

Un-Romanticising the Colonial History

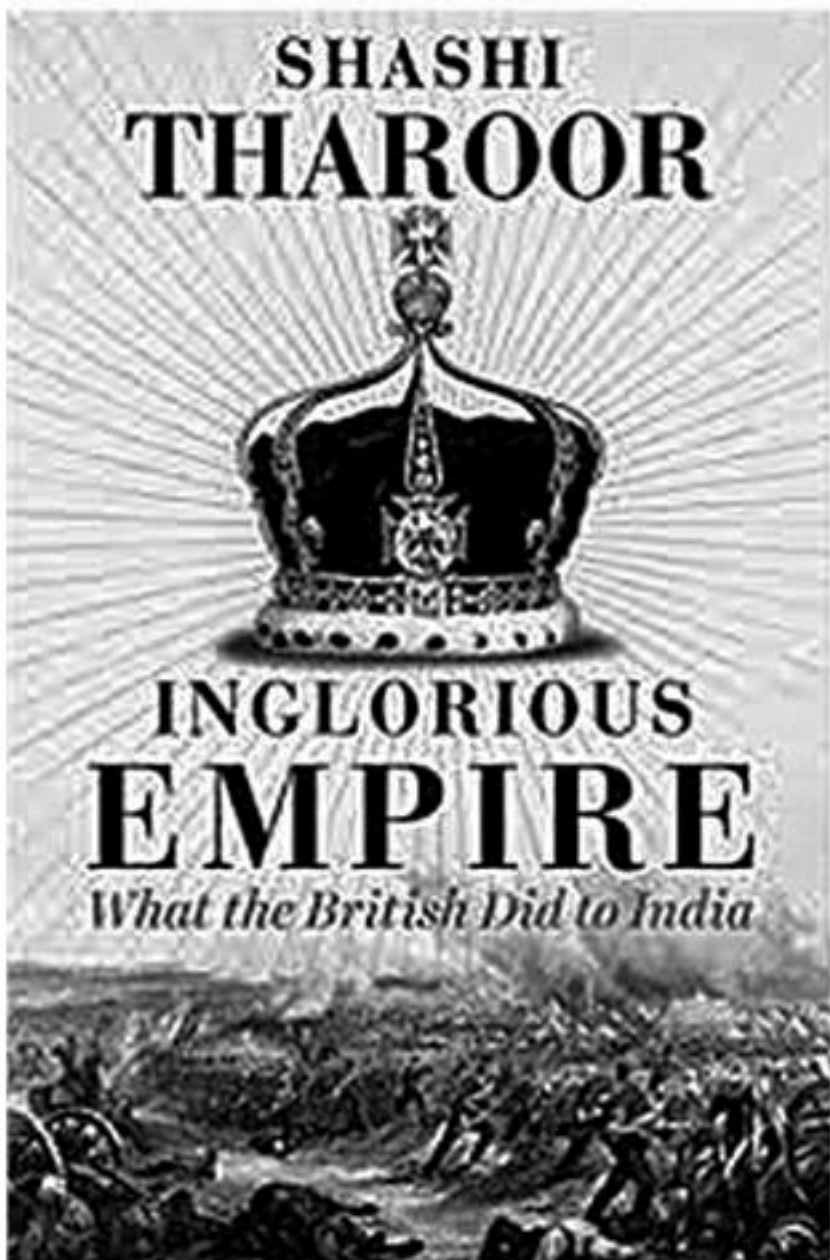
Inglorious Empire, Shashi Tharoor, C Hurst & Co. 978-1849048088, 2016

MANZOORUL ABEDIN

Shashi Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (2017, Hurst: London, 296 pages) does not tell any untold story. The book reiterates long-standing criticism of the British colonial exploitative activities in the then-British India, which Tharoor himself acknowledges, "I honestly did not think I had said anything terribly new" (p. xxii). What he does brilliantly, however, is to have synthesised the existing literature thoroughly with regard to economics and politics, enough to make his case persuasive with telling examples and scathing statistics. The book is not about "reparations" unlike its predecessor – Tharoor's Oxford Union debate of 2015 that went viral, rather, the author felt a "moral urgency" to throw light on the horrors of colonialism for "today's Indians and Britons" (ibid.). The book thus underscores the need to start "teaching unromanticized colonial history in British schools," as "the British public is woefully ignorant of the realities of the British empire" [in British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's words, qtd. in Tharoor, p. xxvii]. I am well aware that India does not loom large in the history taught in most British schools, but my experience of teaching colonial education policies to first year undergraduates in Britain, notably in Cambridge, Reading and Canterbury, tells me that young students are not as 'ignorant' or uncritical about the two centuries of exploitation that financed the British empire and many of its wars. In this age of internet, even young readers are capable of doing quick research on the Raj and its disturbing legacy of iniquity when needed to. I have no doubt, however, that the book is a timely and helpful antidote to other contemporary works (in the vein of the so-called 'postcolonial melancholia' or 'empire nostalgia'), such as Niall Ferguson's 2003 book *Empire*, which righteously defends colonialism as a force for free trade, rule of law, representative assemblies, liberty and democracy.

