

Inglorious Empire: What the British did to India

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Inglorious Empire arose from a speech given by Dr Shashi Tharoor in May 2015 at the Oxford Union in support of the motion ‘Britain Owes Reparations to Her Former Colonies’, focusing on British exploitation of India. The Union then posted the speech on the web. Tharoor ‘promptly tweeted a link to it and watched in astonishment as it went viral’, swiftly accumulating millions of hits on hundreds of sites. In various forms it currently has almost seven and a half million hits on YouTube alone. As the British economy could not afford a quantifiable representation of the wealth extracted from India, reparation would necessarily have to be a nominal gesture (Tharoor suggested £1 a year), as an acknowledgement of Britain’s debt to the Indian economy. The theme of *Inglorious Empire* (originally published as *An Era of Darkness*), which Tharoor was encouraged to write in response to the online interest that his speech had created, is the broader one that in almost all respects British rule in India was profoundly damaging to the sub-continent’s population and economy:

the British state in India was [...] a totally amoral, rapacious imperialist machine bent on the subjugation of Indians for the purpose of profit, not merely a neutrally efficient system indifferent to human rights. And its subjugation resulted in the expropriation of Indian wealth to Britain, draining the society of the resources that would normally have propelled its natural growth and economic development’ (p. 222).

Moreover, the supposed British legacy to India (railways, education, the English language, democracy and so on) has been greatly exaggerated, was not intended for the benefit of Indians and, without colonisation, would have been introduced on a timeline more favourable to the needs of the Indian people.

In his first chapter, ‘The looting of India’, Tharoor sets out the ‘drain theory’ of British economic exploitation of India—by which ‘India was governed for the benefit of Britain’ and ‘Britain’s rise for 200 years [...], financed by its depredations in India’ (p. 3)—generally held to have originated 150 years ago in a speech, and later a book, by the Parsi scholar and British MP, Dadabhai Naoroji. Recent estimates of the relative share of world GDP by India and Britain over a quarter of a millennium, Tharoor argues, support Naoroji’s theory. India’s share of world GDP fell from 27 per cent in 1700 to 3 per cent by the time the British left in 1947. (By contrast, Britain’s share was about 3 per cent in 1700, rising to a peak of 9 per cent

in 1870.) The plundering of India began with the exploitative activities of the East India Company and its officials, such as Robert Clive, and accelerated during the 19th century through British industrial strength and naval networks, control of communications, and the cynical application of free trade policies. The effect was to complete India's economic ruin commercially. Among the most flagrant examples of this tendency, Tharoor argues, was the deliberate destruction of India's ship and textile concerns, while at the same time Britain became a world-leader in these industries. The increasingly agricultural Indian state paid for its own vassal status through outrageously high levels of taxation, which were syphoned off to pay for such developments (all in the British interest) as the enormous Indian army, the construction of railways (at an abnormally high five per cent return for British investors), and the building of public works in both India and Britain. Among the many negative impacts on the Indian population were an increasingly poor agricultural sector, recurrent famine, and a low national morale which stifled independence and ingenuity.

In Chapter two, drawing on historical parallels, such as the unification achieved by the emperors Ashoka (268–232 BC) and Aurangzab (1658–1707 AD), Tharoor argues that India would have become united without British intervention, as throughout its history 'there has existed an impulsion for unity [...]. [I]t is entirely possible that an Indian ruler would have accomplished what the British did, and consolidated his rule over most of the subcontinent' (p. 37). Jon Wilson's *India Conquered* (2016) is enlisted to argue that Indian governance 'had a dynamic economic and political order' (p. 42), which the greed of the East India Company destroyed and which, under the Raj, was replaced by an Indian Civil Service memorably described by Jawaharlal Nehru as 'neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service'. Chapter three describes the destruction of the pre-colonial system of government by a British system of ledgers and regulations designed not so much to change or reform, as to impose itself on India. A member of the Indian National Congress for a decade, Tharoor proposes that the post-independence parliamentary system, which was modelled on the British parliament, 'was from the start unsuited to Indian conditions and is primarily responsible for many of the nation's principal political ills' (p. 87).

