Imperial Illusions: India, Britain, and the wrong lessons.

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I.

As I entered secondary school in the mid-1940s in what was still British India, I remember thinking that, despite our irritation with the British, it was rather agreeable that the favorite military music of the British Army was "Beating the Retreat." There was little sign in 1944 that the British were about to evacuate the country, despite the swelling torrent of the Indian national movement led by Gandhi and other political leaders; but the decisive moment was not far off. It came rather abruptly in 1947, sixty years ago, ushering in the beginning of "the biggest empire ever, bar none," as Niall Ferguson describes it in his book Empire, a guarded but enthusiastic celebration of British imperialism. While this year the Indian newspapers have been full of festivity for what has been achieved in six decades of independence, it is worth remembering more soberly that this is also the anniversary of the end of a very long imperial relationship.

As the year 2007 trails away, it is a good time to take a general look back at the history of the domination of a hot, sunny, and vast subcontinent in the Orient by rulers from a small kingdom in rainy, windy, cool--and very far away--islands on the western coast of Europe. In India, indeed, this is a year of anniversaries. Not only did that imperial rule of the subcontinent end sixty years ago, it also began 250 years ago, with a small but hugely repercussive event in 1757. On June 23 of that year, Robert Clive led the forces of the East India Company to defeat the Nawab of Bengal in the battle of Plassey, thereby initiating British control of state power in India. The battle lasted all of a day, but it is still seen as a memorable event both in Britain and in the subcontinent; and when I gave a commemorative lecture last June in the London City Hall, the mixed nature of the large audience made it vividly clear to me that the recollection of that one-day war a quarter of a millennium ago still interests people of diverse ancestry and origin, living now in post-imperial Britain.

And there is another momentous anniversary that broaches the question of what imperialism did for, and to, India. It is now exactly one hundred fifty years since the first armed battle for the end of the British domination that engulfed the subcontinent. The uprising, which united very different rebellious groups under one banner of revolt, started in March 1857 in Barrackpore, on the outskirts of Calcutta, not far from Plassey, and spread across India. It was ultimately crushed by the British, with the help of Gurkha, Pathan, and Sikh troops, who were not involved in the revolt. The squashed rebellion, which has variously been called "the Sepoy Mutiny" (the official term used by the British) and "the first war of independence" (favored by many Indian nationalists), was in fact responsible for the British decision to make India directly a part of the empire, rather than continuing to rule it indirectly through the East India Company.

The story of British rule in India is of more than historical interest. It has been suggested that the annals of the British empire are relevant to significant policy issues in the world.
today. The British empire is invoked persistently these days to discuss the demands of successful global governance. It is used to persuade the United States to acknowledge its new role as the unique imperial power today, an invitation and an inspiration--and perhaps even an instigation--for which Ferguson speaks powerfully in his ultimately rather didactic book on the British empire. Ferguson is concerned that despite America's leading role in the world today, which could be exercised with pride and responsibility rather than with embarrassment and confusion, America is evading its true historical task. In his view, the United States now runs a de facto empire "that dare not speak its name." He calls it "an empire in denial."

Ferguson asks an important question: "Should the United States seek to shed or to shoulder the imperial load it has inherited?" We may doubt whether America's effective power in the world today is comparable to that of Britain in its imperial heyday, and we may not agree with him that this is "the most burning contemporary question of American politics"; but it certainly is an urgent query and an interesting one. Ferguson is also right to argue that the question cannot be answered "without an understanding of how the British Empire rose and fell; and of what it did, not just for Britain but for the world as a whole." So the cluster of anniversaries of British rule in what was the largest part of the empire--"the jewel in the crown"--is a good occasion to try to get some clarity on those questions, too.

