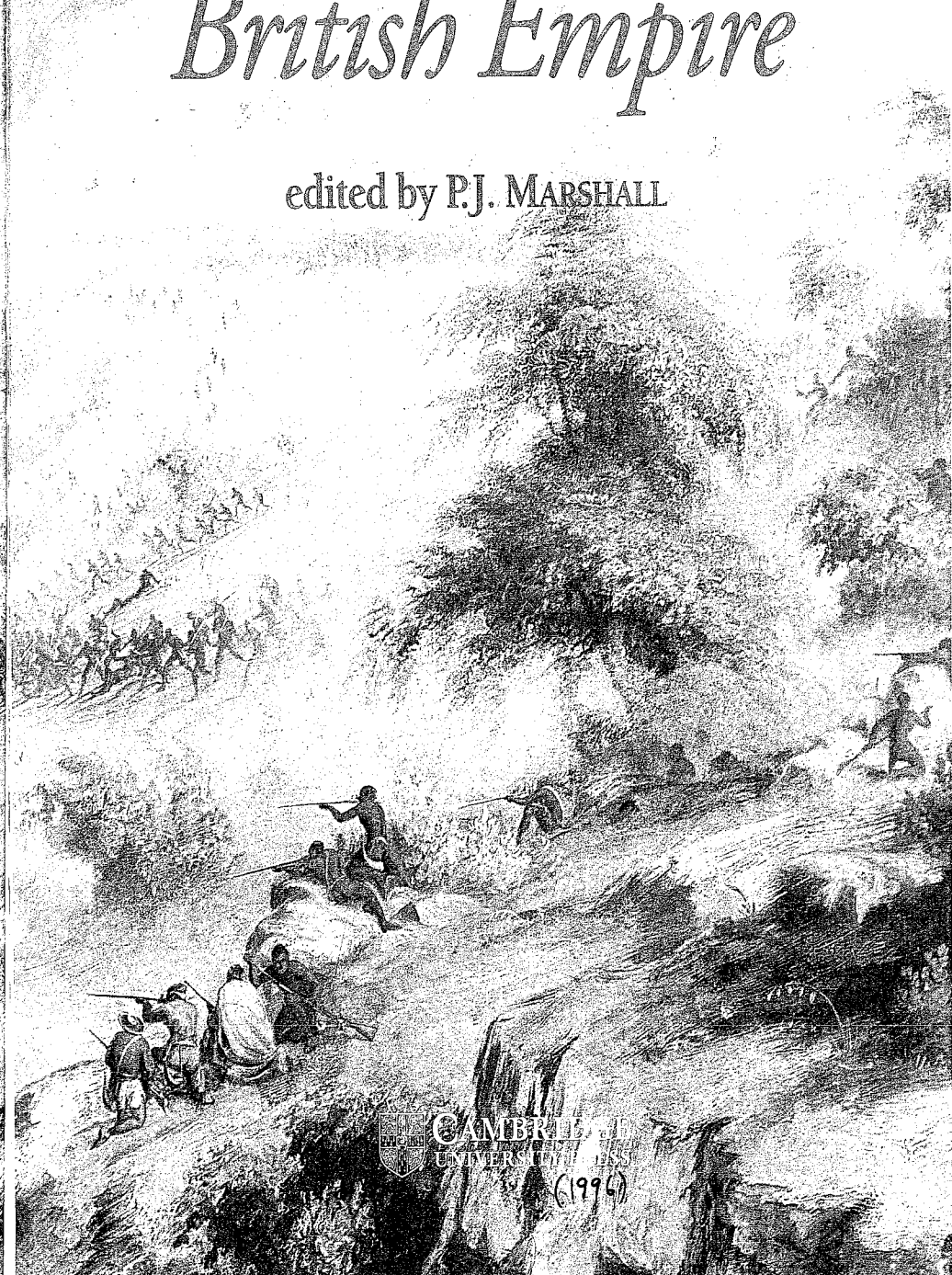


THE CAMBRIDGE ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE

British Empire

edited by P.J. MARSHALL



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Preface

It is the editor's pleasant duty to acknowledge the debts he owes to many people who have made invaluable contributions to this book. Such acknowledgements must begin with the editor's warmest thanks to the authors of the individual chapters. The book was the brain-child of Dr Peter Richards. Sally Carpenter has not only been an indefatigable and meticulous project editor, but she has also been a most resourceful and creative one. The book owes a great deal to David Seabourne for his skill in designing it, and to Callie Kendall's ingenuity in tracking down illustrations. Richard Newnham compiled the index. The sources for the illustrations are fully acknowledged elsewhere, but special thanks are due to Terry Barringer for her help which enabled us to select items from the magnificent photographic collection of the Royal Commonwealth Society, now in Cambridge University Library. June Walker did much valuable work in preparing the text. Sections of the book have benefited from the critical eye and astute comments of Dr Gad Heuman, Mr Donald Simpson, and Professor Glyndwr Williams.

