



The Making of the Hybrid Raj, 1700-1857

Peter Marshall describes how commercial instinct and opportunism evolved into the unofficial rule of 'John Company'.

At certain times of the day long queues snake out of the Indian high Commission in London into the surrounding streets. Anyone with the fortitude to join one of these queues will eventually witness scenes of more or less controlled mayhem inside India House, as would-be travelers to India present their passports for visas to be stamped on them, and then later, as they struggle to recover their passports. Both the size and the composition of the queues, young backpackers, more sedate tourists, business people and huge numbers of British citizens of Indian origin, show how closely inter-twined Britain and India still are. For the historically-minded, the scenes inside the High Commission may evoke something of the British-Indian past. British traditions of bureaucratic formalism are, it would seem, being genially subverted by other ways of doing things.



For all the inequalities of power in Britain's favour which marked the connection between Britain and India for so long, the mixing of British and Indian influences has always been characteristic of it. The stark stereotypes of the polemical historiography of the past, which depicted the British as all-powerful conquerors, aborting the development of the peoples of South Asia and subordinating them to Britain's

purposes, or alternatively, as guiding them to progress and modernity, now carry little conviction. This is especially true for the 18th and the early 19th centuries, a period of growing British trade with India and later of wars of conquest and of the creation of a British administration in the name of the East India Company.



In this period the British built up a huge army that eclipsed all rival Indian forces. Indian states that had emerged from the Mughal Empire were either



defeated in battle or forced into submission by the imposition of unequal treaties. Rule within the annexed provinces was exercised by British Governors with a hierarchy of British officials, acting as Collectors, Magistrates or Judges. India's foreign trade began to be reshaped in response to the changing needs of the British economy. The first attempts were made to develop the teaching of English and the propagation of British values, both secular and religious. A great movement of resistance to foreign rule was defeated in 1857-58.

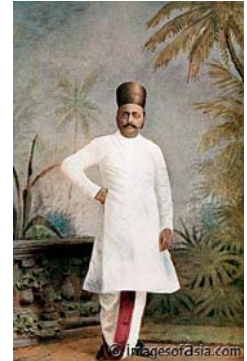
Yet blatant as British domination undoubtedly was, it was still domination built on Indian foundations, taking Indian forms and making use of Indian personnel at every level. While an Indian élite was beginning to emerge that would absorb much from Britain, the British élite in India was generally more absorbed in their surroundings than their successors would



ever be. To use a now fashionable concept, the British regime in India at any time was a hybrid of British and Indian elements, but its 'hybridity' was especially marked before 1857.

In trading with India in the 18th century the East India Company and British merchants who traded under its protection were operating in a sophisticated economy, which was by most criteria a capitalist one, comparable to those of contemporary Europe. The primary purpose of trade with India was to obtain the cotton cloth of the Indian weavers which, until the rise of Lancashire late in the century, dominated the world market. The British also participated in a vigorous inter-Asian commerce, shipping Indian commodities around the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. British trade depended on Indian co-operation at every point: on the skill of the weavers and silk winders, on the capacity of Indian farmers to produce surpluses of crops like opium or indigo, on Indian agents who procured the commodities and on Indian merchants and bankers, whose loans not only financed manufacture and commercial agriculture but who also provided most of the capital for individual British traders. The early

