A People So Different from Themselves: British Attitudes Towards India and the Power Dynamics of the East India Company

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Cover Page Footnote
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Abstract

Today, many characteristics of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century British Raj are well ingrained in the public consciousness, particularly Victorian Era Britons’ general disdain for numerous aspects of the many cultures found on the Indian Subcontinent. Moreover, while many characteristics of the preceding East India Company’s rule in India were no less exploitative of Indian peoples, evidence shows a much different relationship between British and Indian cultures during the East India Company’s hegemony over India than those of the later Raj. Prior to the nineteenth century, many Britons, both those who traveled to India and those who did not, appeared to hold relatively positive views on the “advancement” or “level of civilization” possessed by Indian cultures. During that period, Indians still retained significant political and economic power within India. Thus, the British during Company rule did not hold a dominant enough position over India to be as outwardly dismissive and contemptuous of Indians as did the British during the Raj. Power, or the relative lack thereof, played a critical role in how Britons perceived Indians and interacted with them.

Dr. Pizzo has researched and taught courses on several areas of history including German History, Modern European History, African History, the First and Second World Wars, Imperialism, and Genocide. He earned his Bachelors degree from Duke University and his Master's degree and Doctorate from the University of North Carolina. In addition to teaching graduate and undergrad courses at Murray State, Dr. Pizzo leads several study abroad programs, including semester-long and half-semester programs in Regensburg and Berlin, Germany.

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I chose Murray State for my graduate studies due to the excellent staff in the History Department. The history professors at Murray are extremely knowledgeable and genuinely care about their students’ learning experience. My research focused on the relationships between colonizers and colonized peoples in India and how those relationships changed during the several centuries of British East India Company rule in India. My post-graduation plans include finding employment, continuing to study history in my free time, and preparing to begin doctoral studies in history eventually.
Introduction

*The Anglo-Indian Relationship and Early Modern British Society*

The title of this paper refers to a line from a speech given by British Prime Minister Clement Attlee regarding the passage of the Indian Independence Act in 1947. Prime Minister Attlee attempted to console Britons over the loss of their empire’s “crown jewel” by explaining that the British Raj would “stand in comparison with that of any other nation which has been charged with the ruling of a people so different from themselves” [1]. Prime Minister Attlee’s sentiments reflected a widespread belief amongst Britons during the era of the British Raj (1858-1947) that Indians were entirely different and incompatible with British culture. Many Britons also felt overt racial superiority over Indians during that period. While many characteristics of the preceding East India Company’s rule in India were no less exploitative of Indian peoples, evidence shows a much different relationship between British and Indian cultures during the East India Company’s hegemony over India than those of the later Raj. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, during their interactions with Indians, many Britons appeared to withhold most negative feelings towards Indians they may have held in private.

However, that does not necessarily indicate that Britons prior to the mid-nineteenth century were without their prejudices. While the virulent scientific racism prominent in Britain and the rest of the Western World during the nineteenth century was not a factor for much of the East India Company’s reign on the subcontinent, Britons in India during that period still expressed negative opinions about Indians as individuals and about aspects of Indian cultures in...
general. Additionally, some instances of Britons apparently accepting foreign customs were less outright egalitarian when analyzed beyond the surface level. Certainly, some of the acceptance, or even adoption, of Indian customs by employees of the East India Company occurred as a means to expedite trade with Indians, while other apparently egalitarian opinions recorded by Britons could be interpreted as rationalizing Indian customs in the context of British cultural norms.

Therefore, simply stating that the Britons of the Early Modern Period expressed relatively egalitarian views toward Indians and acted with more equanimity than did their descendants in the nineteenth century leaves much to be desired as an explanation for the differences between Company rule and the Raj. Indeed, such a comparison between the British Raj and the East India Company stands as a false equivalency because of the highly divergent power dynamics between Britain and India during the two periods. Prior to the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the Battle of Buxar in 1764, the East India Company wielded little direct power over India compared to the direct rule of most of the subcontinent by the Raj following the failure of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. British opinions regarding Indians no doubt changed due to the British Empire’s subjugation and emasculation of India during the Raj. From their nineteenth century point of view, Britons had little incentive to look upon subjugated Indians favorably, whereas their ancestors in the previous two centuries interacted with independent Indian states. Simply put, the British during Company rule did not hold a dominant enough position over India to be as outwardly dismissive and contemptuous of Indians as did the British during
the Raj. Power, or the relative lack thereof, played a critical role in how Britons perceived Indians and interacted with them.