PJM

British Rule in India: An Assessment

CHAPTER 15

Tapan Raychaudhuri

Historical writing about India under the Raj has been hag-ridden by the strong emotions that often inform ostensibly rational debates. The preoccupation with giving good or bad marks to British rule has overshadowed exercises in serious analysis. Yet it would be futile to pretend that any historian can attempt to assess what actually happened without any trace of prejudice.

As P.J. Marshall says in his introduction (see pages 12–13), there is no unanimous British view of the imperial past. There are historians and social scientists in all parts of the world who consider imperialism in all its forms as morally unacceptable and a source of misery to the subject population – a historical phenomenon without any redeeming features. British historians with radical views do not disagree with this severely negative judgement.

Yet it would be true to say that in Britain the dominant academic and popular perception of the imperial past, and of the Raj in particular, is far from negative. The focus is now often on the factiousness of Indian society, the historical roots of the country's problems stretching way beyond the advent of the British, the peculiarly Indian character of Indian poverty for which it is wrong to blame the colonial rulers, and the very positive economic gains that flowed from imperial policies at least in parts of the country. In short, some academic perceptions of the Raj in Britain now see South Asia's problems of poverty, illiteracy, internecine conflicts, and the rest as being indigenous in origin and having little to do with the 190 years of British rule. Further, in this view, the empire did more good than the critics of imperialism are willing to recognize.

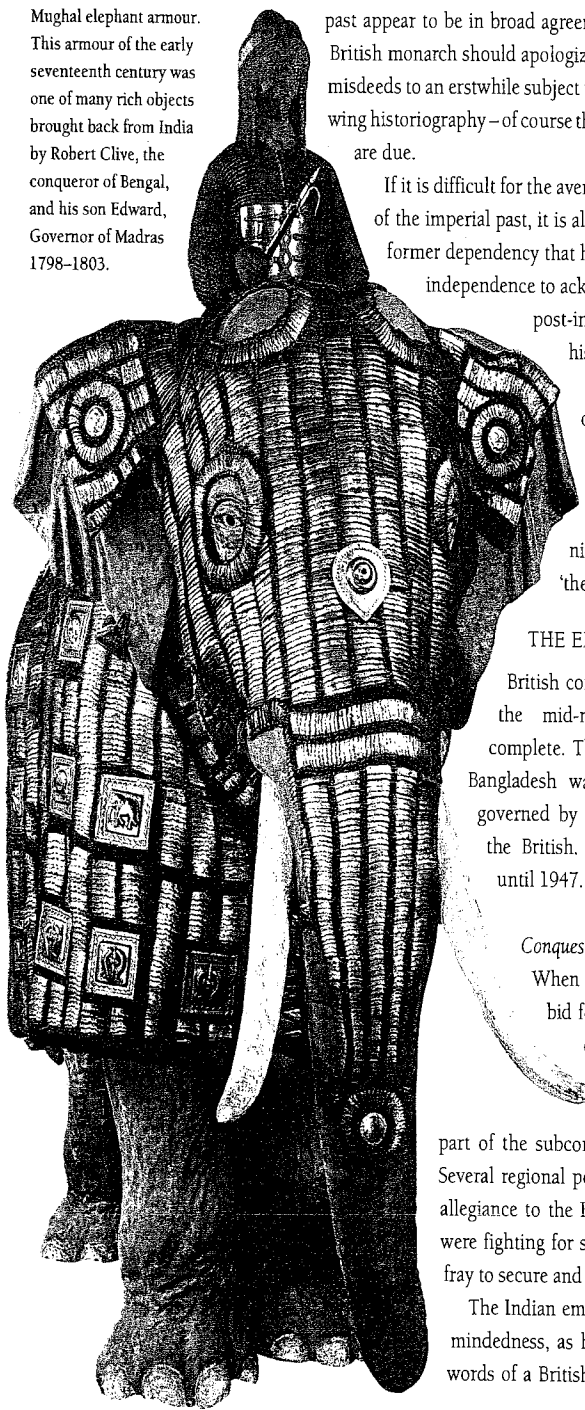
The approaches adopted by some of the other authors in this book, as summarized by P.J. Marshall in his conclusion (see pages 370–81), also tend to undermine any unequivocal condemnation of the Raj or of the British empire in general. In the first place, it is argued that any general judgement about imperialism and its consequences is likely to be invalid because of the diversity of conditions throughout the empire. Secondly, the subject populations are elevated into important players in the game, almost as important as the rulers themselves, if not in fact even more so. In such an analysis, the conquered are no longer passive victims but active co-operators in the relevant actions including the act of conquest. The benefits or otherwise of imperial rule are to a large extent traced to what they, and not the rulers, did or did not do.