In chapter four, 'Divida et impera', Tharoor charts the subliminal British policy of embedding previously indistinct Hindu-Muslim (and other) differences, which had its disastrous outcome in the bloodshed and massacres of Partition. In chapter five he challenges the British notion of effective rule through 'enlightened despotism', by which the state takes on a parental role towards its subjects, making decisions in what it perceives to be their best interest. In real terms, Tharoor argues, the imperial administrators were more despotic than enlightened. Lawrence James's claim that they "were humane men and, although hampered by inadequate administrative machinery and limited resources, they made a determined effort to feed the hungry" (p. 157) is dismissed in favour of the 'Catch-22' strategy actually practised by the British. This involved the administration in maintaining the pretence that the famines exposed the Indians' inability to govern for themselves, while itself failing to respond adequately to the food shortage or subsequently to acknowledge responsibility for the resulting mass starvation.

Chapter six, 'The remaining case for Empire', refutes claims that the historic British presence contributed usefully to the modern India state. The much lauded railway system, Tharoor contends, 'was a big colonial scam' designed to benefit its British builders and investors, constructed at huge expense to the Indian taxpayer and 'intended principally to transport extracted resources [...] to ports for the British to ship home to use in their factories' (pp. 177–8). The education system imposed by the British displaced an existing and much older organisation, while the English language, rather than being a gift to the Indian people, was necessary to implement colonial policy. Its emergence as the language of international commerce is more a consequence of American globalisation than British imperialism. Tharoor concedes that tea and cricket might be the exception to his thesis, acknowledging that 'this time it is difficult to argue that one could have had extensive tea cultivation and a vast market for the product without colonization' (p. 205). However, tea cultivation led to mass deforestation, the decimation of wildlife, and the displacement of indigenous peoples, while the author muses whether 'cricket is really [...] an Indian game accidentally discovered by the British' (p. 207).

Chapter seven consists partly of a riposte of Niall Ferguson's view that empire generates economic benefits;

Lawrence James's interpretation of British policy in India as the successful application of "reason [...] in the form of Western education and the application of science" is also rebutted (p. 218). In his final chapter, Tharoor argues that, despite the British public's woeful factual ignorance of their former empire, 'colonialism [...] remains a relevant factor in understanding the problems and the dangers of the world in which we live' (p. 236). After revisiting Ferguson's defence of empire to dispel his (as it turned out) misplaced confidence in the 21st century as that of *Pax Americana*, Tharoor discusses the possibility of returning some of the antiquities acquired by the British from their colonial possessions. He also considers the global relevance of Ghandi's non-violent response to racism, concluding that 'the ultimate tribute to the British Raj might lie in the quality of the "Great Soul" who opposed it' (p. 245).

Elegantly and engagingly written, *Inglorious Empire* is also polemical and therefore rather sets itself up for criticism, as a number of reviews demonstrate. The most serious critique seems to be that of the 'drain theory' itself, as articulated by Tirthankar Roy:

The statistic that India produced 25 per cent of world output in 1800 and 2-4 per cent of it in 1900 does not prove that India was once rich and became poor. It only tells us that industrial productivity in the West increased four to six times during this period. [...] The drain theory of India's poverty could not be tested, because the intrinsic value of the payments India made to Britain could not be measured. [...] The research shows that the colonial links [...] do not sufficiently explain British investment and British economic growth and that arguments for the empire rested on strategic needs more than material gains [...]. National income statistics do not show that during British rule the Indian economy became steadily poorer.

In addition, Roy maintains, Tharoor 'misreads British history', 'is ill-informed on the record of Indian economic growth in colonial times' and has a 'naïve' understanding of Indian political history.⁽¹⁾ Other reviewers agree that Tharoor underestimates the British cultural impact on India.⁽²⁾

