**British anarchy in India**

[Zafar Aziz Chaudhry](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/zafar-aziz-chaudhry/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Zafar%20Aziz%20Chaudhry)

January 6, 2020

When we were at school, our text books on ‘[British Rule in India](https://dailytimes.com.pk/488779/india-runs-kashmir-council-vote-despite-lockdown-and-boycott/)‘ described the British colonialists as our saviours, who introduced new reforms in agriculture by bringing large tracts of barren lands into productive fields yielding good crops and vegetables for consumption of local population. The actual activities of the Company were even then shrouded in mystery and there was hardly any mention of the steps taken by the Colonists to exploit the resources of India for their own use.

In the recent past, the true role of East India Company has been explored by two eminent writers and historians with deep clarity and vision. Their new researches are well supported by cogent documentary evidence which appear un-rebuttable and amply throw light on the dark activities of the EIC showing with material evidence how the resources of India were ruthlessly plundered by the Colonists. The first book is by the Indian politician and scholar Shashi Tharoor, titled, “Inglorious Empire” and the second is by the eminent British historian, William Dalrymple, titled “The Anarchy”, which has even in more graphic detail and with the support of overwhelming original evidence have thrown light on most perfidious activities of British settlers and their cunning policies to exploit Indian resources for the benefit of British nation.

“Inglorious Empire” examines Britain’s colonial past and the effect it had on India. Tharoor made a speech in 2015 in an Oxford Union address, on the subject, “Does Britain owe reparations to its former colonies?”, which went viral on social media and inspired him to expand it into a book.

For several decades, the British have continued to insist that they were not merely benign, but actually enlightened colonizers. “Inglorious Empire” exposes the harsh truth about the activities of the Company. In outrage after outrage, Shashi Tharoor explores the social, political and economic facets of 200years of abuse that left India a third world country. When the British arrived, India was enjoying a quarter to a third of world trade. It had an effective and comprehensive education system. Hindus and Muslims worked together. By independence in 1947, the economy of the entire India was in shambles. In a 150 year period, British GDP increased 347%, while India’s fell to 14%. This is far worse than benign neglect. This is world class looting and pillaging.

Industrial Revolution was built on Indian money, while destroying India’s economy is again well explained. The Hindu-Muslim divide was created by the British

Tharoor observes that by the early 1800s, India had been reduced from a land of “artisans, traders, warriors and merchants, functioning and thriving in complex and commercial networks, into an agrarian society of peasants and moneylenders. Extensive scholarship has shown how the British created the phenomenon of landlessness, turned self-reliant cultivators into tenants, employees and bondsmen, transformed social relations and as a result, undermined agrarian growth and development.They chopped off the thumbs of weavers so the British could rule the textile trade and made India an importer instead of the lead exporter.Britain, a democracy, sought to crush its colonies, destroying their self-sufficiency, extorting their wealth, and keeping the colonists separate from them, out of government, out of business and out of education.

Because India was not taken over by the British government; it was taken over by a public company. Members of Parliament and Lords were prominent stockholders, and the government gave the company the right to govern, the soldiers to back it up, and the tariffs to ensure success.Tharoor writes, “when the British arrived in India in the 1700s, India was 27 percent of the global economy. When they left in 1948 it was 3%”.

Other shameful aspects of Company’s management and exploitation could be seen in the incidence of murders in Amritsar and famine in Bengal.The Bengal famine, resulted into the death of almost 100 million Indians who died from starvation during the course of British rule. Famines, it must be remembered, are not always a natural phenomenon.

Now I turn to the recent epoch-making book by William Dalrymple, “The Anarchy”. It may be recalled that Dalrymple’s knowledge of Indian history, especially the Mughal period is un-matched and has been acclaimed all over the world when his earlier book, “The Last Mughal” appeared describing how the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar met his tragic end. Like all of William Dalrymple’s books, this history of the East India Company inspires both awe and melancholy. The EIC arrived in India at a moment in which the power of the Mughal Empire had already been shattered. Aurangzeb had mismanaged his realm, and Maratha and Afghan forces were rising on its peripheries. The death blow to Mughal power however had been dealt by the Persian invader Nader Shah, who had sacked the great city of Delhi and carried its riches back to Iran. The book’s title “The Anarchy” refers to the state of India at the time of the EIC’s arrival and thereafter: one in which a mighty empire had fragmented into countless warring polities. A small group of energetic, ambitious and well-funded outsiders by their self-serving policies wreaked havoc in India. He describes how they played off rivals against one another and did not hesitate to pick and choose their preferred candidates and engineer their rise.

Before reaching India, England was very poor country compared to its rivals Portugal and Spain. Massive imports of New World gold had turned Spain into the richest country in Europe, and given Portugal control of the seas and spices of the East, so bringing it in a close second place. After reaching India Britain became the richest and most powerful country. This tells us that India was indeed a golden sparrow for the outside world. By eighteenth-century standards, India was an economic giant, the most advanced capitalist organization in the world. By exploiting Indian wealth, East India Company became most powerful in England after the monarch.

Those Indians who had initially welcomed the Company now understood its primary motive and knew that they had no regard to the concerns of Hindustanis, and suffered them to be mercilessly plundered, fleeced, oppressed and tormented by the officers they had appointed.

The fact that many Indian institutions were destroyed by the British and how they introduced their education system is well presented. The case of the famines that the British caused by diverting grain from India is well written. Industrial Revolution was built on Indian money, while destroying India’s economy is again well explained. The Hindu-Muslim divide was created by the British.

It has been said that Britain ruled India for about 200 years, a period that was marred with extreme poverty and famine. India’s wealth depleted in these two centuries. The scars of colonization remain despite Britain leaving India over 70 years ago. Between 1765 and 1938, the drain amounted to 9.2 trillion pounds($45 trillion).

This brilliant work , Dalrymple’s latest , details not only these tricks, intrigues , subterfuge , chicanery and devious diplomatic policies unleashed to loot rape and plunder one of the world’s wealthiest nations , but also the supreme political cunning , agility and foresight by which EIC – the world’s first corporate superpower- became de facto ruler and overlords of all the various factional powers.The successful policies of East India Companysoon made nearly half the members of parliament and the House of Lords its shareholders, and therefore compromised in their dealings with it.By 1763 the Company had transformed into an “autonomous imperial power” and Dalrymple says, the Company had its own army, navy, and designs on the whole subcontinent. The company became self-financing.

With power, the managers of the Company became corrupt. Governor General Warren Hastings had been the most effective, efficient and compassionate of the Company’s leaders, was tasked with cleaning up the mess of his predecessors. But a lobby was created against him and he could not stay in India for long. Corruption was rampant and men like Robert Clive, instead of being prosecuted became the richest men in Europe as a result of his machinations in India. Clive was uncontrollably violent (which is why he was sent away to India), ruthless, and corrupt, and he ultimately met his nemesis when he committed suide.

Dalrymple has written India’s colonial history with much panache , passion and verve focusing on the anarchic period in India after the last Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. It is a welcome move that even the British historians and scholars have started dispassionately analyzing the machinations of East India Company in plundering its wealth.

*The writer is a former member of the Provincial Civil Service, and an author of Moments in Silence*