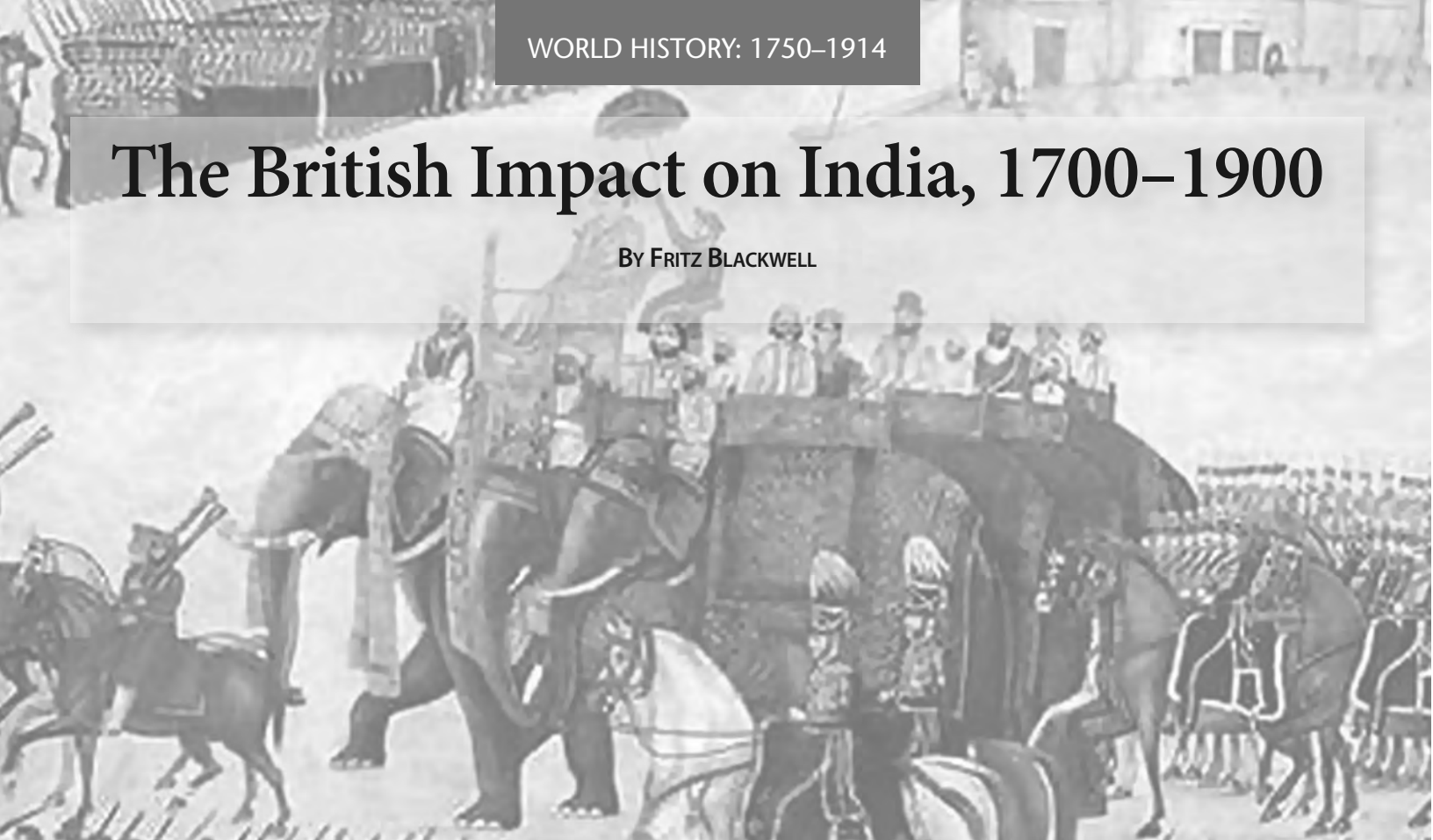# The British Impact on India, 1700–1900

BY FRITZ BLACKWELL

A military procession in India. Image source: The British Battles Web site at http://www.britishbattles.com/first-sikh-war/ferozeshah.htm.

