

Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: the British in Bengal

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In the course of a single generation, the British empire was transformed from being a network of self-governing Atlantic communities into a cluster of largely Asian territories acquired, for the most part, through conquest. As countless historians note, the second half of the eighteenth century saw an 'epochal shift in world power'. For many scholars it was this period which saw the 'foundations of modern colonial empires' (p. 2). For some, it marks the beginning of forms of imperial domination which continue into our present.

Robert Travers opens his elegant and well-argued account of this initial period of imperial rule in India by noting how startled British contemporaries were by the extension of European sovereignty in the subcontinent. Edmund Burke called the rise of British power in India one of the most 'stupendous revolutions that have happened in our age of wonders' (p. 1). The demise of the Mughal empire and its successor states, and the growth of European authority in Asia, created shockwaves in the intellectual world of London and elsewhere.

But despite their surprise at Britain's transformed role, Travers emphasises how the Britons who first thought about sovereignty in India drew largely from intellectual resources which existed in their own past. As he shows, a generation of British officials from Robert Clive to Warren Hastings walked backwards into their colonial future, trying to paper over the fissures and ruptures that separated them from the Indian or British pasts by talking about India's ancient constitutions and customary rights. Travers has no doubt the British *were* doing something different in late eighteenth-century India. There was, he says, 'a clash of different political cultures in Bengal', even if those cultures were always 'dynamic and internally contested'.

‘Clearly’, he says, ‘the contested history of the ancient Mughal constitution cannot be used to support a theory of continuity at the level of political discourse’ (p. 250). But, as Travers notes, the fact that Britons *described* their actions as if they accorded with the political traditions of India’s past ‘blurs the edges between the categories of “British” and “indigenous” politics in the eighteenth century’.

Travers’s book seriously complicates arguments about the extent to which the transition to colonialism in India was marked by continuity or dramatic change. Its major achievement is to introduce a third term, perhaps more accurately a third moment, between the continuous, evolving traditions of Mughal and post-Mughal politics on the one hand and the consciously innovating, actively reforming colonial state on the other. The time between 1757 and 1793 was a brief period of constructive imperialism guided neither by the dominance of Indian political and social forms nor the transformative effort of British officials. Instead, it relied on a series of deep-rooted arguments among the East India Company’s officers between rival attempts to recover India’s past which nonetheless significantly transformed Indian politics. Many nineteenth-century officers romantically celebrated Indian custom, some even nostalgically harking back to the Mughal empire. But none thought the legitimacy and successful operation of the British state relied on its ability to persuade Indians and Britons alike that it was merely a continuation of India’s ‘ancient constitution’, as Travers’s late eighteenth-century officials did. While men such as Robert Clive, Warren Hastings and Philip Francis needed to engage with pervasive European stereotypes of ‘Oriental despotism’, the serious task of colonial state-building was rooted in a much more positive view of India’s political past. Far from being an empire founded on ideas of imperial mission or colonial improvement, the East India Company’s late eighteenth-century regime was ‘an empire of constitutional restoration’ (p. 207), intent on justifying itself in the name of the subcontinent’s – supposed – political past.

Travers shows how some of the most fundamental cleavages within late eighteenth-century British political discourse were reflected in the fierce debate Company officers had about this ancient Indian constitution. In chapters three and four, he demonstrates how British arguments about the relative power of the central state against country property were replicated in the debate between Warren Hastings and Philip Francis, for example. Francis used opposition ideology to champion the rights of rural proprietors in Bengal against Hastings’s attempt to centralise, a rural bias mistaken as the importation of French physiocratic ‘radicalism’ by the historian Ranajit Guha.⁽¹⁾ Often, the language used by Company officials had more in common with the vocabulary of the defenders of the customary rights of North American colonists than parliament. The network of arguments which Travers’s officials are part of extends across the Atlantic as well as the Indian Ocean. Their complex colonial contexts meant that odd intellectual moves were made. Appointees of parliament like Francis used whig ‘country’ rhetoric to oppose the power of corporate property in the name of the Crown, for example.

Travers does not see India simply as the field on which pre-formed European ideas or representations were played out. *Ideology and Empire* articulates a sense of the importance of political argument through time and its relationship to governmental processes. The concepts and categories used to describe Indian action are treated as continually contestable terms in a series of debates that have ‘real’ referents, not least the East India Company’s ability to collect revenue from Indian society.

Here, the arguments Travers makes in his second chapter, ‘Colonial encounters and the crisis in Bengal, 1765–1772’, are one of the strong points of the analysis. The chapter shows how the Company’s fluctuating attempts to establish legitimate forms of government in the period immediately after it began to collect revenue – and assert its political right to do so – were rooted in a series of fiscal crises. Company officials in Bengal were squeezed between pressure from London for ever-greater quantities of revenue and a rapidly changing relationship with Indian nobles and landholders. These crises led to the devastating Bengal famine of 1769–70, followed by widespread resistance from landholders and peasants. In a detailed local study of the relationship between one British collector and the Dinajpur Raj, Travers shows that in practice the British effort to impose its sovereignty was blunted by the necessity of negotiation with magnates; despite their transformative intentions, local accommodations needed to be sought if the British wanted to collect revenue at all. As Travers suggests, the East India Company’s brief attempt to evoke an ancient Mughal polity and construct ‘an empire of constitutional restoration’ emerged as an attempt to ‘give some coherence

and stability' to their chaotic territorial government' (p. 99) wracked by financial instability and crisis.