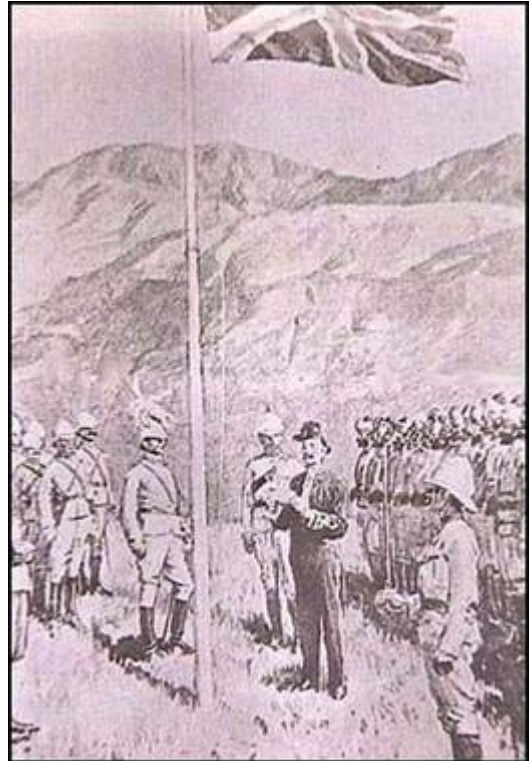
port cities of British India, Madras, Calcutta or Bombay were shaped as much by the Indian business communities who lived in them as by the British themselves. Conquest began in the areas most thoroughly penetrated by British trade, which is on the south-east coast and in Bengal. It has long been customary to explain the beginnings of territorial empire in terms of world- wide Anglo-French rivalry, the British taking control of territory in order to protect their trading interests from French threats. Current interpretations, however, see British conquest more as a response to opportunities in 18th-century India than as an episode in the wars of European powers.



The European trading settlements were increasingly involving themselves in the affairs of some of the regional states that had emerged from the break-up of the Mughal empire, pushing their trade further inland, seeking the right to collect taxes from territory around their settlements and making alliances with Indian grandees who would favour them. A number of such men were willing to try to use the undoubted military prowess of even small numbers of European soldiers to advance their own designs. Thus the British became partners in Indian political rivalries. The early stages of conquest are the story of how the British exploited their role in the partnership, extracting ever larger concessions in return for the military services that they rendered, most

spectacularly at Plassey in 1757, where the ruler of Bengal was deposed in favour of a British-sponsored rival. This pattern was to be repeated over and over again as conquest moved inland, away from the original coastal trading areas. The British virtually never faced an effective coalition of Indian powers. They could always enlist allies. Thus the Maratha princes helped them to crush the formidable Mysore of Tipu Sultan. Later on the Marathas themselves were deeply divided and did not act together against the British. In the desperate fighting that brought the Punjab under British rule in the 1840's, there were Sikh leaders who held back in the decisive battles.

To the Indian élites the British seemed not to represent some totally alien force bent on dominating the subcontinent and bringing about irrevocable change, but rather to constitute a new Indian power that could be manipulated and that would eventually become the upholder of the values and principles deemed appropriate to any post-Mughal Indian ruler. Short-sighted and indeed tragically mistaken as such beliefs certainly were, superficially there was at least some substance for them. British conquests were brought about through Indian diplomacy, intrigues and nominal alliances. The army that won the wars was very much a British-Indian army. Its weaponry, as well as the way in which it was organised, could be matched by the Indian armies that opposed it. The success of the British depended as much on the availability of bullocks to ensure their armies' mobility and on the support of the Indian bankers, who ensured that the soldiers were paid, as on any technological superiority in actually waging war. The great bulk of the British army consisted of Indian sepoys. These were men from social groups for whom military service was a long-established form of employment and who brought with them their own military traditions.



The sepoy regiments were, to a considerable extent, autonomous communities regulated by their own customs rather than by strict British military law.



