

The spectre of the East India Company

William Dalrymple, Scottish historian, writer and broadcaster, is the author of numerous award-winning books. In this interview with Erresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star, Dalrymple talks about his latest book, history of the British East India Company and Bengal, and the dangers of unchecked corporate power in the modern world.

What is the central thesis of your new book, “The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company”?

Both in South Asia and Britain, people now talk about the British conquering India, but the reality is much worse. It wasn’t the British per say, it was one English company. Myths have been created about the history of it since then, and in the process, the corporate nature of the story has been lost. *The Anarchy* is partly an attempt to tell the story of the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of the East India Company, and to remember the degree to which it is a corporate, and not a national, story.

The East India Company had none of the hypocrisy of the Raj in that it never pretended to be about anything except profit. There was no rhetoric about coming to help civilise the natives or bring western civilisation and law or anything else. The East India Company came to trade and make profit as much as Goldman Sachs today exists to make profit.

For the British audience, I particularly emphasised a degree of looting and killing and asset stripping which the East India Company did. And for the Indian audience, I’ve emphasised a thing which is also true but forgotten—the degree to which Indian collaboration, particularly by Hindu financiers, helped the company.

Hundred years into its history, there were only 35 people working in the East India Company’s head office. And there were never more than 2,000 Brits in Bengal. They borrowed money from Indian financiers and trained up an army of 200,000 South Asians. It wasn’t white British troops who conquered the East India Company’s territories; it was South Asian mercenaries paid for by money borrowed from Hindu financiers, particularly the Jagat Seth in the beginning and then the other big Hindu bankers of Benares and Patna.

For a Bangladeshi audience, I think the book is interesting because it’s largely set in Bengal. The early story of British imperialism started here with the defeat of Siraj ud-Daulah, with the end of Alivardi Khan’s reign, and the whole story of Plassey and Buxar.

The book also focuses on the degree to which the Greater Bengal of 18th century was the richest place in the world—there were a

million weavers producing the finest cloths, silk, kalamkaris, cummberbunds, jamawars—and had the greatest textile production in the world. The reason the French, British, Dutch, Danish, Swedes were all in the Hooghly trading business is because of the amount of money Bengal was producing. It was the source of the wealth for the Mughals and it became the source of the wealth for the East India Company. And by capturing Bengal, the company had access to more resources than any of its rivals—so it is very much a Bengal-centred book.

What was the role of the big financiers with regard to the Battle of Plassey?
Plassey was a set-up. It was neither the idea of Mir Jafar nor that of Clive. It was specifically a plot organised by Jagat Seth, the bankers of the world, based in Murshidabad, because Siraj ud-Daulah threatened them with circumcision if they didn’t lend what he wanted them to lend. Clive had written several letters to his father and the company saying that he was preparing to leave Bengal after defeating the French. The reason he didn’t leave and instead went on to conquer Murshidabad was because the Jagat Seth offered him four million pounds, two million to him personally, and two million to the company.

He went in and was successful and Mir Jafar didn’t fight. The next day, he entered the treasury of Murshidabad and emptied it out onto barges and sent it down to Calcutta. So the story of the rise of the company is extremely linked with the Jagath Seth, but it didn’t end there. The Hindu money-lending classes supported the company throughout—as late as the 1780s, when both the Marathas and Tipu Sultan had caught up with the company in terms of military technology and when the British had lost their military edge. The reason they succeeded is because they always had resources and could train more troops and make more and better weapons than their rivals.

The company, during times of war, offered very tempting, high-yielding bonds. And many Bengalis invested their money in company bonds because it was a reliable way of increasing their capital. Bangla textbooks often take the view that there was a terrible conspiracy with Mir Jafar in the middle and



William Dalrymple SOURCE: TWITTER

Siraj ud-Daulah was a nationalist hero. In fact, Siraj ud-Daulah’s misbehaviour, his alienation of the Jagat Seth, helped bring the disaster on Bengal. And the people of Bengal in many ways supported the company thereafter, particularly if there was capital, and the final twist was when Cornwallis in 1790 brought about the permanent settlement, which broke up the old and very large Mughal *jagirdars*, and put them up for auction in small fragments, which were bought by the Hindu middle classes.

Families such as Devs, Tagores, Maleks rose very quickly and became the new power in Bengal. And so, behind the story of the rise of the company lies the story of the support that they gained from many Indian families. As soon as these families invested in these lands, they threw their lot in with the company.

The East India Company was perhaps the first true multinational corporation. Do you see it having any similarity with the big corporations of today?

Unquestionably, the East India Company was the first global corporation. By the 1780s, it had stretched around the world, growing opium in Bengal and selling it to China, buying tea from China, and selling it to Europe and America. And it also invented many of the things that we fear most about corporations—corporate lobbying, corporate corruption when the East India Company was caught offering share options to parliamentarians.