The period 1700 to 1900 saw the beginnings, and the development, of the British Empire in India. Empire was not planned, at least not in the early stages. In a sense, it just happened. The first British in India came for trade, not territory; they were businessmen, not conquerors. It can be argued that they came from a culture that was inferior, and a political entity that was weaker, than that into which they ventured, and they came hat-in-hand. They would not have been viewed as a threat by the Indians—who most certainly would not have thought of themselves as "Indian," at least in any political sense. National identity was to be established much later, during the Independence Movement (which, indeed, was also known as the Nationalist Movement). Identity was in terms of region and caste, which, to a considerable extent, it still is today. The British and the Indians would go on to affect each other in profound ways that still are important today. In what follows, because of limited space, the impact of Imperial Britain on India is addressed. Hopefully, a future useful essay on the impact of India on Great Britain will also be published in EAA.

The Roots of Empire

While there is no 1492-type date for the commencement of empire, 1757, the date of the Battle of Plassey, is often used. The date of the British take-over of Delhi, 1803, is symbolic: the British occupied the Mughul capital and were not to leave. The empire was neither uniform—different policies responding to different events in different parts of India—nor static. It was upon the British and the Indians almost before they realized it. Its effects were ambiguous and ambivalent. A recent catalog advertising DVDs said about a presentation entitled "The British Empire in Color,"

> *The British Empire brought education, technology, law and democracy to the four corners of the globe. It also brought prejudice, discrimination, cultural bigotry and racism.*

The blurb goes on to state that the video "examines the complexities, contradictions, and legacies of empire, both positive and negative."[1] To a degree, such is the intent of this article. Only to a degree, for an article this brief on a topic as complex and intricate as the British impact on India cannot be complete and faces the danger of becoming simply an inventory.

Trade and Power

In 1600, a group of English merchants secured a royal charter for purposes of trading in the East Indies. The Dutch, however, had fairly well sealed off trade in what is now Indonesia, and the merchants' company, which was to become known as the East India Company (the Company), turned its attention to the vast expanse of India, with its cotton and spices (e.g., "pepper" and "ginger" are from south Indian words), as well as other commodities. Other powers, especially the French and Portuguese, were to become competitors. The Portuguese secured enclaves on the west coast, the most important of which was Goa, which they controlled until 1961, and which preserves a Portuguese flavor to this day. The French secured influence in the southeast, where Puducherry, formerly Pondicherry, is sometimes referred to as "The French Riviera of the East," and was transferred to Indian jurisdiction in 1954.

The dominant power in India was the Mughal Empire. British adventurers had preceded the Company into India, including at the Mughal court. It needs to be emphasized that the purpose of the Company was trade. But a combination of factors and events were to draw the Company into Indian politics, especially with the decline of the Mughal Empire and the concurrent and resulting rise of regional powers, including that of the British, who had become ensconced at what is now Chennai (Madras), Mumbai (Bombay), and Kolkata (Calcutta).[2] It is noteworthy that these three cities were founded (or at least devel-

oped) by the British, and in recent years have each had their names de-Anglicized.

Mughal Decline

Two events, fifty years apart, had important consequences. The first was the death in 1707 of the last of the "Great Mughals," Aurangzeb, who was followed by "lesser Mughals."[3] In various ways, Aurangzeb's own policies may have contributed significantly to the Mughal decline, but the importance of his demise is that it was followed by incapable successors and considerable instability.

The British took advantage of the instability and the resulting regional tensions, especially in 1757 at the Battle of Plassey in Bengal. Through machinations and intrigues, a force of eight hundred Europeans and 2,200 Indian troops under Robert Clive defeated an army of 50,000 belonging to the ruler of Bengal. Clive was able to wrest concessions from the Mughals, most importantly the right of land revenue, and, in retrospect, it appears that an empire was underway.