The evidence that Tharoor presents to debunk the myths about Britain's 'civilising mission' in India is staggering. Tharoor recounts (in Chapter 1: "The looting of India") how the British East India Company maintained a private army of 260,000 to enforce merciless taxation, de-

industrialised India slowly and systematically and fed the British industrial revolution. "To stop is dangerous; to recede ruin," enunciated Robert Clive, commander in chief of British India in the mid-18th century, and consequently, India that led the world in textiles, agriculture and metallurgy dwarfed into a mere exporter of raw materials and an importer of goods manufactured in Britain. India's share of world manufacturing exports, as Tharoor conservatively estimates, fell from 27 per cent to a paltry 2 per cent by the end of the colonial rule. The statistics are revealing as in comparison, at the point (in 1600) when the East India Company set its foot on the Indian soil, Britain accounted for 1.8 per cent of global gross domestic product and India for 23 per cent! Did the



British give India political unity? –successful chapters scrutinise the claim that India was left with a functioning democracy with established building blocks of a free press, an incipient parliamentary system and the rule of law. Tharoor felt these claims were undone by colonial censorship efforts, such as Lord Wellesley's Censorship of the Press Act (1799). He argues further in the "Democracy, the Press, the Parliamentary System and the Rule of Law" chapter that the civil service set up by the British was "neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service" where about 6,000 British officials ruled 250 million Indians (by 1890). However, Tharoor does not explain further to what extent the pre-colonial village self-rule was

ideal to bring home the contrasting picture. Similarly, Tharoor's assertion that "stories abound" of Hindu and Muslim communities "habitually working together in pre-colonial times" is loose because of its over-reliance on anecdotes (for instance "The story is told – I cannot pinpoint the source"; "There is a story – perhaps apocryphal").

Tharoor's most damning argument, although a rehashed one, is that the shrewd policy of divide and rule entrenched various forms of inter- and intra-religious contentions all over India. Colonialist obsession with classification and distinction between Hindus and Muslims, between Hindu castes and between Sunni and Shia Islam etc. sets the stage for the violent "original Brexit" — the departure of the British from India. Subsequent chapters, including "The Myth of Enlightened Despotism" deals with man-made famines particularly in 1943 when nearly four million Bengalis died. Notable omissions from the book, however, are the death toll in the 1769-1770 Great Bengal Famine and deaths in a decade of British reprisals after the 1857 Rebellion. Collectively, all these famines amounted to a "British colonial holocaust," Tharoor points out. London ate India's bread while India starved (during the World War II), and Tharoor reminds us Winston Churchill's vile racism: "I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion," and the famines were their own fault for "breeding like rabbits". Tahroor describes the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, with soldiers "emptying their magazines into the shrieking, wailing, then stampeding crowd with trained precision", but fails to mention Churchill's parliamentary condemnation of the mass shooting as "a monstrous event." Similarly, he does not give the context for the comment of William Joynson-Hicks, home secretary in the 1928 Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin, that "I am not such a hypocrite to say we hold India for the Indians." Further, Tharoor, throughout the book, has ignored that even during the colonial rule, several Britons did in fact question fundamental aspects of imperial policy and practice and, at times, the project of empire itself (Gopal, "The British empire's hidden history is one of resistance, not pride", 2017). "But what about the railways?", Tharoor replies to the modern empire apologist enquiry, "the railways were intended principally to transport extracted resources – coal, iron ore, cotton and so on

– to ports for the British to ship home to use in their factories." The English language, Tharoor contends in the same vein, was not a deliberate gift to India, but again an instrument of colonialism, imparted to Indians only to facilitate the tasks of the British. Only tea and cricket, "but only as by-products, and not because they were intended to benefit Indians," writes Tharoor, were unadulterated benefits to the Indians.