Power can be a nebulous and complicated term, but this work employs a reasonably simple working definition of the term. Firstly, this work concerns itself with power dynamics in the relationship between England/Great Britain/the United Kingdom and the various states and entities of the Indian subcontinent. This involves concepts such as economic, political, social, and military power. As seen in the primary sources utilized in this work, the English/British held little direct control over the politics of India until the latter-half of the eighteenth century. The Mughal Empire and its semi-autonomous regional governors held de facto and de jure control over the vast majority of India politically and economically. During this phase of the relationship, English/British merchants and diplomats could only influence for Indian rulers with promises of economic benefits.

Even after the Battle of Buxar solidified East India Company control of Bengal, local Indian elites still maintained significant political and economic power, therefore Indian traditions and social customs still played an important role in the Company’s actions. The need to obtain the official grant of *diwani* (right of tax collection) from the Mughal Emperor displayed the importance the Company placed on maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of Indians, even as the Company’s direct political power increased and they became the single most powerful military force in India. That need for legitimacy can also be gleaned from the emphasis of Company agents on learning Indian languages and customs, as well as their frequent
intermarriages with Indian women. By the end of Company rule, even the power of local Indian elites and Indians within the Company’s colonial administration eroded, which may have helped facilitate some of the controversies that alienated Indians and eventually led to the Rebellion of 1857.

Power dynamics also accounted for variance in the opinions of Britons on an individual level during East India Company rule. Thus, it is necessary to understand the demographics of the Britons who recorded their opinions on India and its people, as well as the conditions of Britain during this era. From the beginning of the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, Britain underwent substantial changes regarding economics, commerce, and imperialism. The trade networks of British merchants and advantageous policies of the British parliament developed a capitalist economy that quickly developed into the first truly industrialized economy in the world. Goods from across the world entered Britain for purchase by consumers and raw materials for fledgling industries. The acquisition of these consumer and industrial goods brought Britons into contact with peoples from across the world, beginning in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. During that time, the subcontinent of India quickly developed into the most vital commercial interest of British merchants.

Those merchants carried countless tons of Indian products, most importantly spices and cotton, across the vast distance between India and their destination back in the British Isles. These products created profound effects on British society during this period. Historian Jan de Vries described it as the “Industrious Revolution,” which he defined as sweeping changes in
work and consumer habits, in his book of the same name [2]. De Vries wrote that Britons at home began to forsake leisure time and produce more from their work in order to afford the comforts of these new consumer products brought in from abroad [3]. De Vries also argued that these changes helped precipitate the Industrial Revolution in Britain [4]. Undoubtedly, contact with India and its commercial goods resulted in profound changes in the British Isles.

This begs the question of whether British people attributed any of the responsibility of those changes to their lives or not. E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* detailed numerous anxieties held by English workers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries regarding the changes in work habits and the emergence of industrial work [5]. Thompson wrote that many working-class Englishmen denounced the usurpation of traditional work habits by the rigid and exhausting conditions of factory work [6]. However, working class Britons apparently kept those negative opinions toward industrialization separate from their opinions regarding India and their nation’s ever-growing presence on the subcontinent. Despite the direct correlation between imports from India and the growth of Britain’s industrial economy seen in hindsight, most British people during this period rarely thought of distant India in relation to their consumer products and raw industrial resources originating from there.

Nonetheless, members of other segments of British society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries undoubtedly concerned themselves with events in India and their implications back home in Britain. Typically, these were individuals in the upper class who never
traveled to India and were unnerved by returning merchants of the British East India Company who brought back aspects of Indian culture as well as Indian wealth—derisively named “Nabobs” [7]. And of course, the “Nabobs” themselves formed and recorded numerous opinions, both positive and negative, regarding India and Britain’s involvement there. These myriad opinions concerned trade, warfare, religion, diplomacy, and morality among others. The disconnect between Britons who recorded opinions regarding India and those who did not typically fell upon class lines. Restated: typically, British people in possession of some degree of political or economic power travelled to India and recorded their opinions of the land and its people.