Other challenges arose for the Mughals, including the rise of regional and ethnic powers such as the Marathas, Sikhs, and Rajputs, and the sack of Delhi in 1739 by the Persian invader Nadir Shah. Meanwhile, the British were to win out in south India over the French, largely because of the Anglo-French wars in Europe and North America in the 1740s.

Aurangzeb (Mughal Emperor of India 1658-1707) reading the Quran.
Image source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image: Aurangzeb_reading_the_Quran.jpg.

The Company

The Company's increase in power and territory did not go unnoticed in London. In 1792, the Company applied for a loan from the government, which Parliament provided, but with strings attached: The Regulating Act of 1793, the first of a series of acts reining in the Company through parliamentary supervision. Nevertheless, Arthur Wellesley, as governor-general (1797–1805), exercised his intention to make the Company the paramount power in India. He was able to suppress what French influence remained (except for some small enclaves, such as Pondicherry), and to remove powerful Indian forces in both the north and the south. The British (that is the Company; in India the two were now to be almost synonymous until 1858) were paramount, and they developed a bureaucratic infrastructure, employing cooperating Indians, who came to constitute a new, urban class.

The title of Governor-General had been bestowed upon the governor of the Bengal presidency (Calcutta), who had been granted power and rank over the governors of the Bombay and Madras presidencies. This arrangement, provided in the Regulating Act, was felt to be necessary because of the long distance between London and India (the Suez canal did not yet exist) and the convenience of dealing with one governor rather than three: an administrative step toward unity which certainly aided the arrangement for empire.

The series of acts passed by Parliament banned private trading on the part of Company employees and separated judicial and adminis-

George Curzon (1859–1925) Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905. Image source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:George_Curzon2.jpg.

trative functions of the Company from commercial ones. The attempt was to regulate taxation, justice, rule, and bribery (the last being viewed by Company servants as an indispensable feature of doing business in India). The Company had acquired considerable political power (although consisting of only a fraction of one percent of the population of the subcontinent), over more people than there were in England. Parliament was concerned, and was to remain so. Empire may not have been, at this early stage, a governmental declaration, but the wheels were in motion and Parliament became a core part of it all. The India Act of 1784 created a council of six commissioners, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer and a newly-created Secretary of State for India. This group was constituted above the Company directors in London.

With the transition of the Company to the role of ruler, the British attitude toward Indians degenerated. Previously, there had been some limited social mixing between the British and Indians, with no sense of superiority or inferiority. That changed. What earlier Englishmen had viewed with interest in Indian culture became abomination; thus, the parliamentary leader against the slave trade, William Wilberforce (1759–1833) felt Hinduism to be a greater evil than slavery. The opening of the Suez Canal (1869) allowed greater access to India by English women—who, of course, had to be "protected" from the hostile culture and barbarous Indian men. Biased concepts regarding non-Western cultures and non-white peoples, arising from so-called social Darwinism and evangelicalism, provided rationale for imperial rule. It is not coincidence that the heyday of imperialism was the Victorian age.

Although the foundation was provided by the Battle of Plassey (1757), 1803 is a good symbolic date for the start of empire. General Gerard Lake defeated the Marathas, perhaps the most important Indian power, and entered Delhi, the Mughal capital. By this time the emperor was mostly a figurehead, but symbolically important. He now became a pensioner of the British, with his realm reduced to the Red Fort. A British official, referred to as the Resident, became de facto ruler of Delhi. Company soldiers protected the city and commercial interests. Things were never to be the same. In a sense, the taking of Delhi was but part of a process, for, as Dilip Hiro, in his chronology of Indian history has asserted, "By the late 18th century it had become commonplace among the British, irrespective of class, to despise Indians." This characterization has been affirmed by other observers.[4]

Racism and Rebellion

Racism is a core characteristic of the British Empire in India, or, as it came to be known, the *Raj* (from a Sanskrit word, which found its way into vernacular languages, meaning to rule over, or the sovereign who does so). Historically, the term was applied to Hindu kings (as raja, or maharaja, great king). While implying political superiority, it did not have racial implications. Cultural and political factors were to add racial

"General Havelock's Attack on Nana Sahib at Futtyporer, 1857," a steel engraving by the London Printing and Publishing Co., late 1850s.