In the course of a heated debate on Japan's war record, a Japanese historian pointed out that nations do not reassess their historical past radically unless they have gone through the experience of social revolution or crushing defeat in war. Since Britain has been spared such experiences, public perceptions of the imperial



District Officer. This drawing of a District Officer dispensing justice to village people appeared as an illustration to an account of the Indian civil service by one of its members, Philip Mason, in a book called *The Men who Ruled India; the Guardians*. Both the drawing and the title of Mason's book reflect the ethos of an idealistic service who saw themselves as guardians of 'their' people.

Mughal elephant armour. This armour of the early seventeenth century was one of many rich objects brought back from India by Robert Clive, the conqueror of Bengal, and his son Edward, Governor of Madras 1798–1803.



past appear to be in broad agreement that it would be unthinkable that a British monarch should apologize like the Japanese Emperor for ancestral misdeeds to an erstwhile subject people. In popular perception – and right-wing historiography – of course there were no misdeeds for which apologies are due.

If it is difficult for the average British citizen to take a negative view of the imperial past, it is almost equally difficult for the citizens of a former dependency that has gone through a prolonged struggle for independence to acknowledge any benefits of colonial rule. In post-independence India, serious thinkers and historians who see anything good in the imperial record can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. Even the best known among these persis-tent admirers of the Raj, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, has described the British in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as 'the Nazis of their time'.

THE EXPERIENCE OF RULE

British conquest began in Bengal in the 1760s. By the mid-nineteenth century it was virtually complete. The area that is now India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh was either under direct British rule or governed by princes who were subordinate allies of the British. The order created by conquest lasted until 1947.

Conquest and 'pacification'

When the English East India Company made a bid for political power in the mid-eighteenth century, first in the eastern and southern parts of India, the Mughal empire that once exercised control of the greater part of the subcontinent had been reduced to a shadow. Several regional powers, some of which still owed formal allegiance to the Emperor and even paid revenue to him, were fighting for supremacy and the company entered the fray to secure and enhance their commercial gains.

The Indian empire was acquired, not in a fit of absent-mindedness, as has sometimes been alleged, but, in the words of a British historian, in pursuit of the public and

private greed of the company's servants. Hilaire Belloc advised a child that it should 'Always keep a hold of nurse for fear of finding something worse'. Similar claims have been made for British rule in India, probably correctly. But the initial experience of the conquest was horrendous both in Bengal and southern India. Ghulam Hussain, a contemporary historian, who was otherwise full of admiration for the British, especially for their courage and military skills, described how his countrymen were groaning under the company's yoke. The company's servants indulged in an orgy of loot and this systematic plunder was at least one major cause of the famine of 1770. Although there are reasons to question the accuracy of claims that the famine wiped out a third of Bengal's population, the ruinous effects on the region's economy are not in doubt. The wars in the south, where Haidar Ali, the ruler of Mysore, devastated territories under British control, produced similar consequences. And taxes collected from these provinces and from the company's subordinate Indian 'allies' funded the military machine for the conquest of more territories and the consolidation of empire.

That empire was nearly destroyed by the great rebellion of 1857, described inaccurately as the Mutiny. The result of complex and multiple causes, the rising expressed the accumulated anger of many sections of the population in north and central India – dispossessed princes, disgruntled soldiers, and a harassed peasantry from whom the company's army was largely recruited (see page 50). The rebels committed acts of great brutality and were suppressed in equally brutal ways. The British in India bayed for even more bloody revenge. The rebellion created a legacy of racial hatred which permeated all aspects of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled.

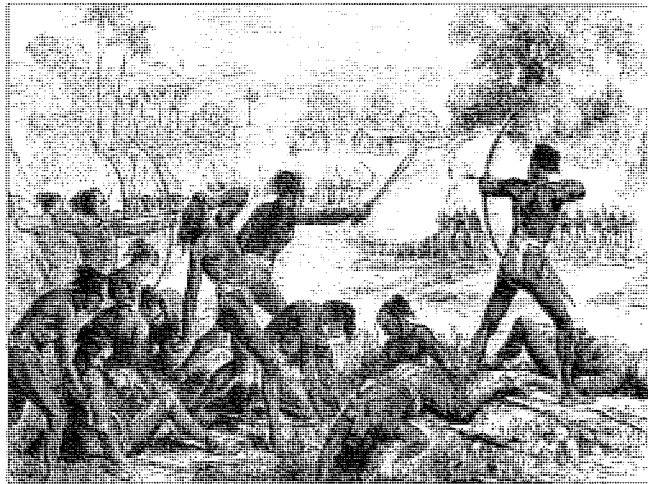
The leaders of the rebellion feature prominently in the demonology of British imperial history. It is significant that they were and are viewed very differently in India. Leaders like the Rani of Jhansi and Kunwar Singh are revered heroes in folk memory and nationalist myth has elevated the rising to the status of the First War of Independence. Such total disjuncture in perceptions is a significant comment on the relationship between the rulers and the subject population.