Tharoor's occasional misinterpretation of Victorian politics is demonstrable in his treatment of Robert Lytton, viceroy from 1876 to 1880. Lytton was appointed, the author contends, because he was Queen Victoria's favourite poet (p. 155), although no evidence is provided for this surprising claim: the Queen's preference is generally understood to have been for Alfred Lord Tennyson or Adelaide Procter.⁽³⁾ The durbar where Lytton proclaimed Victoria Empress of India is given as 1887 (it was 1877) and his response to the 1876-8 famine likened to that of Stalin during the famines caused by collectivisation (p. 155). To represent Lytton as entirely indifferent to the misfortunes of those he governed is misleading. His wife's account of her husband's actions during the famine, for example, tells a different story. In February 1877, Edith Lytton mentions that 'the famines [...] had made R[ober]t very anxious, and just this year for the finances this is a great blow'. On 'the 25th [July 1877] the talks over famine matters became very serious', with the outcome in August 1877 that 'two great famines [were] grappled with'. Subsequently, 'when R arrived in Bangalore', he saw that '[p]eople were dying in the streets [...], starving'. In terms of organising relief, although other Raj administrators 'all helped immensely, [...] they feel R has really done all himself'.⁽⁴⁾ Lutyens and Bence Jones to some extent support this interpretation of Lytton's response, which clearly conflicts with the viceroy's stated Malthusian beliefs.⁽⁵⁾ However, the discrepancy should be viewed in the context of Malthusian orthodoxy regarding famine relief, which 'had the support of many official reports of the period' and was a widely held belief in government circles.⁽⁶⁾ During 1866-7, a future viceroy, Lord Dufferin, in 'a series of letters in *The Times* tackling the renewed agricultural depression in the Irish countryside', advocated 'Malthusian arguments in favour of further emigration from a country whose population had apparently outstripped its resources'.⁽⁷⁾ Lord Salisbury, Secretary of State for India during 1866-7 and 1874-8, declared in response to the 1874 Bihar famine that 'emigration on a considerable scale [...] seems to me the only way out of a difficulty which is closing round us'.⁽⁸⁾ Recalling his own inaction at the time of the 1865-6 Orissa famine, Salisbury later wrote regretfully: '

I did nothing for two months. Before that time the monsoon had closed the ports of Orissa—help was impossible—and—it is said—a million people died.[\(9\)](#)

By contrast, despite Salisbury's intransigence, there were 'large-scale relief efforts' in 1876–9. Explanations for the failure of these—given that the famine resulted in the deaths of five million Indians—appear to have depended on nationality: 'Senior British officials argued that [...] India, particularly the dry Deccan, was simply prone to famine', while 'most Indians, by contrast, blamed the British'. Roy concludes that a proposal from any source that

famines were an outcome of colonial politics is an unconvincing theory because it fails to explain the rarity of famines during late colonial rule and presumes that the capacity of the state to mitigate famines was limited only by its own intention to act.[\(10\)](#)

Like other vicereines, Edith Lytton adopted various philanthropic causes. Of course, there was already a long-standing tradition of charity in India, which was not much recognised by the British, who viewed it—very much as they did the Elizabethan Poor Law—as an inducement to dependence and idleness. Nevertheless, British women campaigned successfully to promote causes considered suitable for Western female involvement, which included the abolition of sati and child marriage, while also working in a variety of other gender-appropriate causes, such as improving levels of childbirth survival and standards in girls' education. However, in a narrative remarkable for its male-centredness, Tharoor does not mention the philanthropy of British women. Admittedly, such humanitarian aid often took place within the context of British-style institutions and Tharoor would perhaps argue that, had India remained independent, it would have occurred anyway. Nevertheless, British patronage seems to have had a cathartic effect on India's future philanthropists, such as Pachaiyappa Mudaliar, Sir J. and Lady Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy, Jagannath Shankarshet and Kavasji Jehangir Readymoney, who 'thus encouraged [...] went about building some of the country's most important institutions'.[\(11\)](#) Another important oversight is the lack of convincing evidence in support of the claim that Indian unification would have occurred *a priori*, an assumption based on a mystical conception of India's past and challenged by present-day realities. As John Keay points out: 'imperial interludes account for no more than five hundred years of imperfect integration scattered across two millennia of chaotic fragmentation'; reviews by Tahir Ganie, Sumantra Maitra and Ferdinand Mount also point to weaknesses in Tharoor's counterfactual.[\(12\)](#)

Although he cites Jon Wilson's *India Conquered* and other recent reputable works, Tharoor's statistics and 'much else' are taken from a lesser-known work, *The Case for India* (1930) by Will Durant, an American writer and teacher who had toured India. Keay argues that, as Durant was 'averse to [establishing] primary sources', he relied on the research and opinions of a fellow-American, Jabez T. Sunderland, in the latter's *India in Bondage* (1928). As a result, '[t]he 'uncompromising views and unevenly-sourced statistics of *India in Bondage* permeate *The Case for India*, much as Durant's material permeates *Inglorious Empire*'.[\(13\)](#)

Tharoor was surprised that his Oxford Union speech, which he felt merely restated established arguments, had created such a stir and concluded that what he 'considered basic was unfamiliar to many, perhaps most, educated Indians' (p. xxii). However, as Keay points out, 'Indians are not the only ones who need reminding that empire has a lot to answer for'. In a 2014 YouGov survey, 1,741 respondents voted by three to one that 'the British Empire is more something to be proud than ashamed of' and that Britain's former colonies are better off for being colonised. If only from the point of view of enabling individual relationships in a multicultural society, this should be addressed. But in terms of global politics, as Tharoor points out, it is essential. Coming to terms with Britain's record in India is as good a place to start as any.