How tidy and how regular were the processes that led to the emergence of the largest empire in history? How great were the achievements of this empire that was emphatically not "in denial"? The latter is a tricky question to answer, and even to formulate adequately, since it is extremely difficult to judge the effects of specific developments in history. The temptation to compare the subcontinent in 1947, when British rule ended, with what India was in 1757, at the time of the battle of Plassey, is hard to resist, and this forms the subject matter of a good deal of the analysis of what British empire did--and did not--achieve. But in fact that comparison tells us little about the consequences of the empire, since the subcontinent would have moved on over that long period to something different from what it was in 1757 had India not been conquered by the British.

To illustrate the ground for my skepticism, consider another comparison--a hypothetical scenario, what philosophers call a counterfactual assumption. Imagine if Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States Navy, who steamed into the bay of Edo in Japan with four warships in 1853, had been not the leader of a pure show of American force (as was actually the case), but instead the front guard in an assumed American conquest of Japan. If we were to assess the achievements of this supposed American rule of Japan by comparing Japan before that imagined American domination in 1853 with Japan after that domination were to end, we would omit all the effects of the Meiji restoration in 1868, as well as all the other globalizing changes that were yet to come, which radically transformed the nature of Japan as a country and a society and of course as an economy. Dates--1757, 1853--are stationary, but the process of history is not. It is not easy to guess with any confidence how the history of the subcontinent would have gone had the British conquest not occurred. Would India have moved, like Japan, toward modernization in an increasingly globalizing world, or would it have stayed resistant to change, like Afghanistan, or hastened slowly, like Thailand? We could not assess "the results of the British rule" without being sure what the alternative would have been (rather than simply assuming that India would have stayed locked for two centuries into whatever it was in 1757). Still, even in the absence of such big comparisons of alternative historical scenarios, there are more limited questions that can be asked--and to a considerable extent answered--which may help us to an intelligent understanding of the role that British rule actually played in India.
II.

**What were the challenges** that India faced at the time of the British conquest, and what happened in those critical areas during the British rule? To recognize a need for some change in India in the mid-eighteenth century does not require us to deny the achievements of India's ancient civilization, with its rich history of accomplishments in philosophy, mathematics, literature, arts, music, medicine, and a variety of academic studies such as linguistics and astronomy. India also had much success in building flourishing economies with large trade and commerce--both internal and external--well before the colonial period, and the economic wealth of India was plentifully acknowledged by British observers and commentators.

Yet it is hard to doubt that India had fallen well behind the modernization that was occurring in Europe by the eighteenth century. In some insightful essays on India that Karl Marx published in the *New York Daily Tribune* in 1853, he discussed the constructive effects of British rule in India, on the ground that India needed some serious shaking in its stagnant pause at the time of the British conquest. Without disputing Marx's thesis about the need for substantial change in eighteenth-century India (a thesis that is, I think, basically correct), one could question his further assumption that the British conquest was the only window to the modern world that could have opened for India. What was needed at the time was more global involvement--but that is not the same thing as imperialism.

It is worth noting here that throughout India's long history there were persistent exchanges of ideas and commodities with the outside world. Traders, settlers, and scholars moved from India to the east--Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and elsewhere--for a great many centuries, beginning nearly two thousand years ago; and the far-reaching influence of these movements, especially on language, literature, and architecture, can be seen quite plentifully even today. There were also huge avenues of global influence coming into the country through India's open-frontier role in welcoming fugitives and other settlers from abroad, from very early days. Jewish immigration into India began right after the fall of Jerusalem in the first century, and continued over many centuries. (Baghdadi Jews, such as the highly successful Sassoons, came in large numbers even as late as the eighteenth century.) Christians started coming in the fourth century, and Parsees in the late seventh century (as soon as persecution commenced in their homeland). Muslim Arab traders began to settle in coastal India in the eighth century. Persecuted Bahais came much later. In fact, India has for most of its history played a similar role to modern Britain and America, as a home for fugitives.

