

A Plague on both your Houses

Priya Gopal and Niall Ferguson both make unjustified assumptions about the omnipotence of European Imperialism.

It took a while for the predictably bad-tempered debate about Empire on ‘Start the Week’ (BBC Radio 4, 12th June 2006) to make its way to the pages of *The Guardian*, and when it did so it was in an equally predictable form. The battle-lines are drawn between the “New Imperialists” such as Niall Ferguson, who argue for the overall benign influence of at least the British Empire, and postcolonial critics such as Priya Gopal (“The story peddled by imperial apologists is a poisonous fairytale” *The Guardian*, 28th June 2006). Both sides might be surprised to learn that they share at least one characteristic: they assume that 19th century European Imperialism was all-powerful. Thus in *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* Ferguson credits the British Empire with spreading liberalism, parliamentary democracy and free trade around the world, whilst Gopal attributes the ‘poison of purity’ in modern identities (as Eric Hobsbawm rather nicely put it on the programme) to Imperial manipulation: in both cases it is as if colonised peoples had no agency at all in creating these ideas – a notion which is not only implausible but which infantilises those whose history is being written.

Gopal, following upon Mike Davis in *Late Victorian Holocausts*, calls on us to pass moral judgment on an Empire in India where “More famines were recorded in the first century of the British Raj than in the previous 2,000 years”. Why leave it at 2,000? How about 200,000, or even 2 million? The key word here, of course, is “recorded”. We do not know how many famines there were in India over the whole of the last 2,000 years, or how many people died in them, precisely because the records are only complete for the later period. We also know very little about pre-colonial systems of famine relief in India: the evidence Davis cites in the wholly inadequate three-page section of his work devoted to this question largely consists of unsupported assertions of the superiority of Mughal systems by British Officials such as Sir John Malcolm, who were at that time engaged in a polemical debate with ‘modernisers’ in Calcutta over whether British rule should take on ‘European’ or ‘Oriental’ forms, a debate Davis is clearly completely unaware of – and which took place in the 1830s, before organised systems of famine relief had been established. The British, however, were assiduous in recording famines, holding an enquiry after each one to establish how many people died and how this could be prevented in the future. Their efforts to achieve this included the extension of irrigation and the construction of unprofitable railways by the State in remote and vulnerable areas. Neither of these proved particularly effective, partly because they were indeed hamstrung by their adherence to *laissez-faire* and their failure to comprehend the fact that famines are largely caused not by absolute shortage but by some people being too poor to buy food. This is rather different from asserting that famines were caused deliberately, or were in some way a particular product of alien rule. To cite

Amartya Sen in this context, as Gopal does, is disingenuous. Sen's famous argument (based on the report of the Enquiry into the appalling Bengal Famine of 1943) is that famines do not occur in democracies. This has the same implications for non-democratic pre-colonial regimes as it does for the British *Raj*.

On the other side of the debate, Ferguson's grand narrative of 19th century progress overlooks the fact that, in some respects, British rule did little for India: as far as we know the economy barely grew at all for over a hundred years (from 0.38% growth p.a. between 1820-1870 it peaked at 0.97% between 1870-1913, but then declined to 0.23% between 1913 and 1950, an overall rate which barely kept pace with the growth in population in the same period). Industrialisation was very limited, famines, as we have seen, were not prevented, and overall development much lower than in the Dominions which enjoyed self-government. As Ferguson himself acknowledges, in general global growth-rates have risen much faster in the post-colonial era, which further calls his argument into question. His description of a 19th century of global stability and progress brought about by British dominance in a unipolar world has been eagerly seized upon by American Neocons seeking a historical justification for the modern role of the U.S.A., but the truth is that the British Empire was never as powerful as the U.S. is today: it was the greatest of the Great Powers, but only one of several. Relative 19th century stability was a product of the balance between them, not the presence of a single hegemon and this is visible in Britain's respect for the Monroe Doctrine which greatly limited military enforcement of her trade interests in Latin America. For similar reasons Ferguson is also quite wrong in asserting that the 19th century was a "Golden Age" for free trade. Britain was the only major industrial power to abandon tariffs – the United States in particular was heavily protectionist – and so inadequate was Imperial power to impose free market ideology around the world that even the Dominions (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) imposed high tariffs on British imports in order to protect their nascent domestic industries, and, perhaps in consequence, enjoyed much higher growth-rates than Britain's Crown Colonies where free trade was enforced. Of these crown colonies, only India was a significant trading partner (and let us not forget that two-thirds of Britain's trade was outside the free-trade zone of the Empire). Indian Nationalists such as Dadabhai Naoroji (Liberal MP for Finsbury in the 1890s) argued that India should be able to protect her economy as well, and in the face of this political pressure limited tariffs were eventually permitted by the Imperial Government. Gopal characteristically misses this point, arguing instead that Ferguson is wrong because "Amitav Ghosh has reconstructed the forgotten history of a vibrant trade culture between medieval India and Africa" – apparently assuming that free trade and international trade are one and the same thing; in her account of the initial arrival of Europeans in Calicut she also confuses the mercantilist practices of the Portuguese in the late 15th century with the classical political economy of the British in the late 19th century. Gopal further writes that "The Indian