The magic alchemy by which the interest of the state is a process which was first pioneered by the company. At this period, when we do fear the power of big data, big pharma, big corporations—this is definitely the right time to re-examine this history and see it not through the 19th-century lenses of nationalism, but through more 21st-century lenses.

Are modern corporations connected to today’s imperialism the way the East India Company was tied to British imperialism?

There are obviously huge differences between the East India Company and Google or Facebook. No modern company today has a huge cache of army, least of all the size of the East India Company, which was double the size of the British army.

But you can argue that a modern corporation doesn’t need all that. You are recording this on a mobile phone, tomorrow your social media feeds will be full of adverts for East India Company tea. They are listening to us every minute, spying on us—they know what we do, our vices, our pleasures, our secrets. This age of data harvesting and surveillance capitalism is a new age, one that is only becoming clearer as we understand about Cambridge Analytica and the way in which the Internet and Facebook are being used to manipulate people’s wishes and desires.

Did people in this region foresee the peril of being colonised by the East India Company? Similarly, are we, as a global population, aware of the dangers of today’s rising corporate power?

The difficulty in writing about the East India Company is that it is a creature that keeps morphing. The company starts off really

as a pirate operation, capturing Portuguese shipping. It becomes the shipping agency of moveable goods around the world, then transforms again into a military power conquering India. At different times it was a very different creature—each one growing in power.

No one in the East India Company, I think, saw what was to come, much less the people in Bengal.

For a long time, people didn’t really understand what the company was. Mir Jafar, writing to London, clearly thought it was a person. He hadn’t understood that there is actually a board of London merchants, and the wording of his letter makes clear that he believes he is talking to an individual.

I think there was a lot of confusion and the company became sort of this anthropomorphic creature that the people here had very little understanding of, because it was something quite new. There were no companies—much less one which moved overseas, took over countries, had its own army, and became a sovereign power. So I think each generation has to learn lessons anew from this, and just like individuals have to be regulated by laws so that we can’t go around committing mayhem—murder, rape, pillage—companies, too, must be regulated by laws. But because the nature of companies changes and the current nature of surveillance capitalism is a completely new world, we are being fed what the companies want every day, every time we look into our Twitter, Facebook or e-mails with Google. All these things that we get for free have created the richest companies in the world in only a little more than 10 years. And laws haven’t caught up with this.

Who are placed at most risk by unchecked corporate power?

Fragile and impoverished countries are particularly at risk of this, because a large corporation can out-buy the power of a country. We have seen in the 20th century the way the CIA was brought in to bring down Mosaddegh’s Iran, when he nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The United Fruit Company brought in the CIA to topple the socialist government of Guatemala in 1945. And the CIA also brought down Salvador Allende in Chile when corporations were threatened.



the issue. True, some Democrats in the House of Representatives, particularly Adam Schiff of California, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, do appear to understand the seriousness of the question before them. But most Republicans—egged on by Trump, who often complains that they are not doing enough for him—are on a search-and-destroy mission. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who had long been reluctant to proceed with impeachment, lost control of her caucus over the issue this summer and has ended up where she feared: in a bitter partisan fight.

At the risk of setting an unfortunate precedent by allowing Trump’s numerous other abuses of power to go unpunished, Pelosi has narrowed the impeachment inquiry to presidential activity for which there is adequate proof, and that she and her Democratic allies think the American public can easily understand. That means Trump and his allies have a very limited target to shoot at.

The inquiry is thus focused on the fact that Trump withheld USD 391 million in congressionally mandated military aid to Ukraine and held out the prospect of a White House meeting greatly desired by that country’s new president, Volodymyr Zelensky, while he and his accomplices pressed for political favours to help in the 2020 US election. In particular, they wanted Ukraine to investigate former Vice President Joe Biden’s son Hunter, who unwisely accepted a lucrative seat on the board of a Ukrainian gas company at a time when his father was in charge of Ukraine policy. (Both Bidens have denied wrongdoing and, thus far, none has been found.)

Although Democrats of course have strong feelings about Trump, they have lately tried to adopt a solemn tone. When Pelosi announced the impeachment inquiry in September, for example, she handed over leadership on the issue to the steady, tough-minded Schiff, removing it from the more openly partisan House Judiciary Committee, which has a weaker chairman (Jerrold Nadler of New York).

Hard as it may be to believe, the period since then has been one of relative calm, in which the Intelligence Committee gathered closed-door testimony. That will change when public impeachment hearings begin this week. To make sure that their side is sufficiently tough toward

witnesses, Republican leaders have added the rambunctious Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio to the Intelligence Committee.

The closed hearings—not unusual in investigative matters, and unlike in the cases of Presidents Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, there’s now no special prosecutor to do their research—produced a strong case against Trump. That was partly because the format was more productive: committee members don’t gain by preening and being disruptive when no cameras are present. But the most important factor—one without modern precedent—was the courageous willingness of a number of fairly high-level, non-partisan government employees, most of them career foreign-service officers, to disobey White House orders not to appear. They

Such unbounded “off-the-books” operations—whether Nixon’s “White House Plumbers” or the Iran-Contra scandal during Ronald Reagan’s administration—usually come to grief. I covered Nixon’s impeachment, and although Trump is theoretically guilty of more serious offenses, there’s one striking similarity: both men got in the deepest trouble for failing to recognise limits on seeking revenge against political opponents.