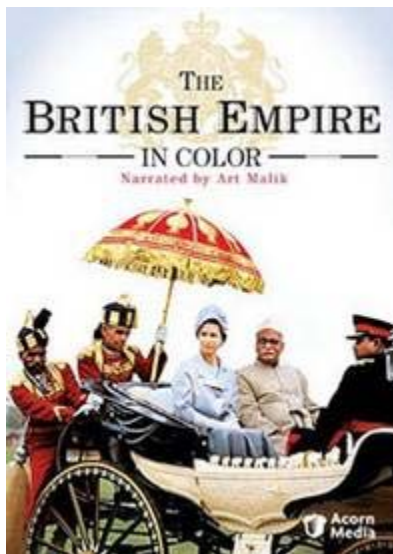
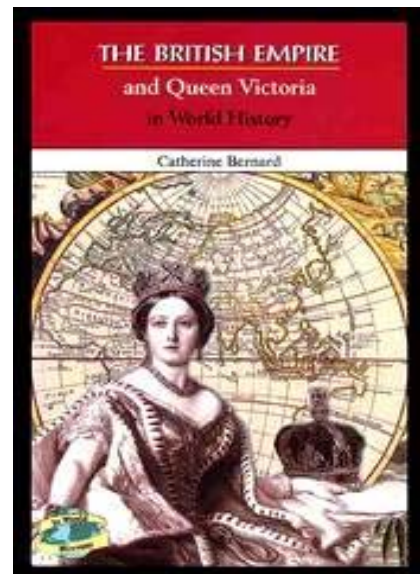
When territory passed under British control, little at first seemed to change. The initial acquisitions were nominally grants of the Mughal emperor, the British becoming imperial officials. Like Indian rulers of successor states, the East India Company rendered symbolic obedience to the emperor in such matters as striking coins in his name. When regional states were brought under British domination, rulers and their courts were usually preserved.

Although their actual power might now be negligible, such courts remained as centres of consumption and patronage, the rulers often developing tastes for European art and architecture as well as maintaining some older traditions. Lucknow, capital of the protected

state of Awadh (Oudh), was a spectacular example of this cultural merging in the early 19th century. The East India Company also respected religious centres. When the British armies moved into Orissa in 1803, the priests of the great Jagannath temple complex were assured in advance that there would be no intrusion. The British accepted responsibility for supervising the administration of the temples and guaranteeing their income. At other shrines and temples local British officials often assumed the role of Indian rulers in acting as patrons of festivals or protectors of pilgrims.

Continuity in the outward trappings of authority could not disguise the reality that a change of rule meant a change in the priorities of the ruler. At first, however, British priorities were not radically different from those of their predecessors, even though they were likely to be enforced more rigorously. The British wanted to maintain control over their provinces and to raise a high level of taxation. Early British administration was largely a matter of enforcing authority and collecting money. The exercise of control meant the elimination of rival sources of authority to the British administration and the disarming of all except those licensed to bear arms in the service of the East

India Company. Forts were demolished, armed retainers were dispersed and, in theory at



least, all the inhabitants of the Company's provinces were made subject to the jurisdiction of its courts. Migratory groups that lived off the countryside through which they passed, such as the *sanyassi*'s, or religious mendicants who were both traders and plunderers, were expelled or confined to specific areas. Attempts were made to 'pacify' peoples who lived in the forests and hills on the frontiers of the Company's provinces. In time the Company's Magistrates and Police exercised a relatively uniform authority over territory claimed by the British. Open defiance became rare, although this did not of course mean that the British sought to exercise close supervision over the lives of

those who had become their subjects, or that they were capable of doing so. Levying taxation was the essential function of British administration until far into the 19th century.

The East India Company inherited systems of taxation which, in spite of many local variations, were essentially similar. Cultivators of the land were assessed at what were by European standards very high levels: one third or more of the value of the crop had to be surrendered. Over most of India tax was collected in cash, evidence of a highly developed market economy which enabled farmers to sell their crops for cash and to borrow money in advance of their harvest.



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How the collections were made varied greatly in different parts of India. In some areas peasants dealt directly with the agents of the government; in others, there were layers of intermediaries between the government and the tax payer. The commonest term for these intermediaries was *zamindars*, a term which implied the right to collect taxation over a specific area and to exercise some degree of authority over the cultivators.

Some zamindars seemed to the British to be the equivalent of the owners of great landed estates, while others were themselves little more than substantial peasants.

For the British, much, above all the regular payment of the Company's troops depended on the effective levying of taxation. Indian bankers would lend to the Company rather than to an Indian ruler because of their well-founded belief that the efficiency of its taxation system ensured that they would be repaid. Efficiency had its price, which was born by the cultivators and the intermediaries. Levels of assessment may not have been higher under the British than under their predecessors, but the evidence generally suggests that significantly higher levels of taxation were actually realised.