Pax Britannica

When India passed under the direct rule of the Crown in 1858 there was no one left to challenge British authority: the prolonged wars that had disturbed peace in many parts of the subcontinent during the decline of the Mughal empire and the era of conquest – some 160 years in all – were finally at an end. Banditry, a by-product of wars and anarchy, was soon crushed. For the first time in the history of the region, the entire subcontinent was ruled by one centralized government in a peace that the British regarded as one of their greatest gifts to India.

Peace, of course, is preferable to war and lawless anarchy, but the benefits of peace were not accessible to all concerned in the same way. If one remembers that the rebellion of 1857 occurred some thirty-five years after the main wars of

Santal Rebellion, 1855. The Santals were a 'tribal' people who lived in the wooded hills to the west of Bengal. Like other peoples who had lived apart from the main body of Indian society, they resisted the pressures of colonial rule and their resistance contributed to the sporadic violence of the Indian countryside. The Santals rebelled against tax demands and the incursions of settlers and traders from the plains. As this picture shows, Santals faced the fire of the British Indian soldiers armed only with bows and arrows.



conquest were over, it becomes obvious that many people in India were less than happy with the British peace. The peasants and the tribal people who constituted the majority of the population rose repeatedly in rebellion in many parts of the country throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The immediate causes of these risings varied, but most were rooted in the massive dislocation caused by the process of conquest and consolidation. The people driven to rebellion in sheer desperation included peasants forced to give up cultivation during the period of plunder, tribes deprived of their hereditary rights to the free use of forest resources, tenants rack-rented or expropriated by landlords created under the new tenures, and cultivators hopelessly indebted to moneylenders (who benefited from the new laws of contract) or forced to cultivate indigo by white planters on totally unacceptable terms.

The forces of law and order were almost invariably deployed in favour of their oppressors. The new legal system was incomprehensible and too expensive to be of any use to the poor. Before the British, justice in matters of civil dispute usually took the form of arbitration by village councils. Such arbitration must have favoured the privileged, but the less fortunate were not ruined. The new equality before the law meant that a Brahmin could now be hanged, but such triumphs of justice were of little consolation to the peasant who lost his land to the moneylender or the landlord. The intricacies of the land tenure system and the incomprehensible laws enmeshed the agrarian population in ruinous law suits. There is also plenty of evidence that the people lived in mortal fear of the rapacious police. When a village was robbed, often the first concern of the villagers was to hide the fact from the police lest they should ransack their homes. Folk songs in every part of the subcontinent record memories of such varied misery. There are none rejoicing in the advent of the Pax Britannica.

There were others who shared the unhappiness of the underprivileged. Pious and learned Hindus or Muslims had in the past been rewarded by grants of rent-free land. Under the British their descendants were deprived of their livelihood if they failed to prove that the grants were authentic. The bulk of officials who had served the regimes conquered by the British, especially the Muslims, were reduced to penury. Indians had been appointed to high offices of state in the early days of the East India Company's rule, but this practice ceased totally from the late 1780s: a new stereotype – that Indians were dishonest and undependable – became an integral part of the official dogma. Nevertheless, the lower ranks of the colonial bureaucracy had to be opened to Indians, a fact that is now cited in support of the argument that the subject population were active players in the task of government and decision making. Memoirs of middle-ranking Indian bureaucrats leave one in little doubt that they had very little effective power and that they resented the severe restrictions on their career opportunities. The fact that the British bureaucrats in India were among the highest paid by international standards and at times affected a lordly style aggravated the resentment.

Of course, there were sections of the population who were delighted with their prospects under British rule, a fact that explains the enthusiasm for the Raj that persisted well into the twentieth century. The Indian princes and the big landlords, secure in their possessions and privileges, never lost that enthusiasm. The new professional classes and those who had the benefit of western-style education also long retained their faith in the beneficence of British rule, but they criticized many features of that rule from the 1820s onwards. And their criticisms were not directed only to matters that concerned their self-interest: the abject misery of the Indian peasant is a recurrent theme in the writings of Indian intellectuals in the nineteenth century.

LEGACIES OF THE RAJ

India, far more than any other part of the British empire, was the great testing ground for colonial rule and its capacity to leave enduring legacies: a huge population was ruled over a long period by a regime that was by most standards strong and well-equipped.