It is difficult to conclude, therefore, that India had to depend only on Britain as its sole guide to the changing contemporary world in the eighteenth century--or at any other time. In fact, there were long-established trading connections, stretching back nearly two thousand years, of people in the exact locality, near the mouth of the Ganges, from where the East India Company launched its first conquest of India in the eighteenth century. The evidence for this can be found not only in Indian accounts, but also in the writings of such authors as Claudius Ptolemy in the second century, who treated this region in some detail, and identified a number of towns and cities that were engaged in trading and other economic activities for a global economy. Pliny the Elder also provided descriptions of the open and flourishing economy of this region.

When the East India Company undertook the battle of Plassey and defeated the Nawab of Bengal, there were businessmen, traders, and other professionals from a number of different European nations already in that very locality. Their primary involvement was in exporting textiles and other industrial products from India, and the river Ganges (or Hughly, as it is more often called in that part of India), on which the East India Company had its
settlement, also had (further upstream) trading centers and settled communities from Portugal, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, Prussia, and other European nations.

Being subjected to imperial rule is not the only way of learning things from abroad, no matter how necessary such learning may be. When the Meiji restoration established a new reformist government in Japan in 1868 (which was not unrelated to the internal political impact of Commodore Perry's show of force in the previous decade), the Japanese went full steam into learning from the West, sending people for training in America and Europe, and making institutional changes that were clearly inspired by western experience. They globalized themselves voluntarily. They were not coercively globalized by others. The shaking of India, too, could have come in non-colonialist ways.

**It is true that** it was Britain that did, in fact, play the role of India's pre-eminent Western contact, and this was certainly connected, and quite intimately, with the empire. To recognize this, however, is not in any way to rule out the alternative scenarios that could have occurred in the absence of India's colonial subjugation—-that is a separate question altogether. But what did actually happen deserves our special attention, as the process of change that in fact occurred. Consider Christopher Bayly's important point (in his definitive book *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914*) that the Calcutta intellectual Ram Mohun Roy, born in 1772, "made in two decades an astonishing leap from the status of a late-Mughal state intellectual to that of the first Indian liberal," who "independently broached themes that were being simultaneously developed in Europe by Garibaldi and Saint-Simon." To understand Roy's creativity, it is necessary to see that his far-reaching deliberations were influenced not only by his traditional knowledge of Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian texts, but also very strongly by the growing familiarity of Indian intellectuals with English writings circulating in Calcutta under the East India Company's patronage.

Related to the general question about what India needed at the time of the British conquest, there is also an important thesis about the need for uniting India, which is often presented by theorists of British imperialism as one of the great services that the empire performed. It is argued that India was not one country at all, but a divided land mass and a fragmented population spread over an area of the size of a continent, and that it was the British empire that welded India into a nation. It can certainly be argued, with considerable plausibility, that the kind of change that happened in Japan after the Meiji restoration would have been very hard to organize for a country as large and as fragmented as India. When Robert Clive's forces of the East India Company defeated the Nawab of Bengal in 1757, there was certainly no unifying power ruling all of India.

Yet it would be a gigantic leap from there to the British claim that they united India, a thesis that is usually garnished by such observations as Winston Churchill's remark that India had been no more a country than was the Equator. In fact, the ambitious and energetic emperors of India from the third century B.C.E. onward—Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, the later Chandragupta of the Gupta dynasty, Alauddin Khilji, the Mughal emperor Akbar, and others—did not accept that their regimes were complete until the bulk of what they took to be one country was united under their rule. Indian history shows a sequential alternation of large domestic empires and clusters of fragmented kingdoms. As it happens, British rule began at a time when the Mughals had declined in power, though formally even the Nawab of Bengal, whom the British defeated, was a subject of the Mughal emperor. The Nawab still swore allegiance to the Mughal emperor, without paying very much attention to the formality of the empire.