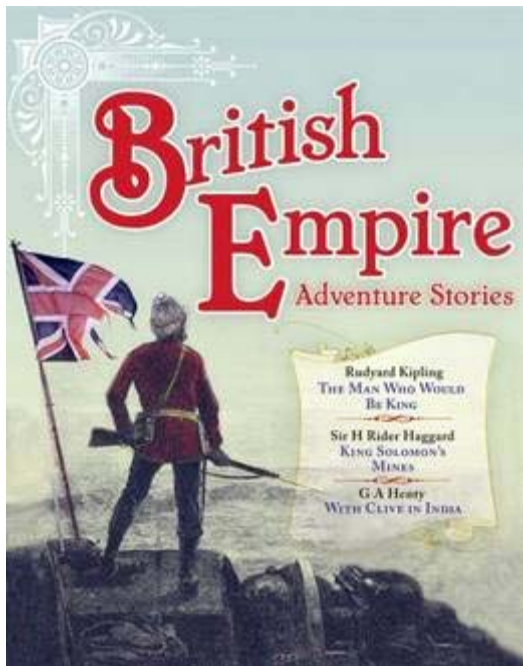


A regime that could impose its will by force, that was intolerant of any claims that seemed to contest its authority and which put foreigners into commanding positions was still very dependent on the services of Indians and had to reward such services. The British were never in any doubt that concessions must be made to maintain the goodwill of their Indian soldiers. Effective revenue collection still depended on Indian intermediaries, whether they were the great zamindars, who were given privileged status in Bengal, or the village *élites* in areas where the Company tried to deal directly with the cultivators.

The European Collectors had to leave much of the management of their districts to their Indian junior officials (*amaldars*), who often manipulated the system to their own advantage and enrichment. The law that the Company's courts dispensed was nominally Hindu or Islamic, until the production of codes of a distinctive British-Indian law began in the 1830s. What constituted the corpus of Hindu or Islamic law used by the Company's courts and how that law was interpreted depended to a large extent on those Indians whom the British consulted. The British believed that Hindu law was derived from a canon of great antiquity, of which Brahmin scholars or 'pundits' were the guardians. Men like Warren Hastings or Sir William Jones employed distinguished pundits to provide them with texts and to aid them in making translations. The result, modern commentators suggest, was not to give the British courts access to a living tradition of law as currently practised, but to create something that was essentially artificial, even though it was based on ancient texts, embodying the Brahminical values of the pundits. Similarly, *maulvis* were employed to provide Arabic texts and to help with their translation.

Conquest brought about changes in the economic relations between Britain in India. Its immediate effect was to cut off the inflow of bullion to pay for India's textiles. In the long run, India was to be opened to Britain's manufactured exports and India's agricultural produce was to be exported throughout the world. The pace of change was, however, slow. India remained a great textile exporter until the end of the Napoleonic War and British imports of manufactured cloth only began to gain a significant hold from the 1820's. British capital or British technology was not introduced on any scale into India until the second half of the 19th century. At the highest levels of banking and international trade, except in Bombay, British businessmen tended to displace Indians, but internal trade remained predominantly in Indian hands and the indigo, raw cotton, opium, sugar cane or other crops for export were nearly all grown by Indian farmers. Only in the new tea plantations were Europeans directly involved in agriculture.

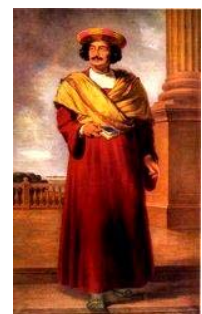




In enforcing its authority and collecting taxation, the new British administration was essentially performing the functions of the Indian regimes that it had displaced. In the early nineteenth century, however, the British began to contemplate new departures which would involve changing the mental world of their subjects by education and by the propagation of Christianity. These were issues that generated a huge volume of debate in both Britain and India. Was education to be in English and about 'Western' subjects or to be in Indian languages? Was it Britain's sacred duty to lead the population of India into the Christian fold or was any attempt to do so a

rash act of unjustifiable interference? The practical results before 1857 of any such initiatives were, however, quite disproportionate to the heat of the paper debates. The mass of the population remained well beyond the reach of either new schools or Christian missionaries. A limited and largely urban Indian élite was intensely interested in things Western and in learning English. They pursued these interests in schools and colleges that they set up for themselves as well as in those opened by the government or by the missionaries. Very few of them were, however, converted to Christianity. Where the missionaries had success, it was largely among poor and marginalised communities.