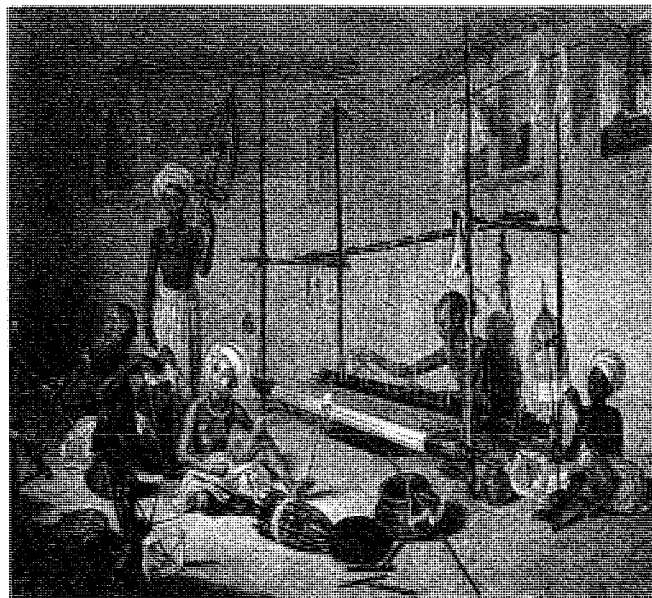
Development or underdevelopment?

When one reads the European accounts of India and other major Asian civilizations from the early modern age, one often has the impression of reading descriptions of a first world, to use a contemporary expression, written by people from less fortunate climes. Even in the mid-eighteenth century Clive compared Murshidabad, a provincial city in Bengal, in some ways favourably with London.

The information available concerning the record of India's economy under colonial rule is extremely imprecise. We know very little about the trends in population, output, or life expectancy until the last decades of the nineteenth

century. Certain things are however clear. The population increased, if at all, at a very slow rate – never even 1 per cent per annum until 1921 when reduced mortality through control of epidemic diseases pushed the figure to 1.3 per cent. Agricultural data is undependable but it seems that although in Punjab and parts of southern India there was some growth in productivity, the record in the rest of the country was dismal. In some parts of the country agricultural output had stagnated or actually declined during the twentieth century so that the population as a whole had considerably less to eat per head in 1947 than in 1900. Insecurity of tenure, the heavy cost of borrowing, and minimal investment in irrigation all contributed to this poor record. The development of railways and the market for agricultural crops, both national and international, encouraged specialization in crop production and stimulated the production of cash crops, including the higher value food grains such as high-quality rice and wheat. The consequent gains were often at the cost of lower value food grains – coarse rice, barley, or millet – the main source of food for the majority of the population. India, never an importer of food grains in the past, became dependent on imports, and per capita availability declined until the trend was finally reversed in the 1970s.

Not surprisingly, the successor states of the Raj were among the poorest countries of the world. It is estimated that in India some 48–53 per cent of the rural population were below the poverty line in 1947: in other words, nearly half the population could not afford the minimum amount of food required to sustain the human body. Average life expectancy was twenty-nine years. Nearly 88 per cent of the population was illiterate and the rate of illiteracy was even higher among



'A loom with the process of winding off the thread'. This painting of c.1792 depicts the Bengal weavers who produced cotton goods for export throughout the world by the East India Company. In the first half of the nineteenth century Indian weavers such as these lost their export markets and part of their domestic markets as well to the competition of machine-made cloth from Britain.

women. A very high proportion of the predominantly rural population were either landless or had no secure rights in the land they cultivated. Although some of the agriculturalists who could afford to cultivate the higher value crops had prospered and were to prosper even more in the newly independent states, these constituted a very small proportion of the rural population, as did big landlords with vast estates who lived off their rental income without contributing to agricultural production in any way.

Of course, there was a great deal of poverty in pre-colonial times as well but it would be a mistake to see India's twentieth-century poverty as a continuation of pre-modern patterns. Modern underdevelopment is the product of a vicious circle, low income–low saving–low investment. In 1600 when agriculture had to support a relatively small and very slowly increasing population (the subcontinent had an estimated population of about 100 million as compared to some 1,000 million in the 1990s), poverty did not mean near starvation. Famines had certainly been a part of Indian life since very ancient times. But in the past these calamities had been caused by crop failure. In the nineteenth century, on the other hand, one would have expected food grains to move to areas of shortage, helped by a modern system of transport. Yet as late as 1899 famine mortality remained high because vast sections of the population now lacked the purchasing power to buy food even when it was available.

By 1947 India had not developed an industrial base to compensate for the poverty of the countryside. For much of the span of British rule India's population was probably more dependent on agriculture than it had been before the conquest. In the pre-industrial world, India's manufactures like textiles were among the staples of international commerce and a flourishing class of merchants plied their trade from East Africa to the Philippines and as far north as Moscow and St Petersburg. Early in the nineteenth century India lost its export trade in manufactures and became a net importer of manufactured goods and a supplier mainly of agricultural products to Britain for the first time in its history. The consequent limited growth in agriculture did not compensate for the decline in manufactures caused by the loss of export markets and of the demand from the courts and the armies of the rulers who had been deposed by British conquest, as well as by the competition of machine manufactures imported from Britain. Such modern industries as developed from the late nineteenth century remained relatively insignificant. All newly industrializing countries have been dependent on favourable state policies in almost every part of the world. In India the favourable terms granted to British exporters and the doctrine of *laissez faire* meant that Indian industries received no protection and hardly any encouragement by the state until the mid-1920s, and then only in response to persistent Indian pressure.

