

## The Empire of the Raj

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**Author:** Sneh Mahajan

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**Reviewer:** Keith Wilson

In a memorandum for the Committee of Imperial Defence dated 10 July 1920 Harold Nicolson, whose family connection with these matters dated back to the time when his father Lord Carnock entered the Foreign Office, namely 1870, wrote:

For the last century the policy of His Majesty's Government has been inductive, intuitive and quite deliberately opportunistic, but through it all has run the dominant impulse of the defence of India.<sup>(1)</sup>

Mahajan does not make use of this Nicolson memorandum, but the above quotation from it would have made an apt motto, or legend, for her book. Something equally suitable could have come from the work of James Joll, who is quoted, on p. 6, as saying: 'It was imperial questions and especially those arising out of the possession of India and of the need to control the route to the East which conditioned British Foreign Policy.'

It is fitting that James Joll should be cited in the introductory chapter, as the theme of his inaugural lecture, 'The Unspoken Assumptions', is addressed at the beginning of Mahajan's work. Her charge is that the majority of historians of British foreign policy of the Victorian and Edwardian eras have not looked beyond their immediate remit in such a way as to realise that the problem of the protection and preservation of India was the fundamental determinant of British policy. Even those such as Rose Greaves, John Grenville, and James Joll, who did appreciate this, so compartmentalised their studies that what should always have been regarded as 'the bottom line' or 'the big issue' – namely the defence of India and of all possible approaches

to the sub-continent – has not been kept continuously before the eyes of their readers. Even issues to do with the balance of power in Europe, maintains Mahajan, represented only ‘the top layer of reality’.(p.12)

(In this connection, palpable hits are scored against the following: R. Millman (p. 49); R. Robinson and J. A. Gallagher (p. 67); K. Bourne (p. 42); H. G. C. Matthew (p. 71), C. J. Lowe (p. 94), G. Martel (p.122 and p. 223, n. 96), G. N. Sanderson (p.226, n. 103), J. A. S. Grenville (pp. 137-8), G. Monger (pp.142, 166-7, 231, n.1), M. E. Chamberlain (pp.142, 201), P.M. Kennedy (p.231, n. 1), P. Addy (pp.152-3), A. Lamb (pp.152-3), P. J. Marshall (p. 201), Z. Steiner (pp.167, 169-70, 193).

Mahajan’s case, built up on both primary and secondary sources, is overwhelming, The ‘assumptions’ of those responsible for British policy are shown to be far from ‘unspoken’, and hers is the very opposite of an argument from silence. The reader is left in no doubt that, when the centrality of the Indian factor in determining Britain’s diplomatic and strategic priorities is taken note of,

it becomes easier not only to place Britain’s relations with other European states in their proper perspective but also to understand how Britain’s imperial designs came to be tacked on to the Near East, the Middle East, Africa and South-East Asia. (p. 197)

As a work of both synthesis and scholarship, Mahajan’s book is an impressive achievement. It fills a very important gap in the literature. It revives a neglected perspective, despite the re-printing in 1966 of H. L. Hoskins’ *British Routes to India* (London: Cass), first published in 1928. It shows that Edward Ingram is not alone in carrying the banner of the appropriateness of viewing these matters as put in his most recent title, *The British Empire as a World Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2001). Mahajan’s work, indeed, might be described as a dotting of the ‘i’ s and crossing of the ‘t’ s of the article published by Ingram in *Militargeschichtliche Mitteilungen*.<sup>(2)</sup> It is remarkable how ‘observers’, such as Ingram, Glen St. J. Barclay, and in this case Mahajan, see more of the game, or how great the game really is.

The publishers have not thus far served the author as well as a work of this significance deserves. They were in no hurry to send it out for review and have not taken every possible care to produce an error-free text. See, for instance, ‘Cecil Rhode’s British South Africa Company’ at mid-page 97, or ‘Again, Only...’ on p. 200 line 12. However inadvertently amusing, ‘walk wearily’ (p.143, n. 147) should be corrected to ‘walk warily’, and ‘raised the sceptre’ on last line of p.160 to ‘raised the spectre’. Other necessary adjustments may be more the responsibility of the writer: Palmerston was not Prime Minister at the time of the second Mehemet Ali crisis (p. 28); Alexandretta is nowhere near ‘the entrance to the Dardanelles’ (p. 47) although admittedly closer than Alexandria; and the second Anglo-Japanese Alliance was concluded not in March 1905 (p.159), but in August of that year. There is a serious misattribution on p.161, where the impression is given that in January 1906 a ‘sub-committee of strategists’ was appointed to consider the question of the British stance should Germany attack France. However, the ‘report’ cited in this context is actually a memorandum written by Admiral Fisher in April 1905; there was no appointment of any such body in January 1906, nor was Delcassé then functioning as the French Foreign Minister.