Those factors formed the rationale for the source materials chosen for this work. The main sources analyzed in the following chapters include the writings of the English diplomat Sir Thomas Roe, the East India Company governor William Hedges, the Scottish footman John MacDonald, and the British soldier and explorer Thomas Skinner. With the notable exception of John MacDonald, these men were English and wealthy. All of them appeared to be adherents of Anglicanism or other accepted Protestant faiths. Thus, even during this period in which Britain did not completely dominate India, these men held varying degrees of power within their own society, which influenced their opinions regarding India and Indians.

John MacDonald, seemingly the most egalitarian of the sources used in this analysis, stands out demographically from the others. MacDonald, a Highlander Scot employed as a servant by various upper- and middle-class Britons throughout his life, lived most of his life as
an outsider to the predominant culture wherever he resided and possessed almost no political or economic power. Thus, MacDonald as an individual had incentive to cooperate with, and seemingly accept, peoples that appeared quite different to him, just as Britain’s less advantageous position over India prior to the Raj incentivized more powerful men like Roe and Hedges to be seemingly less negative about Indians than Britons during the Raj. Power mattered on an individual level as well as on a geopolitical level.

**Conclusion**

After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the direct rule of the British Raj essentially pushed out all Indians from the positions of power they held in the colonial administration and military during the East India Company’s administration of the region [8]. The dominant position in the British-Indian relationship that developed over the course of Company rule now stood unfettered from the influence of Indians holding important positions within colonial administration. This trend extended to other areas of British Empire as well, even in cases in which the British held little direct control of territory, most notably in the British relationship with China following the Opium Wars. China’s monopoly on tea production represented the nation’s last measure of leverage in its relationship with the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century. British botanists believed that learning the secrets of tea cultivation was part of their scientific mission to understand the natural world, but more importantly for the East India Company and the British government, obtaining those secrets solidified their advantage in their dealings with the Chinese [9]. Aside from the indirect rule through Indian and African collaborators in some colonies deemed too unimportant for direct rule, the British imperial
project during the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century was to be carried out by Britons, or not at all.

As was typical of nineteenth-century European societies, most Britons of that era felt an unwavering confidence in the superiority of their own culture, traditions, and ability to govern a territory. Unlike the tradition of French Universalism, which much of the French intelligentsia believed to be applicable to most cultures, the British held little faith that their system could be operated by non-British peoples. They not only believed their system to be superior but also that only the British were capable of properly implementing this superior system of governance. This was especially true for the administration of the United Kingdom’s overseas empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

As seen in Mary Procida’s *Married to Empire: Gender, Politics, and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947*, the colonial administration of British India differed after the 1857 Rebellion. Whereas Indians served in key roles as administrators and military officers during Company rule, the Raj government consisted of white British men, exclusively--- at least officially. The British belief in their own superiority, as well as the vitriol the British public felt over Indian conduct during the Rebellion (both real and imagined), meant that the British no longer considered Indians to be appropriately “civilized” or competent enough to hold any degree of power in the Raj [10]. Outside the collaborators in the Princely States, many of whom were eventually ousted under the Doctrine of Lapse, Indians no longer shared a role in ruling India.
The fact that so much of India was now a subjugated population fueled negative British perceptions of Indians. In the British mind, Indian men became simultaneously effeminate incompetents and hypersexual threats to British women in the Raj [11]. Indian men’s conduct toward Indian women, such as the much-maligned practice of Sati, now marked them as misogynists, highly ironic given gender relations in nineteenth-century Britain. The obligation of widows to immolate themselves on their deceased husbands’ funeral pyres became proof to the British that Indians were a backwards, barbaric people. Some Britons took this as a call to action to “uplift” Indians into a more civilized people [12]. Others decided that Indians simply lacked the capability to reach the heights of British culture.

Procida’s work described the emasculation of India by the near total exclusion of Indians from colonial administration and the surprising hierarchy this arrangement created in the Raj. Because the British generally resided above Indians on that hierarchy, British women in India enjoyed a far greater status than Indian men, despite rampant misogyny in nineteenth-century British society. Furthermore, British women performed more “masculine” tasks in the public sphere than many Indian men, and certainly more than British women back in the home islands [13]. Their work originated as unofficial outgrowths of their husbands’ positions in the military and colonial civil service, and indeed Anglo-Indian women were expected to assist their husbands in their public service positions, in stark contrast to their contemporaries in Britain, expected to cloister themselves to domestic life. While the presence of women in the public
sphere was controversial in the British Isles, this dynamic was expected of Anglo-Indians in the Raj, if unofficial [14].