By the end of British rule India had a small industrial sector – consisting of mines, light consumer goods, and a major iron and steel industry – and it was served by an infrastructure, especially a railway network, that compared well with



Sampling raw cotton, 1872. This warehouse for raw cotton at Calcutta is an indication of how, from being an exporter of cotton cloth, nineteenth-century India became a major exporter of raw cotton with which other countries manufactured cloth.

that of other dependent countries. But the railway network was heavily oriented to the needs of exports and imports. The majority of India's villages lacked even mud roads serviceable round the year. Modern irrigation, impressive in scale – especially in the Punjab and Sind – benefited only 6 per cent of the cultivated land.

Perhaps the one point of strength in the Indian economy at the time of independence was the existence of a highly resilient entrepreneurial class, recruited to a large extent from castes and communities with long-standing commercial traditions, who had made the most of the limited opportunities available under colonial rule. Though facilities for technical education had been severely limited and there was hardly any demand for high skills, Indian universities and education abroad had produced large numbers of professionally trained personnel with technical skills that later proved to be of value in efforts to develop the country.

Thus, when power was transferred, South Asia was a typically underdeveloped region, with a vast and growing population, stagnant agricultural output, a small industrial sector, and inadequate infrastructure. In per capita terms India was nearly at the bottom of the international ladder both in commerce and in modern industry. Very low per capita income, low saving, and hence low investment completed the vicious circle. This was not the logical outcome of the buoyant pre-industrial economy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but a reflection of the workings of the colonial economic relationship. This is not to say that on the eve of the British conquest India was on the verge of an industrial revolution which was frustrated by colonialism. But the nature of economic change induced by the colonial nexus surely precluded the possibilities of industrialization. It also created bottlenecks which proved to be serious handicaps for later efforts at industrialization.

Politics, identities, and conflict

In 1947, when the British left India, they transferred power to two – and if one counts Burma, three – successor states. Of these, one, Pakistan, has since broken up into two states. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have all adopted Westminster-style parliamentary systems of government, with periods of lapse into military dictatorship in the case of the last two. The administrative system, including the judiciary, created by the British has survived decolonization though it has been extended and modified to cope with the tasks of economic and social development as well as the phenomenal increase in population. Parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, despite many challenges and violations, may be said to have become integral parts of the political culture in Britain's erstwhile dependencies in South Asia.

On the face of it, this fact reflects the triumph of an ideology that is western, especially British, in origin. It is not, however, the end result of smooth or continuous developments sponsored by the Raj. The British created representative institutions not as a conscious preparation for Indian independence, but to try to

induce limited numbers of Indians to co-operate with the administration and thus to limit opposition to the government and reduce some of its costs. Except during the last ten years of their rule, when elected governments in the provinces had some real power, subject to the authority of the provincial governors and the Viceroy, the British bureaucracy who ruled the country was not accountable to any representative body in India. The right to vote for legislatures with strictly limited powers was granted to only 2 per cent of the population in 1919 and then to 10–13 per cent in 1937. It was the governments of India and Pakistan who introduced adult suffrage and accepted the principle of elected governments accountable to elected legislatures. This was a quantum leap, not the logical climax of gradual evolution. The transition was from oligarchic and autocratic government to representative democracy even though this was no doubt badly flawed in many ways.

The successor states also inherited the administrative organization of the Raj and the traditions that went with it. These were not best suited to the tasks of social and economic development attempted after independence. The inordinately expensive judicial system and a proverbially corrupt police which was often a law unto itself remain heavy burdens for the underprivileged in India.

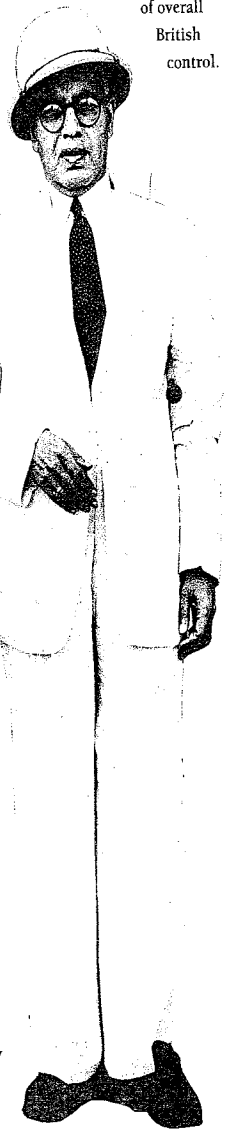
New political identities leading to rivalries and conflicts developed within the British political and administrative framework. These are an enduring legacy of the Raj. Such developments were only partly the deliberate creations of British rule: they were essentially by-products of the workings of colonial government and its interactions with indigenous society.