The sudden firing in May of Marie Yovanovitch, a longtime foreign-service officer and highly respected US ambassador to Ukraine who had tried to block Giuliani’s political meddling (she was ordered, without explanation, to take the next plane out), greatly upset the already demoralised State Department bureaucracy. Secretary of State Mike



US President Donald Trump. PHOTO: AFP

risked their careers by going before the committee. Some quit their jobs to be able to do so; another has been removed from the staff of the National Security Council.

Trump, who understands almost nothing about governing, made a major mistake in attacking career public officials from the outset of his presidency. He underestimated, or just couldn’t fathom, the honour of people who could earn more in the private sector but believe in public service. And he made matters worse for himself as well as for the government by creating a shadow group—headed by the strangely out-of-control Rudy Giuliani, once a much-admired mayor of New York City, and now a freelance troublemaker serving as Trump’s personal attorney—to impose the president’s Ukraine policy over that of “the bureaucrats.”

Pompeo, whose ill-disguised political ambitions have led him to remain close to Trump, simply refused to protect her.

Congressional Republicans could see from the memorandum on Trump’s infamous July 25 phone call with Zelensky that Trump had pressured his Ukrainian counterpart to take actions that would benefit him politically. Many also know that withholding congressionally approved aid to Ukraine likely constitutes an abuse of power, an impeachable offense. But, desperate to protect the president, Republicans have careened from one frustrated defence to another.

As a diversion, they’ve tried to smear and even expose the whistleblower whose report triggered the impeachment inquiry. For example, Trump recently shouted to the press corps assembled on the White House driveway that the whistleblower’s charges were all “lies,” even though the

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charges have been broadly confirmed by witnesses before the committees. Exposing the whistleblower’s name—which Donald Trump, Jr, among others, has tried to do—could be a federal offense (except if done by the president), and could put that person’s life in danger.

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Trump is becoming more confident in his own instincts, and now has almost no aides who will challenge his ideas. At the same time, he’s increasingly agitated about his likely impeachment in the House. As a result, the president is even more impulsive in his conduct of foreign policy, in particular regarding the calamity in Syria.

Almost all American presidents have honoured their constitutional duty to “take care that the laws be faithfully executed.” But Trump, with his *l’état, c’est moi* approach, views his role very differently. As a result, he is in the greatest trouble of his presidency so far.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BEETLE! PUT THOSE BACK ON MY DESK!

I WAS JUST CLEANING UP THE OFFICE

BEETLE'S PROBLEM IS HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE'S DOING

BUT HE DOES IT ANYWAY

GOES HOME

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

WARY WOULD YOU INVITE COLEEN OVER TO HANG OUT IF YOU TWO DON'T GET ALONG?

BECAUSE CHARLIE WAS RUDE

WANTS CHARLIE?

HE'S THE #1 WHO KISS ME ALL THE TIME

THE FRIEND POOL GETS PRETTY SHALLOW DURING SUMMER VACATION!

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Public square

6 Job for a lawyer

10 Solitary sort

11 Wed in haste

13 Anne Bronte's "—Grey"

14 Bolshevik leader

15 Even score

16 Snaky fish

18 Dry – bone

19 Davy Jones's locker

22 Bit of ointment

23 Walk through water

24 Christmas song

27 Canvas holder

28 Finished

29 Inventor Whitney

30 Climber's goal

35 Storage site

36 Tire track

37 "— Maria"

38 French farewell

40 Small body of land

42 Wyoming's — Range

43 Unexpected growth

44 Cubicle fixture

45 Flavorful

DOWN

1 Aristotle's teacher

2 Spock specialty

3 Year, in France

4 Last letter

5 Arms collection

6 Viola's cousin

7 Hoppy brew

8 Orchestra pieces

9 Series unit

12 Tooth layer

17 Subside

20 Decorate

21 Tom Sawyer's creator

24 Fighting

25 Steered clear of

26 Get together again

27 Snobby sort

29 Water, in France

31 Tree part

32 Ankle bone

33 Plain to see

34 Trifling

39 Dawn goddess

41 Relaxing resort

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

R	E	N	A	L	S	P	I	T	
I	N	D	I	A		C	I	G	A
D	O	O	R	M	A	T		O	W
E	R	E		M					
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			A	R	O	M	A		
A	V	O	N			R	U	N	N
D	I	N	G	B	A	T		I	R
A	C	E		B	E	A	R	C	A
P	A	S	H	A		N	O	O	S
T	R	I	A	L		T	I	L	E
S	E	L	L			S	L	E	D

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