The Indian élites, even in the port cities, became neither Christianised nor Westernised. But they mastered English and developed a taste for English books and an interest in Western ideas, while at the same time redefining and modifying their own traditions, especially in reformist Hindu movements. In Bengal the great figure was Rajah Ram Mohun Roy, who remained a Brahmin, while advocating monotheism and secular liberalism in perfect English prose.



A comparable figure does not exist among the British population in India. Many, of course, acquired a working knowledge of Indian languages. Some individuals became deeply learned in Sanskrit or Persian and were able to make translations from them. These translations were the basis of essays on religion and history. There was the beginning of an awareness of Indian art, Mughal miniatures being especially admired. Indian singers were patronised and

what were called “*Hindostannie Airs*” were transcribed for performance at musical parties. Warren Hastings was pre-eminent among those with a serious taste for things Indian. He commissioned translations, collected paintings, attended musical recitals and wrote of his desire to inculcate respect for Indian civilisation in British opinion. Men with the interests of Hastings were, however, only a small minority and even they tended to view India much as they viewed Greece or Italy, as the now sadly degenerate home of an ancient civilisation, which was destined to be revealed by foreign scholarship. Modern Indian ways of living offered little, if anything, that Europeans would want to incorporate into their own lives.



Cohabitation with Indian women was very widespread, but except at Islamic courts, notably at Lucknow or Delhi, these women seem to have been merely appendages to European households. In spite of some concessions to dress and diet, the British élite in India prided themselves on maintaining the highest standards of contemporary British taste in their way of life and their entertainments.

To contrast Ram Mohun Roy and Warren Hastings is to reveal something of the nature of the early British-Indian connection, above all of the inequalities inherent in it. Ram Mohun and the intellectuals of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay took much more from the West than virtually any British person, Hastings included, ever took from India. Yet Ram Mohun did not become a brown-faced Englishman. He and future generations of others like him borrowed and adapted extensively, but they did so on their own terms, rejecting as well as accepting.

British rule over India as a whole was in a sense a rule on terms. Conditions in 18th-century India gave the British the opportunity to establish their regime, yet they also determined the nature of that regime. British rule was built on the foundations of Indian alliances, an Indian tax system, Indian capitalism, Indian troops and Indian administrative expertise. For all the power of their armies, the British only slowly freed themselves from dependence on the allies who had unwittingly put them into power and who tried to manipulate the regime for their own purposes.



Few historians now think that the great crisis of 1857 was a last stand against an insensitive regime's drive to Westernise India. More realistically, it should be seen as a dire lesson of what could happen when allies became alienated, even though there were sufficient allies in other parts of India to enable the British to survive the crisis. Throughout its existence the Raj was always of necessity to be a hybrid one, adapting itself to India rather than transforming it to any British blueprint. The necessity for adaptation was at its most compelling during the Raj's first hundred years.



PJ Marshall was formerly Rhodes Professor of Imperial History, Kings College, London.

FURTHER READING:

- RB Barnett, “*North India between Empires*” (Berkeley, 1980);
 - CA Bayly, “*Rulers, Townsmen & Bazaars*” (Cambridge, 1983);
 - CA Bayly, “*The New Cambridge History of India*” I (1988);
 - PJ Marshall, “*The New Cambridge History of India*” II (1987);
 - D Washbrook in “*Modern Asian Studies - XII*” (1980).
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BRITISH EMPIRE SOVEREIGNS