To conclude, then, Tharoor argues vociferously, that the British colonial rule, despite the empire apologist claims to the contrary, intentionally impoverished India economically for Britain's benefit. Echoing William Dalrymple's laments over the colonial looting and the rise of British racism in the 19th century, Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire*un-romanticises the colonial delusion of 'victor's sovereignty' (as Jon Wilson says).But, at the same time *Inglorious Empire* can not claim to be immune from 'romanticised interpretations of pre-colonial traditions and cultures' (Berger, 2004) in its bid to oppose western colonial visions of modernisation and development. Tharoor is also wary of the criticism that his "recitation of past injustices" and "attacks on Britain's colonial cruelties" are invalidated by India's postcolonial political and economic failings, understanding the prefix 'post' as a temporal marker denoting years after decolonisation. The book, Tharoor wants us to understand, serves a greater need "to temper British imperial nostalgia with postcolonial responsibility," understanding 'post' here as a condition that continues to yield economic, social, political, and cultural effects of colonialism.

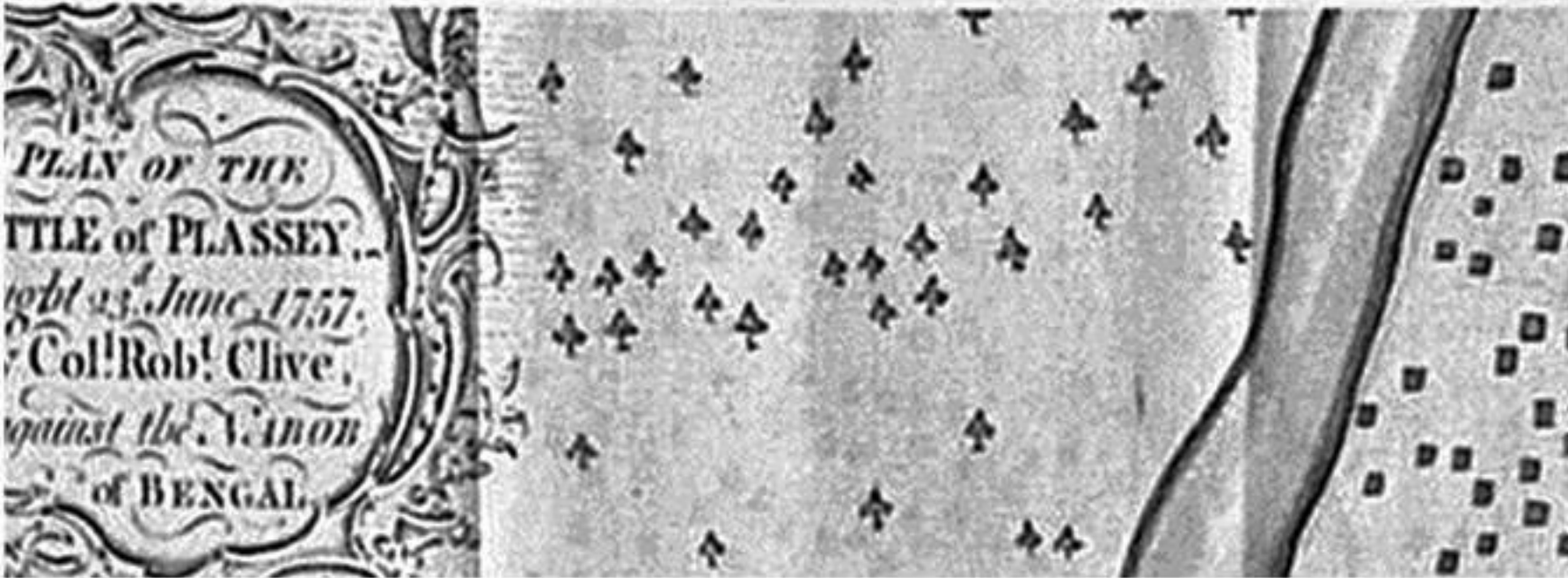
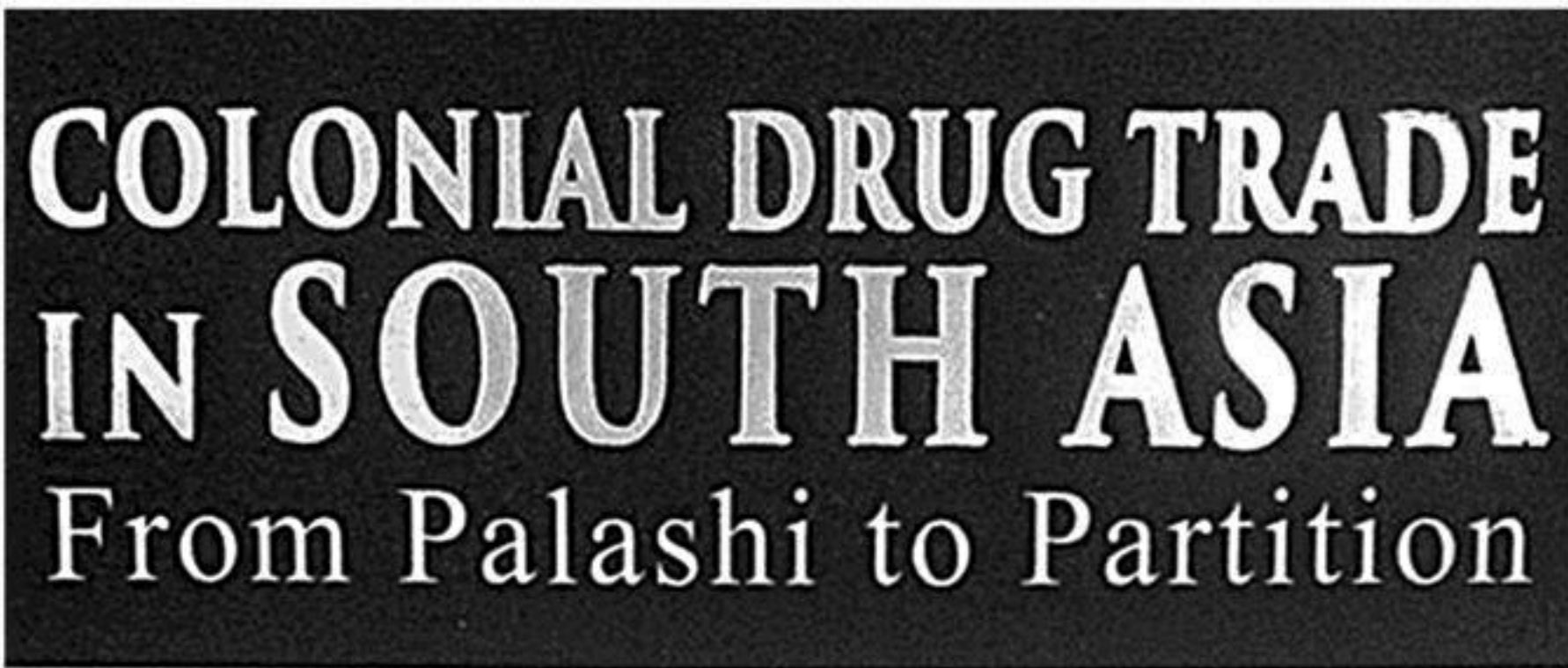
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Colonial History Disrupted: Interpreting the Bottom Line