Image source: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1800_1899/1857revolt/nanasahib/nanasahib.html.

distinction to the concept under the British: Christian proselytizing and the great uprising, or rebellion, or mutiny, of 1857. This historic rebellion was not an insurrection, for it was not organized, and therein may have been its failure.[5]

The rebellion was a bloody mess, involving Indian soldiers (*sepoys*), native rulers of "subsidiary" or "princely" states that were quasi-independent but in thrall to the Company (and in fear of loss of their principalities), and the Company armies, in vicious retaliation. In essence, it was an explosion of deep frustration and fear that had been building up for decades. It is significant that it was largely confined to north central India, where Company rule and British oppression were strongest and most obvious.

The causes were numerous, and included forcing the use of Western technologies—the railroad and telegraph—upon a highly traditional society, imposition of English as the language for courts and government schools, opening the country to missionaries (with the resulting fear of forced conversions), Company takeover of subsidiary states when a prince died without direct heir, increasing haughtiness and distance on the part of the rulers, and policies beneficial to the Company's profits, but even inimical to the people, and so on. The spark was the introduction of the Enfield rifle to the sepoy ranks, which necessitated handling of cartridges packed in animal grease, anathema for both Hindus and Muslims, and considered as an attempt to Christianize the sepoys. Atrocities became commonplace on both sides, and were to be repeated by the British in the Amritsar Massacre of 1919.

The rebellion and the gruesome reaction to it were atrocious enough, but, as Maria Misra has observed, "The after-shock of the Rebellion was if anything even more influential than the event itself."[6] A curtain had fallen, and the two sides would never trust each other again. British disdain increased, and for the Indians, resentment festered. Yet oddly enough, Western influence was eclectically accepted by many upper class urban Indians (to a large extent in imitation, but also as a means to, and result of, upward mobility). The apparent anomaly of interest in things Western is best illustrated by Calcutta, one of the three early centers of Company presence. The others were Madras and Bombay— cities that built up around the Company's commercial establishment.

Indian Culture

Bengal historically has been marked by cultural pride, most justly so. Its position in Indian culture has been compared with that of Italy in European culture. Given different historical situations, the comparison might have gone the other way. Western impact was central to Calcutta (particularly noticeable in its architecture), the capital of British India, and provided the impetus for what is known as the Bengal Renaissance. As in Florence, it was business that made revival of the arts possible. In the case of Bengal, the revival involved religion as well. An almost perfect paradigm is that of the Tagore family. The modern founder was Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846), an entrepreneur with British partners and British friends, including women. His association with the relative freedom of English women, in contrast to the rigidly orthodox outlook of the women in his household, resulted in part with his becoming "a strong advocate of female education."[7] The fortune he accumulated enabled his heirs to pursue other interests.

Dwarkanath's son Debendranath (1817–1905) was active in social and religious reform, especially the revitalization of Hinduism, largely in response to missionary activity resulting in conversions of Hindus to Christianity. He was also active in the 1850s in forming the British Indian Association, a forerunner of the Indian National Congress.

Debendranath was father of the famed Rabindranath (1861–1941), an artistic genius and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Several other Tagores were active in the arts and influential in the revitalization of Bengali culture.