The above items are pointed out because in my opinion there should be an immediate second edition of this work, this time also issued in paperback and so priced as to make the volume accessible to the large readership that it deserves. As things stand, a huge opportunity is being missed. Mahajan’s work, getting right as it does ‘the big picture’, and displacing in the process works which have been genuinely short-sighted, Eurocentric, and downright parochial, should be widely promoted and appreciated – all the more so as a second volume, taking up the place of India in British imperialism and ‘foreign’ policy from 1914, and no doubt taking Harold Nicolson in its stride, is planned.

Mahajan’s presentation of the view of India from Whitehall is well complemented by Blyth’s presentation of the view from India (whether Calcutta, Delhi, or, to a lesser extent, Bombay) of what the governments there regarded as the sphere of interest and influence of the Raj itself. Blyth moves from the modest claim in the

introductory chapter, that a number of lacunae in the existing historiography will be filled in (p. 10), to the hope that the concept of 'the empire of the Raj' will provide a useful framework for future research.(p. 203)

The focus is primarily on East Africa and Aden, Zanzibar and Somaliland (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 7) with an excursion, courtesy of the Great War, into Mesopotamia (Chapter 6). Despite a chapter on 'Persia and the Persian Gulf 1850-1914' and a postscript on 'India and the Persian Gulf 1928-48', there is less – and less successful – coverage of the interests of the Government of India in the Gulf and in particular in Persia. No mention is made, for instance, of the attitude of the authorities in India to the revival of the Trans-Persian Railway project, against which Curzon inveighed in the House of Lords, or the possibility of a branch from the Baghdad Railway into Persia proper. Nor is it easy to square the statement that 'By 1914, British India's position in Persia ... was infinitely stronger than at any point in the nineteenth century' (p. 37) with the concern of the Foreign Office in London, in 1914, at what it regarded as a virtual take-over by Russia of northern Persia and the consequent necessity for a revision of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.

Unavoidably, there is a great deal of administrative history, described by Blyth as 'perhaps the least fashionable branch of imperial history'.(p. 10) Unfashionable it might be, but in this context it is absolutely essential to the bringing out of the multiplicity of agencies and responsibilities involved. One could, indeed, have done with a little more of this branch of imperial history, especially with regards to the innermost workings of the Viceroy's Council, and also to changes in the Indian constitution from 1917 onwards. The contradictory, and often self-contradictory, decisions and positions of successive Viceroys might then have been a little easier to follow and to understand.

What emerges best is the impact on the stances adopted by the Government in the first half of the twentieth century, of considerations to do with popular opinion within the sub-continent. What also emerges well are the pressures exerted by the communities of Indians outwith the sub-continent, whether in East Africa or Aden. Also brought into sharp relief is the almost chronic disposition of all Viceroys, right up until 1947, to attempt to act as if in some respects the Government of India was an independent Great Power, untrammelled by and not subject to the metropole, and inclined to continue to play off the various Whitehall departments involved – Foreign Office, India Office, Colonial Office, Treasury – one against another, in increasingly desperate and anachronistic attempts to 'stay on'. That 'the empire of the Raj' lasted as long as it did, of course, as Blyth makes clear, has much to do with the already existing rivalries within Whitehall which were there to be taken advantage of throughout.

Although Blyth's book is part of the Cambridge Imperial and Post Colonial Studies Series, production values are not as high as one is accustomed (still) to expect from Cambridge University Press itself. On p.119 the intervention of the Indian Government has become the 'invention' of the Indian Government – possibly a Freudian slip; on pp.140-41 the de Bunsen committee quickly becomes, and remains, the 'de Busen committee'; and with the first footnote to chapter 8 the author himself becomes a victim in respect of the dates covered by a previously published article.

## Notes

1. The National Archives, CAB 4/7, Paper 251B.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Edward Ingram, 'A strategic dilemma: the defence of India 1874-1914', *Militargeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 16 (1974), 215-24.[Back to \(2\)](#)

Dr Blyth is pleased to accept this review without further comment.

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[3]

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