Colonial Drug Trade in South Asia: From Palashi to Partition, M. Emdadul Haq, Century Publications, ISBN 978-984-34-3236-0, 2017.

REVIEWED BY KATHERINE LI



As Josh Katz says in a recent *New York Times* article, there has been a 540% increase in Fentanyl-related deaths over the past three years in the United States. Fentanyl, an opioid used medically for the management of pain, is highly addictive. When asked to read Dr. Haq's book, the issue of how we got here was already on my mind. Dr. Haq, a Professor in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at North South University, has absorbed himself in this question for the past 25 years – beginning with his doctoral dissertation entitled, *The Politics of Narcotics in South Asia*, which he completed at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. In his latest work, *Colonial Drug Trade in South Asia From Palashi to Partition*, Dr. Haq sets out to unveil "the darkest side of the British political history of South Asia" by explaining "the politico-economic background for the rise, and expansion of the drug trade in Bengal and across South Asia from the colonial era" and which he claims was camouflaged by the "Divide and Rule" policy.

The book opens with a retort against a commonly held belief that it was the Arabs and Mughals who brought opium into South Asia. It is here that the author begins to give evidence of how it was the British East India Company (BEIC), through their taking over of territories "one after another in their centuries long battles in the region," that in pursuit of geo-strategic interests in drug revenue were the true culprits. Even after global anti-opium pressure, he claims, "the government of British India, the biggest exporter of opium, disagreed on the need to control opium production." In fact, he goes on to argue that "in an attempt to consolidate its control over the local drug market, the colonial government adopted

the Bengal Act of 1909 that helped promote excise revenue in subsequent years. He adds how the European companies ignored the "long-term catastrophes of drug addiction," and concentrated on accumulating as much wealth as possible from the South Asian drug trade. As a result of their enthusiastic engagement, the region emerged as the centre of the world's opium trade by the end of the eighteenth century.

In the book, Dr. Haq describes how Mahatma Gandhi had made the drug issue a part of his Non-Cooperation Movement to overthrow the British in India and encouraged picketing against establishments involved in selling intoxicants of any kind to which the

government retaliated when it saw a drop in its revenues. It wasn't until after the Geneva Dangerous Drugs Convention of 1925 that the government of India conceded to diplomatic pressure and only then began to make changes to its policy of "manufacture, trade and consumption of opium and other injurious drugs in the region."