textile industry was the most advanced in the world when the British arrived; within half a century it had been destroyed". The story here is not even primarily concerned with Imperialism: Bengal first prospered and then suffered from the globalisation of trade. Its export-driven industry was largely created by European demand in the first place. Om Prakash estimates that in Bengal between 1709 and 1718 alone over 111,000 jobs in the textile industry were created by the European Companies' demand for Indian cotton and raw silk. It was the industrial revolution in Europe which destroyed India's export-led textile industry, not British Imperial rule *per se* (just as Italian imitations of the Indian textiles arriving in Europe through Smyrna – the “New Draperies” – knocked the bottom out of the European broadcloth market in the 16th century). It is quite true that, as Manmohan Singh pointed out last year on accepting his honorary doctorate from Oxford, “the painstaking statistical work of the Cambridge historian Angus Maddison has shown [that] India's share of world income collapsed from 22.6 per cent in 1700, almost equal to Europe's share of 23.3 per cent at that time, to as low as 3.8 per cent in 1952” - but this was largely owing to industrial growth elsewhere in the world with which Indian industry proved unable to compete, not to deliberate “under-development”.

Ferguson meanwhile claims that democracy in India is a British legacy. British India was a military despotism, which grudgingly and reluctantly responded to insistent demands for political reform when the pressure from below grew too great and it was in danger of losing the cooperation of elites upon which it depended. The real reason for the rise of parliamentary democracy in India is down to the ever greater flow of political ideas around the world. The British played an unwitting role in this by establishing Universities, which were originally intended to produce pliant clerks for the administration, but where many of the students read Locke, Rousseau, Mill and Marx instead. There were also no restrictions on Indians studying abroad, in England, where they could observe the workings of the British Parliamentary system at first hand, and even in France and Germany where they might pick up still more radical ideas, but the Imperial State's role was at, most, a passive and unintentional one: Ferguson shows some awareness of this, but never explores the role of native agency fully. The search for indigenous roots to democratic ideals in India is a worthwhile one, but Priya Gopal's reference to Gandhi's idealised ‘Panchayat Raj’ as the origin of Indian democracy is erroneous: he got this notion from Ruskin's *Unto this Last*, and it bore little relation to the reality of village councils dominated by upper-caste and landowning elites. Ferguson is equally wide of the mark in describing the democratic outcome in India as part of some carefully-laid constitutional plan, rather than the unplanned global spread of democratic ideals (seen also in the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906). He writes that the lesson of Empire is that “the most successful economy in the world [...] can do a very great deal to impose its preferred values on less technologically advanced societies”. Given that India is virtually the only British ex-colony to be a successful and

functioning democracy, surely the lesson is that these values take deep root when they are adopted and demanded from below rather than imposed from above?

Both parties to this dispute thus conflate the effects of globalisation with those of Imperialism. Globalisation is something that can and does take place independently of Empire, if by globalisation is meant the free exchange of goods, services, ideas and people across the globe, facilitated by new technologies - it need not originate in Europe or America, as we can indeed see with early Indian banking networks on the East African coast and in Central Asia. Empires are about the exercise of power, in the 19th century normally meaning political and military power based in European polities. This power could be and was used both to accelerate this movement and exchange (shipping Indian indentured labourers to South Africa and the Caribbean, founding British-style universities in India) and to retard it (artificially preserving traditional peasant society in Punjab, in the French case erecting tariff and cultural walls around their colonies). Our task as Imperial historians is to examine where the currents of globalisation and Imperial power intersect, and which wins out over the other – and in so doing we should never make the mistake of believing that the latter was omnipotent. The projects of Imperial powers frequently have consequences which they did not predict and are unable to control, and these often constitute their most important legacies (such as democracy and cricket in India, neither of which the British made any real attempt to promote). This is not to deny the appalling suffering and long-term psychological trauma which were frequently the product of Imperial expansion, although the experiences of the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao and Cambodia under Pol Pot suggest that these are not exclusively Imperial phenomena. It does render both the blame-game (in which, despite her protestations, Gopal is whole-heartedly engaged) and Niall Ferguson's "balance-sheet" of costs and benefits equally futile exercises.

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