Anglo-Indian women lived quite divergent lives from British women in the home islands. As a result of extremely cheap labor in India, Anglo-Indian women spent far less time of their time personally performing domestic duties [15]. One Anglo-Indian woman confided that she spent a short portion of her morning giving a cursory inspection of her home’s kitchen and pantry, which completed her portion of the household chores for the day [16]. Childcare also burdened Anglo-Indian women far less than British women back in Britain, as most children were sent back to Britain for education around the age of six [17]. Without childcare and domestic burdens, Anglo-Indian women spent much of their time providing invaluable assistance to work of their husbands. Anglo-Indian women performing functions in the public sphere were not only accepted in the Raj, but in fact women were generally considered poor wives if they were not up to the task of sharing the burden of their husbands’ professional duties. Britons were so sure of their own superiority that the sexism of nineteenth-century British society appeared to be outweighed by their racism towards Indians.

Sarah Rose’s *For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World’s Favorite Drink and Changed History* demonstrated a similar theme of Britons’ sense of their own superiority even outside of British territory. Like how they treated silk and porcelain, Chinese dynasties jealously guarded the secrets of tea production for centuries. The emergence of worldwide trade networks during the Early Modern Period brought processed tea leaves to Britain, where the
beverage brewed from them became a national institution. But the Chinese did not allow for
tea plants or their methods of processing tea leaves to leave their borders, and Britons
remained ignorant of even basic information regarding tea [18]. Prior to the expeditions of
Robert Fortune, the central narrative of Rose’s work, Britons believed green and black tea to
come from distinct species of tea plants, rather than the same plant processed differently [19].

This ignorance became unacceptable for Britain during the nineteenth century. The
popularity of sciences, like botany, grew rapidly in Europe during this period. Europeans held a
belief that all knowledge could be obtained through the research and experiments of heroic
scientists and that humanity could be improved through their work and technological
advancements. That feeling naturally extended to botanical science, and because of their
deeply Eurocentric worldview, if a British scientist had not yet recorded some type of
information, then that information was completely unknown and needed to be “discovered.”
Thus was the case with tea, something the Chinese discovered centuries ago but was unknown
from the perspective of the British. The desire for a British botanist to record information about
tea, in part, drove the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew to send the Scottish botanist Robert
Fortune to China to “discover” the secrets of tea [20].

However, financial considerations also drummed up support for Fortune’s venture. The
East India Company wanted Fortune to obtain live tea plants to start their own tea growing and
processing industry in their Indian territories, particularly in the Western Himalayas [21]. While
the dynamic between Britain and China already shifted decidedly to Britain’s advantage
following the Opium Wars, China’s monopoly on tea cultivation provided some degree of leverage in that relationship, and of course revenue for the Qing government. The British not only wanted to further advantage themselves over the Chinese, but they also believed that their presumed superior intelligence and work ethic would lead to great improvements in the procedures of growing tea plants and processing the leaves into a finished product for consumption [22].

Despite the odds stacked against him, Robert Fortune succeeded in retrieving specimens of tea plants for British production in India and convincing a small group of Chinese tea growers to travel to India to help guide the British effort. However, the experience of those Chinese experts displayed the prevailing sense of superiority possessed by the British. At almost every turn, the British officials overseeing this project ignored Chinese advice and attempted to swindle or exploit the Chinese tea experts [23]. Despite their relative ignorance on the production of tea, the British maintained a haughty attitude toward the non-British experts, even though the East India Company specifically requested the expertise.

Until the calamity of the First World War, Britons and other Europeans commonly possessed complete confidence in the superiority of their culture and their methods of administration. Before the war shattered the illusion of absolute supremacy fostered throughout the nineteenth century, the British saw little need to include others in their imperial ventures. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 soured many British towards Indians, though the roots of their prejudices towards Indians were far older. This developed into the administration of the
Raj, which barred Indians from positions of power in their own homeland. Similarly, the
discovery that Chinese tea manufacturers used poisonous additives to make their green teas
more visually appealing to British consumers reinforced the notion that the Chinese methods of
tea cultivation needed British improvement. During the Raj, the British trusted themselves
above all others and indeed viewed Indian as "a people so different from themselves." This
arrangement differed greatly from previous dynamic between Britain and India during
Company rule.