The primary object of British rule was to protect and enhance the interests of Britain in India. This provided the one element of continuity in the otherwise ad hoc and shifting policies which are often cited in support of the theory that it is impossible to generalize about the motives and consequences of imperialism. So long as there was no conflict with the dominant purpose, the welfare of Indians was often an important consideration, especially at the level of idealistic decision makers. Besides, a contented subject population was essential for stable government. The record, however, suggests that conflicts between British interests and policies likely to benefit India in the long run were frequent enough.

As the British in India could be counted in thousands and the subject population were several hundred million in number, co-operation and acquiescence on the part of Indians were essential for the functioning of colonial rule. This political co-operation had to be bought at a price – providing some access to resources and devolving some power. Elite groups competed for these benefits and they did so partly on the basis of groups and alliances that already existed in indigenous society, and partly on the basis of 'constituencies' defined in

Sir P.T. Rajan. Rajan, who was educated at Oxford and became a barrister, served as a minister in the government of Madras from 1930 to 1937. In the last years of colonial rule British India was to a considerable degree governed by Indian ministers within

a framework
of overall
British
control.



their own terms by the rulers who saw Indian society as a mosaic of different interests, communities, and peoples.

As people began to see themselves in new ways through interaction with western thought and the British presence, social identities acquired a new political importance. We do not encounter in the pre-British past either the idea of an Indian nation or any consciousness of a Hindu community spread across the subcontinent. As the idea of nationhood and political rights seeped into elite consciousness, the facts of being an Indian, or a Hindu, or a Bengali, acquired meanings that were entirely new. When the new rulers distributed seats in local bodies and legislatures or allocated funds for education on the basis of communities and in some instances of castes, communities and castes became the focus for political competition. Social and doctrinal difference, which had very rarely been the cause of civil conflict, now informed competition and political antagonisms. The British perception that Hindus and Muslims were two mutually antagonistic monoliths, a notion not rooted in facts, became an important basis for allocating power and resources.

Rioting in Calcutta, August 1946. The episode known as 'the great Calcutta killing', in which about 4,000 people lost their lives, was one of many violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in the events leading up to the ending of British rule and the partition of India.



Hindu-Muslim rivalry and the eventual partition of India was the end result and the British policy makers, when they did not actually add fuel to the conflict, were quite happy to take advantage of it. For example, Muslim leaders who opposed the nationalist claim to speak for all Indians were certainly courted as potential allies, though at the last moment there was desperate anxiety to prevent the partition of India because it was considered a threat to Britain's world-wide strategic interests.

Indian nationalism – the idea that the very diverse population of the subcontinent constituted a nation – was also of course a product of British rule in India. The rulers did not encourage the idea and their publicists pooh-poohed the notion that a people so diverse could ever be a nation. Yet the emergence of a colonial elite, in many ways homogenous in terms of their expectations and frustrations and sharing a language and common assumptions, as well as unification under a single administration, laid a basis for pan-Indian nationalism.

The overt racism of the British in India, which affected the institutions of government, contributed powerfully to the growth of nationalist sentiment. All Indians, whatever their status, shared the experience of being treated as racial inferiors. Higher levels of appointment were virtually closed to non-whites. British people reacted violently against proposals that would make them subject to the authority of Indian judges. The Viceroy Lord Curzon commented that the British in India got away with murder because no white jury would find a white man guilty of killing a native. As late as 1930 British officers were advised in a secret army memorandum that they should not kick Indians. The life stories of Indian celebrities are full of episodes of racial insults. The perception of shared bondage gave credibility to the notion of shared nationhood.

The ideals of the Indian nation that emerged in 1947 grew out of the movement for independence. The new Indian nationalism was inspired by the ideals of representative democracy as practised in Britain and denied to India. It was also inspired by ideals of social equality, but the exigencies of the struggle for independence have limited the extent to which these ideals have been applied after 1947. Aware of the country's great poverty and pervasive social injustice – problems that the colonial government left untouched – the nationalists adopted programmes that would ameliorate some of the misery. But since they sought the support of all social classes, and the interests of the poor clashed with those of the privileged, the tendency was generally to avoid conflict and maintain the *status quo*. The landless and the sharecroppers have, for instance, remained where they were, but the rural classes, who had some rights to land and had come to constitute a strong base for nationalism, were rewarded at independence: their chief enemy, the big landlords, lost their land as did the Indian princes.

The effort to mobilize support and sustain an organization based on multiple ethnic elements and mutually conflicting interests created the basis for a unique nation state, more diverse than any other known to history. Unlike the Soviet Union, it was created with the active consent of the constituent elements and has

survived with that consent largely intact for some fifty years. The absorption of the princely states, the two-fifths of Indian territory that was ruled by autocrats under British protection, into democratic systems with popular support also gives post-1947 India a further edge over the record of colonial rule.