Current GDP ranking statistics indicate that during 2019 the size of India's economy overtook that of its old

colonial masters, France and the UK. In the event of Britain leaving the EU, when could there be a better time to steal a march on the decade-long and still unresolved EU-India trade talks and secure a deal with an economy which, within 20 years, will be one of the world's three largest? Any such negotiations would certainly be facilitated by the kind of official apology for past injustices that Tharoor recommends. On 1 September 2019, the 80th anniversary of the start of the Second World War, the German President apologised to his Polish counterpart for the Nazi invasion of Poland. Earlier in the year, on the 100th anniversary of the Amritsar Massacre, Theresa May expressed 'regret' for what had happened, but stopped short of an outright apology. As with David Cameron's earlier refusal to apologise during a visit to Amritsar, it is tempting to speculate that the nostalgia of British voters for their 'jewel in the crown', expressed by the popularity of such recent dramas as *Indian Summers* and *Beecham House*, informed the prime ministerial decision. In such circumstances, a change in the national *zeitgeist* is best implemented top-down. As Tharoor puts it: 'atonement was the point—a simple sorry would do' (p. xxii).

Notes

1. Tirthankar Roy, 'Inglorious Empire', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 31 (2018), 135–6. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Andrew Robinson, 'Little more than tea and cricket', *History Today*, 4 (2017), 63. Pavan Kumar, 'Inglorious Empire', *Political Studies Review*, 16 (1) (2018) <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1478929917724121>> (accessed 1 September 2019). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Gill Gregory, *The Life and Work of Adelaide Procter: Poetry, Feminism and Fathers* (Aldershot, 1998), p. 1.; A. N. Wilson, *Victoria, A Life* (London, 2015), p. 505. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Edith Lytton, *India 1876–1880* (London, 1899), pp. 98, 114–15, 136. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mary Lutyens, *The Lyttons in India* (London, 1979), pp. 112–13. Mark Bence-Jones, *The Viceroy of India* (London, 1982), p. 101. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. S. Ambirajan, 'Malthusian population theory and famine policy in the nineteenth century', *Population Studies*, 30, 1, (1976), 6. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Andrew Gailey, *The Lost Imperialist* (London, 2015), p. 106. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. A Selection from the India Office Correspondence of Robert Cecil, Third Marquis of Salisbury, ed. Paul Brumpton (Lewiston, 2003), p. 96. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famine and the Making of the Third World* (New York, NY, 2001), p. 32. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Jon Wilson, *India Conquered* (London, 2016), p. 330. Tirthankar Roy, 'Were Indian famines "natural" or "manmade"?'', *LSE Working Papers*, 243 (2016), 23. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Pushpa Sundar, 'Philanthropy in the building of modern India', in *Revealing Indian Philanthropy*, eds Mattieu Cantegreil, Dweep Chanana, Ruth Kattumuri (London, 2013), p. 33. [Back to 11\)](#)
12. Mohd Tahir Ganie, 'Review of *An Era of Darkness*', [https://www.researchgate.net/](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324703406) [3] publication /324703406, accessed 24/09/19. Sumantra Maitra, 'Review of *An Era of Darkness*', <https://quilllette.com/2017/04/14/review-inglorious-empire-british-india-...> [4], accessed 24/09/19. Ferdinand Mount, 'Umbrageousness', *London Review of Books*, vol. 39, 17.7 (7 September 2017), pp. 3–8. [Back to \(12\)](#)
13. John Keay, 'Bristling with Raj', *Literary Review*, 453 (2017), 22. [Back to \(13\)](#)

Other reviews:

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/23/inglorious-empire-what-british-did-to-india-shashi-tharoor-review> [5]

Financial Times

<https://www.ft.com/content/1885a53e-07d4-11e7-97d1-5e720a26771b> [6]

London Review of Books

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n17/ferdinand-mount/umbrageousness> [7]

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[3] <https://www.researchgate.net/>

[4] <https://quillette.com/2017/04/14/review-inglorious-empire-british-india-shashi-tharoor>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/23/inglorious-empire-what-british-did-to-india-shashi-tharoor-review>

[6] <https://www.ft.com/content/1885a53e-07d4-11e7-97d1-5e720a26771b>

[7] <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n17/ferdinand-mount/umbrageousness>