A fascinating example of this revitalization is a style of painting dating from about 1800. *Kalighat* painting originated around a temple dedicated to the goddess Kali in a neighborhood near the Hooghly River. The subject matter was in part religious, but in a sensual manner, and it also focused on daily life. A favorite topic was the *babu*, who in this context was a quasi-Westernized dandy obsessed with shady women. (The term babu has many connotations.) As a form, the art anticipated some Western developments, but received little recognition from Westerners, the general attitude being reflected by John Ruskin's dismissal of all Indian art as that of "heathen people." Missionaries showed a negative interest, viewing the paintings as childish and evil at the same time. The art was an urban twist upon folk tradition, yet with its own freshness and uniqueness.

After 1857

There were decisive changes as a result of 1857. The Mughal dynasty was terminated, as was the Company. The British government took over direct rule, replacing the Company's administrative apparatus with an Indian Civil Service (which became the Indian Administrative Service after independence). In 1877, Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India, a symbolic exclamation point.

Governor-Generals, popularly referred to as Viceroys (after 1858), came and went, but the direction remained clear: Imperial rule for the profit of Britain, not for the welfare of the people of India—this was shown even in the governmental response to famines, and India became represented as the Jewel in the Crown. With the formation of the Indian National Congress (or, simply, Congress), some half-hearted concessions to change and inclusion occurred, albeit always seeming to be too little too late. This organization (curiously, initiated by a retired British official) might have seemed impotent at first, but it did demand that "the Government should be widened and that the people should have their proper and legitimate share in it."[8] Perhaps

most significantly, the initial meeting, held in Bombay in 1885, involved about seventy-two delegates, from various regions, and consisted mostly of upper class Hindus and Parsis (many of them lawyers) with only two Muslims in attendance. It was through this organization, under the leadership of lawyers such as Motilal Nehru and his son Jawaharlal (India's first prime minister), and M. K. Gandhi, that India achieved independence.

Such a meeting, let alone the organization itself (or, for that matter, the nationalist/independence movement), would not have been possible had it not been for the English language as a *lingua franca*, which stemmed from the 1835 decision by the Governor-General to make English the official language of instruction. That decision opened a can of worms: men educated in English law saw the possibilities of constitutional democracy. No one Indian language could claim the majority of speakers, and English provided the bridge that made communication possible between the educated from different parts of India. The importance of this development cannot be overemphasized. Related developments included the establishment of universities (oddly, in 1857) in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta; a vibrant (if often censored) press, and Indian literature in English. These all are evident and thriving yet today, and strongly so. The most important development might well have been that of nationalism, an attempt to override the British policy of divide-and-rule (which played on Hindu-Muslim antipathy). Of course, the creation of Pakistan showed that the dream was not completely successful—yet India today is a successful democracy. And the nationalist movement did bring the diverse cultures and languages, the religious sects and castes, into a new identity: Indian.

Conclusion

The date 1900 makes a good closing point. In 1899, Lord Curzon, the most imperial of the Viceroys, became Governor-General, and in 1901 the Queen-Empress, Victoria, died. The post-1857 developments were, of course, designed to keep empire supreme, but British tradition opened doors within the empire, and did so in spite of empire (e.g., the use of the Magna Carta by an Indian teacher in the classroom).[9] Further, they really did not develop a coherent approach toward rule. The late Raghavan Iyer found it to be a mix of Trusteeship, Utilitarianism, Platonic Guardianship, and Evangelicalism.[10] The focus was on administration, not development, and that by as small a cadre as possible. Stalin is said to have observed that it was ridiculous . . . that a few hundred Englishmen should dominate India. Actually, the "few hundred" numbered just over a thousand, of whom one-fifth were at any time either sick or on leave. This, over a population of about 300 million in what is now India, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh.[11] Although certainly not as cruel as the Belgians in the Congo, the servants of the Raj and their compatriots (families, businessmen, missionaries, etc.)—about 100,000 in 1900[12] —were viewed as "lofty and contemptuous."[13] And they had their moments of cruelty as well.