What struck me most was that Dr. Haq—a Bengali himself—maintains the balance of a seasoned researcher by presenting historical material that might otherwise render one immobile by the impact of its brutality. My sense of it is that he left no stone unturned in order to let the facts tell the story instead of his emotions. He paints a picture of despair

in vivid detail leaving us with not only a sense of the injustice but also a feeling of responsibility to do something so that history does not repeat itself.

We know, and it is well documented, that when a local economy is disrupted for the purpose of cultivating export crops that the farmers lose their ability to sustain themselves, as was the case when opium and indigo replaced grain, jute, spices and other crops in Bengal. Here the most shocking finding is revealed, "This large-scale conversion of paddy fields into poppy cultivation contributed to the Great Famine of Bengal of 1770...This famine caused the death of 10 million people."

We know that if people get addicted to medical opioids, they will seek a replacement upon release from their doctor's care and may even turn to the illicit drug trade when their prescription runs out. Does this help me to understand how we got to where we are today? The roots of the larger global drug problem of today can be traced back to the colonial period, Dr. Haq insinuates. "As a result of diffident official policy, the abuse and trafficking of cannabis, opium, *bang* and *charas* have never been completely eradicated from the country...This reluctance to engage in antinarcotics drives meant that the country was open to the cross-border supply of contraband drugs in 1980s." Perhaps the same could be said for the "War on Drugs" in other parts of the world as well.

We know that Fentanyl will kill you if you take too much of it, but who is going to stop you if you do?

The bottom line is the bottom line.

Dr. Katherine Li is an Assistant Professor and Director of External Affairs at North South University.

POETRY

My Absence

AL MAHMUD

TRANSLATED BY MD. ELIAS UDDIN

In the sultry air of March yawns my absence.
Who knew even the year's last Sunday would pass in such alienation?
Still I do not come back: flowers from your bun wither and fall off on your back.
Taking away the tea-making paraphernalia, you think whether you should change the *saree* and keep lying in the southern room downstairs.
And I have put on the attire of promise-breakers
as if I forgot everything, as if I never promised to anybody,
'I'm coming back. Stay indoors. We two will sit together on the veranda.'

A blurred memory still haunts my mind: a woman sometimes used to wear a *saree* as I liked her to;
she used to become a river, laughing, because I love rivers;
when I tried to make her understand the enigmas of nature,
and when I said, 'If you were a tree –,' hearing this, she, all at once, used to say, 'Look!', spreading out all her branches.
Today I have put on the attire of promise-breakers,
and my absence yawns in the sultry air of March.

Md. Elias Uddin is a Lecturer in the Department of English at Dhaka University.

THUMBNAIL REVIEW

BRAVERY HAS NO AGE RESTRICTION

REVIEWED BY T. S. MARIN

Gramer Nam Kakondubi,
Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, Tamralipi,
ISBN 984-70096-0277-1, February 2015.

With the rise of fake Freedom Fighter certificates, it is nearly impossible not to be a cynic when one hears about early teen or eleven years old freedom fighters.

Ronju and Dora a.k.a. Khokon, the pre-adolescent protagonists of this novel are barely old enough to grasp the vastness of 1971, yet their Herculean adventures let the readers have a glimpse of those surreally glorious days of our '71.

Set in an idyllic village, Kakondubi, this book by Zafar Iqbal chronicles how our Liberation War changed the Bengalis, their perceptions, and their lives once and for all -- bringing out the best in many, and the monsters in some in that tumultuous time of national crisis.

In his signature style, the author shows how the decisions of big fishes rippled through the country and reached every nook and cranny; how the initiation of Probbat Feri awakened Bengali solidarity in that picturesque village; how phenomenally important Bangabandhu was to every true Bengali in 1971; how traumatizing life was for the war heroines -- during and after the war.

Often borrowed from real life experiences of freedom fighters, *Gramer Nam Kakondubi* hovers between reality and myth -- making it all the more closer to the hearts of readers -- making them fall for the little heroes of Kakondubi and love Bangladesh more than ever. Unlike most of his other juvenile adventures, this book is rather voluminous - - 256 pages -- with a gripping plot and unforgettable characters.

Bangladesh's most beloved author once again shows that goodness conquers over evil, and loving one's country irrevocably and unconditionally is really not an option - - even to eleven year olds.

T. S. Marin loves children's literature, happy endings, and Bangladesh. She is a lecturer of English at Primeasia University and is the Sub Editor of Star Literature and Star Reviews pages of The Daily Star.