As several of the sources in this work displayed, the East India Company relied on
collaboration with Indians, to varying degrees, throughout its reign in India. Initially, Company
agents begged and plotted for the favor of Mughal Emperors and their regional governors,
seeking their all-important firman and perwanna. Sir Thomas Roe and William Hedges sought
their special privileges from sovereign rulers, over whom they held little influence, let alone
power. Even after the dynamics between the Company and India changed following the Battles
of Plassey and Buxar, Company agents desired the formal grant of diwani to justify their rule in
their newly acquired Bengali territory. Three years after Buxar, East India Company military
officer Robert Clive described this dynamic to the directors of the Company back in London,
writing that, “since the acquisition of the dewany, the power formerly belonging to the soubah
[nawab] of those provinces is totally, in fact, vested in the East India Company. Nothing remains
to him but the name and shadow of authority. This name, however, this shadow, it is
indispensably necessary we should seem to venerate" [24].
Clive understood that despite the East India Company’s recent victory over Bengal and the Mughal Empire, Indian symbols of legitimacy like the *diwani* still held value for the Company in the late eighteenth century. Even with the *nawab* of Bengal deposed and the Mughal Emperor merely a figurehead in the region, the Company still needed support from local landholders, merchants, and officials in its newly conquered territories. The relationship between Britain and India drifted closer to that of the Raj at the turn of the nineteenth century, yet key distinctions remained in the power held by Indians.

The shifting power dynamics of the different eras of the East India Company’s activity in India influenced how Britons interacted with Indians and perceived them. Sir Thomas Roe conducted himself diplomatically in his interactions with Indians, outside a few isolated outbursts toward Mukarrab Khan. William Hedges spent a great deal of his time in India negotiating for privileges with Indians who clearly did not view their relationships with Hedges and the Company as vitally important to their interests in the same way Hedges and his superiors felt about those business relationships. Thomas Skinner began to display some of the haughtiness associated with Britons during the Raj. The shift in power within the British-Indian relationship during Company rule partially accounted for the change in their conduct with Indians.

Power dynamics within British society also factored into British attitudes and actions towards Indians. John MacDonald’s account of his time in India displayed the difference ethnicity and social class could play in the British-Indian relationship. MacDonald appeared to
be the most outwardly favorable toward Indians of the major sources studied in this work. MacDonald also held the lowest social standing of said sources and held the distinction of being a Highlander Scot rather than an Englishman. To expand this work, more sources like MacDonald could be analyzed to further examine the importance of social class and ethnicity in British opinions towards Indians. Furthermore, a greater emphasis on sources from British women in India during both periods of colonial rule would add another critical dynamic to study, namely gender. For example, in 1902 the socialist intellectual Annie Besant stated that, “India is not ruled for the prospering of the people, but rather for the profit of her conquerors, and her sons are being treated as a conquered race” [25]. Besant’s remarks, written during the height of the Raj, provide a counter-example of the prevailing attitudes of her time. Applying the framework of this study, Besant’s anti-imperialist message could indicate how her position outside mainstream British society influenced her opinions towards Indians and the British Empire. Her socialist views also hint at other factors besides power dynamics, such ideology, which influenced the formation of attitudes.

The East India Company and the British Raj both existed to extract wealth from India for the benefit of the British Empire. However, differences in their structures regarding the amount of power Indians held within each system created a dichotomy between the two eras in which the Company rule seemed less racist and more equitable than the Raj. By extension, this could lead one to believe that perhaps British society was simply less prejudiced during the era of Company rule than during the Raj. This answer, which some historians in the past have
accepted, lacks the nuance to truly represent the dynamics of Company rule in India. Britons did possess prejudices against Indians during Company rule and expressed those prejudices.

Sometimes those prejudices manifested in negative opinions towards Indians, though of a different nature than negative opinions commonly found from the Raj. For example, despite the “civilizing mission” to bring British ideas of modernity to India, many Britons during the Raj doubted the ability of Indians to act like proper Britons. In contrast, during certain periods of Company rule, East India Company officials were quite insistent that Indians conduct themselves like Englishmen, a critical factor in the outbreak of the Sepoy Rebellion. Whereas Britons of the Raj viewed Indians as “a people so different from themselves,” Britons during Company rule viewed Indians as compatible with British culture, yet Britons of both periods felt that Indians needed to be changed by the British. Power dynamics, both between Britain and India and the power dynamics within British society played a role in such divergences between the two periods. Of course, that distinction does not justify either of those forms of prejudice or imperialist ideology, but a note-worthy distinction remains in order to attain a deeper understanding of the nuances of this subject.
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