The cultural legacy

The introduction of a western style of education brought an enthusiastic initial response from the new colonial elite who wanted a better knowledge of the English language as a key to careers under the new regime and who were, to a large extent, responsible for the new initiative. They also sought access to western science and humanities in the belief that these would generate progress. British policy makers like Thomas Macaulay, contemptuous of oriental cultures, wished to create a class of people who would be western in all but appearance. The need for functionaries who spoke the rulers' language was of course a consideration and the missionaries, who were among the chief propagators of western-style education, hoped to Christianize India.

The long-term effects of western education were very different from what the pioneers had expected. It acted as a catalyst – generating processes of change that went way beyond simple adoptions of western cultural artefacts. India was not Christianized: if anything, the new appeal to reason that shook the Hindus' faith in their own traditions also militated against the acceptance of Christian dogma. While the products of the new centres of higher learning remained enthusiastic for one feature, or another of western civilization, liberal democratic and egalitarian ideals had much greater appeal than that of the constitutional monarchy enshrined in Britain's unwritten constitution. So much so that at one time educational administrators seriously considered the exclusion of British history, with its record of struggle for citizens' rights, from the curricula of Indian schools and colleges.

One major end-product of the cultural encounter was the articulation of a distinctively Indian nationalism. This emphasized the shared cultural traditions of India's diverse population and the belief that the Indian civilization had unique powers of assimilation which had created out of diverse and often warring elements a unified culture, the basis of a future Indian nation. While this message of co-existence and unity was carried, up to a point successfully, to the mass of population mobilized in support of the movement for independence, the new political culture was also potentially divisive. Basically, it was the culture of the urban classes exposed to western-style education. Its inspiration was liberal humanism and the democratic ideals of the west and these had little meaning for the Indian masses. Some of those ideals were communicated to the poor and the under-privileged through Gandhi's self-consciously Indian life-style and the charisma that the leadership and their followers acquired by courting persecution. But as a number of historians now point out, the masses interpreted the message of nationalism in their own terms, very different from the concerns of the middle

class. There was an element of naivety in the modernizing leadership's expectation that deep-rooted attitudes and beliefs could be altered by waving the magic wands of reason, science, and technology. The leaders of Indian nationalism were generally committed to secularism, in the sense that it was right for the state to remain neutral or indifferent in matters of religion. The mass of Indian people have not always shared this belief. For them religion and politics have often been seen as inseparable.

Western education did create a class of people intellectually and in some ways psychologically in tune with developments of modern civilization in Europe and America. Since they provided the leadership of the nationalist movement, it would be obviously incorrect to describe them as denationalized. The encounter with western thought triggered off an outburst of creativity in literature and the arts that is remarkable by any standard. Much of this creative effort celebrated the new national consciousness. Access to a world language remains a great asset for the educated classes in India. The fact that the Indian Union has the second largest group of technically trained personnel in the world has certainly been facilitated by this linguistic inheritance of the Raj. Yet the fact remains that after some 180 years of exposure to English education less than 2 per cent of the population understand English. The percentage was even smaller in 1947 when there were 17 universities and 200 colleges in the subcontinent as against 140 and 2,000 respectively in the Indian Union alone today. And nothing has happened to bridge the chasm created by this cultural dichotomy. Macaulay believed that western culture would percolate down to the masses. This has not happened. The elite's way of thinking remains incomprehensible to the masses. Probably this fact, rather than the much discussed ethnic diversity of India, poses a real threat to its solidity as a nation state.

THE COLONIAL PAST AND THE SUBCONTINENT'S FUTURE

The vestiges of the Raj are very much present in the life of the subcontinent today. Despite attempts to shake it off, especially in Bangladesh, English remains the dominant language of intellectual discourse and, in India, effectively the language of administration as well. More important, the beliefs and attitudes that inform elite concerns as well as state policy can be traced back to the catalytic encounter with western thought under imperial auspices. The chasm that divides the masses from the privileged derives in part from this fact of western 'influence'. It is difficult to foresee an end to these legacies of the colonial past in the near future. One totally negative inheritance of that past, antagonism between Hindus and Muslims – converted at the state level into Indo-Pakistani conflict and Indophobia in Bangladesh, also seems destined to persist. On the positive side, the aspirations towards democracy, economic growth, and social equity that emerged in the colonial era – if not exactly with the blessings of the Raj – are now integral to the life of the subcontinent's population. It would be unwise to speculate about their chances of success.



Doctors at a Bombay hospital, 1905. The Jamsetjee Jijibhoy Hospital was a well-equipped institution with Indian doctors trained to the same professional standards as their European colleagues. It had been founded to relieve the poor of Bombay, but its capacity of 296 beds could do little to meet the needs of the city's vast slum population. The gap between the worlds of the Indian doctor and of his potential patients was very wide indeed.