The empire was a mix of the White Man's Burden and Ma-Bap ("We are your mother and father"). Mix is a good word to describe the Raj. The British engaged in racism and exploitation, and they also provided the doors that would lead to Indian democracy and nationhood. Paul Scott, in the opening to *The Jewel in the Crown*, the initial novel of the Raj Quartet, wrote of two nations in violent opposition

> . . . locked in an imperial embrace of such long standing and subtlety it was no longer possible for them to know whether they hated or loved one another, or what it was that held them together and seemed to have confused the image of their separate destinies.[14] ∎

NOTES

1. Video Collectables: *The Very Best of British Entertainment*, Summer 2008, 30. Web site: www.collectablesdirect.com.

2. The favored concept of the decay of the Mughal Empire as resulting in anarchy and a power vacuum that the British stepped into and righted with stability is not without challenge; e.g., Archie Baron, *An Indian Affair* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2001), 19. Be that as it may, Mughal power withered and British power grew, although not necessarily by design, even though regional or local economies may have prospered.

3. A very useful annotated chronology, to which I am indebted, is Dilip Hiro's *The Rough Guide Chronicle: India* (London: Rough Guides Ltd, 2002).

4. Hiro, 227–233; quote from 227. This attitude is reflected in other works (e.g., Zareer Masani, *Tales of the Raj*—see notes 9 and 12 below—and Paul Scott's "The Raj Quartet") far too numerous to list.

5. There are problems with what to call this event—or series of events. Originally, the British referred to it as the Sepoy Mutiny. A sepoy, from the Hindi *sipahi*, or soldier, was an Indian, Hindu or Muslim, serving in the East India Company army. After independence, nationalists began to refer to it as the First War of Independence. Variations abound, trying to avoid either extreme. Perhaps the best is that of "the Great Rebellion," as in the subtitle of an outstanding new study by Maria Misra, *Vishnu's Temple: India Since the Great Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

6. Misra, page 7; see 6–17 for an account.

7. Blair B. King, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 183. An informative article, "Jorasanko and the Thakur Family," by Chitra Deb, appears in a rich collection of articles on historical Calcutta edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Calcutta: The Living City, Volume I: The Past* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990/1995), 64–67. Jorsanko is the particular branch of the Tagore family, and Thakur is the literal transliteration of Tagore from Bengali.

8. As quoted by Hiro, 259.

9. Zareer Masani, Indian *Tales of the Raj* (London: BBC Books, 1987), 90. This a remarkable book for insight into the nationalist-independence struggle beyond the political level. The author is the son of nationalist leaders, who were neither Hindu nor Muslim, but Parsi. In his introduction, he provides a very apt observation: "the Indians who have been the most enduring legacy of the Raj—the Western-educated middle class whom the British fostered to serve their interests, but which eventually threw them out. " (5)

10. Raghavan Iyer, *Utilitarianism and All That: The Political Theory of British Imperialism* (Santa Barbara: Concord Press, 1983).

11. David Gilmour, *The Ruling Caste: Imperial Lives in the Victorian Raj* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005), xiii.

12. Masani, 7.

13. Maria Misra, "The New Statesman Essay—Before the Pith Helmets," published 8 October 2001, available at www.newstatemen.com/200110080018. This small, concise article is highly worthwhile.

14. The Raj Quartet has gone through several publishings. The quote appears on page nine (the initial page of the work) of *The Jewel in the Crown*, Avon paperback edition of 1970 (first published 1966).

ADDITIONAL READING

There are far-ranging books of a popular nature, such as Archie Baron's *An Indian Affair* (goes only to 1857) and Geoffrey Moorhouse's *India Britannica* (to 1947), but perhaps best for the British Empire in India to 1900 are the first six (of ten) chapters of Denis Judd's *The Lion and the Tiger* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004; paperback 2005).

Finding video for the period 1700–1900 is even more difficult. One which reflects the impact of the British during the period of empire, but which is almost an apologia, is "Ironies of Empire," part ten of *The Triumph of the West: A View of World History*, produced, written, and narrated by John Roberts for the British Broadcasting Corporation, 1985.

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