In that special situation, then, the British did make a big difference. The most likely successors to the Mughals, the newly emerging Hindu Maratha rulers from near Bombay,
periodically sacked the Mughal capital of Delhi and continued to exercise their military power across the country. (The East India Company had already built a huge ditch in 1742, called "the Maratha ditch," at the edge of Calcutta, to slow down the lightning raids of the Maratha cavalry, coming across much more than a thousand miles.) But the Marathas were still quite far from putting together anything like the design of an all-India empire.

Like previous Indian emperors, the British were not satisfied until they were the dominant power across the bulk of the subcontinent, and in this regard they were not bringing a new vision of a united India so much as acting as the successors to previous domestic empires. For an adequate understanding of what was happening at the time of the British conquest, it is important that we do not make the mistake of assuming that the fragmented governance of mid-eighteenth-century India was exactly the state in which the country typically found itself throughout its history, until the British came along helpfully to unite it; and at the same time we must not fail to see what the British did actually accomplish as they filled up the imperial vacuum, through a sequence of conquests that began in Plassey.

Why was it so easy for the British to defeat the Nawab of a part of India, namely Bengal, that was quite well-known in Europe as a rich kingdom? The battle was swift, beginning at dawn and ending close to sunset on that June day in 1757. It was a normal monsoon day, with occasional rain in the town of Plassey, situated among mango groves between Calcutta, where the British were based, and the capital, Murshidabad, of the Nawab of Bengal. It was in those mango groves that the British forces faced the Nawab Siraj-ud-Doula's army and promptly defeated it. The British, with a much smaller army, had much greater fire power, but perhaps more importantly, Robert Clive had taken the precaution of making use of—and to a great extent fostering—a treacherous development within the Nawab's government. The person at the center of the treason was Mir Jafar, the Nawab's uncle, who had a leading role in the conspiracy against young Siraj, and whose desire to seize the throne was both strong and strongly encouraged by Clive.

Mir Jafar's role was quite crucial for Clive's early victory. Right in the middle of the battle of Plassey, the big division of the army that Mir Jafar commanded on the Nawab's side suddenly left the fight and quit. In the evening of the battle, after Clive had won, he received a felicitating letter from Mir Jafar: "I congratulate you on executing your design." Clive killed Siraj, the defeated Nawab, and put Mir Jafar, the key conspirator, on the throne, with nominal power, at the mercy of his British guardians. The empire began, then, in an event that can hardly be seen as a regular and straight military conquest. If Plassey had been a cricket match, it seems plausible that Skipper Clive would have been disallowed from participating in further games for many years to come.

But it was not a cricket match, and not only did Robert Clive continue to command British operations in India, building up the company's empire, he also waxed eloquent on his achievements in Plassey in his deposition before a Parliamentary Committee in London in 1772:

"Consider the situation in which the victory at Plassey had placed me! A great prince was dependent on my pleasure; an opulent city lay at my mercy; its richest bankers bid against each other for my smiles; I walked through vaults which were thrown open to me alone, piled on either hand with gold and jewels! Mr. Chairman, at this moment I stand astonished at my own moderation."
As I entered secondary school in the mid-1940s in what was still British India, I remember thinking that, despite our irritation with the British, it was rather agreeable that the favorite military music of the British Army was “Beating the Retreat.” There was little sign in 1944 that the British were about to evacuate the country, despite the swelling torrent of the Indian national movement led by Gandhi and other political leaders; but the decisive moment was not far off. It came rather abruptly in 1947, sixty Imperialism is the policy of extending a nation’s authority by territorial acquisition or by the establishment of economic and political influence over other nations. There are a variety of policies that countries use to control their colonies. Imperialism can be viewed in a positive and negative way, because it can help a colony become stable, but imperialism often removes some of their culture and blends it with the controlling nation. Inventions such as the railroads, steamships, and the telephone allowed for easy communication between the colony and the controlling nation. Africa was divided, which made them extremely vulnerable and easy to seize. India possessed excellent opportunity to obtain raw materials, and it was even referred to as "jewel in the crown."