Travers's discussion of 'crisis' will be considered in a moment. Here, though, one must note the way Travers offers an account of the ebb and flow of ideas in relation to political practice. He deploys something akin to Quentin Skinner's contextualist methodology to reveal how particular concepts were deployed to explain action in a number of different contexts at once; his account constantly loops back from the heights of political discourse to events in the rather murkier realms of Company finance and local politics. Just as in Skinner's account of early modern political thought, in Travers's narrative actors describe their future conduct using concepts drawn, usually explicitly, from their own political past. As Travers shows, that past was largely but not exclusively populated with British political concepts, even if ideas such as 'the ancient constitution' were torn from their original contexts and given new meanings in Bengal. One feels that Travers would have liked to have said more about Indian argument, but doesn't find sufficient material to allow him to do so in his largely British archive. Indian 'voices' are present in so far as they were the subjects within colonial conversation; Travers's point is to show how their words were muffled by the British concepts and categories to which their own arguments are assimilated. So, Muhammad Reza Khan, a senior critic of Hastings's regime, was converted by Francis and his allies into an English country whig. The ongoing work of scholars such as Kumkum Chatterjee and Muzaffar Alam will provide a better account of the twists and turns of Mughal and post-Mughal political discourse in the eighteenth-century. But in the future, this liberation of these discourses from the grip of colonial historiography will depend on Travers's account of the British intellectual contexts into which Indian arguments were initially translated and (perhaps one might say) misunderstood.

Ideology and Empire is a properly post-national and post-imperial account of the early phase of British imperialism in India because it concerns a form of empire, and a form of modernity, which is neither *our* empire nor our modernity. In his account, the past is neither excoriated nor celebrated as a positive, alternative way of doing things that is superior to those of our present time.

Here, Travers's rich and nuanced account of the twists and turns of British thought in its imperial situation contrasts with the rather more reductive way historians of political thought have written on similar topics recently. A recent genre of scholarship has impugned the pluralistic credentials of liberal political thinkers from James and John Stuart Mill onwards. In doing so they contrast liberal imperialism with other, seemingly more palatable ways of thinking about the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world, whether those proposed by anti-rationalists like Edmund Burke or Enlightenment *savants* such as Voltaire.⁽²⁾ A number of such accounts have made important theoretical interventions in each case. But again in each case, the fluctuating arguments of individuals thinking and acting in real, historical time is reduced to a reified position that can be used or criticised in argument today.

By contrast, Travers's writing shows how the best forms of historical understanding do not come with either condemnation of or sympathy for individual characters, and that history which is not 'judging history' – to quote James Mill – can be written well. *Ideology and Empire* does not offer a sympathetic portrayal of the strange conduct of men placed in imperial situations such as Clive, Hastings and Francis. But with a light and unjudgemental tone, the book does place ideas in context and explain what this generation of imperial officers thought they were doing. Travers does not abstract the thought of the individuals he considers from their historical context to allow them to be used to judge empire today. Challenging the myth of intellectual coherence which underpins many accounts of imperial intellectual history, his book undertakes the far more important project of explaining how empire and its early justifications actually emerged.

Driving Travers's argument is his attempt to show how imperial agents legitimated their conduct in Bengal. As a good Skinnerian, Travers assumes that actions have conceptual consequences, and need to be justified with a language which legitimises them in some form. In his account actions sometimes are caused by particular ideological positions imported from Britain, at other times justification occurs afterwards, but in each case they have significant consequences for subsequent conduct.

Perhaps, though, Travers's attempt to show the close relationship between imperial action and the discourses

which justify it produces its own myth of coherence. This is so simply in the way his approach presumes all action is either produced by or produces coherent strands of legitimist thought. Action and the conceptual justification of action are closely related, but as Travers (like Quentin Skinner) perhaps sometimes forgets, they are different things. Actions can be performed which cannot be justified within existing discourse, sometimes which receive no contemporary explanation at all. Individuals can hold contradictory sets of thoughts at what seems to be the same point in time. Properly 'contextualising' political thought requires attention to the incoherence of human action, its semantic failures, as well as to moments when action occurs without an intention to explain at all. The failure of words totally to describe action plays some role in Travers's analysis. After all, his text begins with Burke's description of the revolution from which British rule in India emerged as an incomprehensible act. But that failure is not adequately explained.

Travers frequently refers to imperial 'crises' and 'breakdowns' of various kinds; the word 'crisis' occurs 15 times. He often suggests that legitimist concepts emerge in moments of stress. But he describes the conceptual process in which existing ideas are mapped onto new kinds of imperial action as, for the most part, a remarkably unstressful and anxiety free chain of events. One criticism of *Ideology and Empire*, then, is that it fails to account for the very radical way in which British concepts such as the 'ancient constitution', despotism or the right of conquest were reworked to find conceptual use in Bengal. One is left wondering what, precisely and practically, happens to concepts when they travel. How far does their reemployment and redefinition make them part of a conceptual world wholly alien to the one which produced their original use? Are ideas articulated in a dramatically different context the same ideas?

Ideology and Empire leaves one thinking about the relationship between concepts and imperial crises in a fundamental sense. There is an unexplained tension throughout the text. On the one hand, Travers emphasises the unprecedented character of what the British were doing in India, and the important role a sense of uncertainty and continual crisis had in producing imperial ideology. This seems convincing, until one realises that Travers is suggesting that British officials approached politics in exactly the same way they would have done in Britain. One has to ask, if they found empire such a perplexing enterprise, why did they rely on the historicist, constitutionalist mood of political legitimacy they would have deployed in discussing the politics of their 'own' society? One wonders how persuasive it would be to argue exactly the reverse of Travers's case. Perhaps this colonial attempt at constitutional restoration demonstrates how relatively straightforward it was for Britons to assimilate empire in India to British ideology, showing in the process how comfortable they were in ruling Bengal during this first period of direct rule. But perhaps other forces led them to produce different ideas of colonial rule.

There were, of course, processes that prevented the easy assimilation of Indian empire into British ideology. One was the fiscal relationship between the Company and Indian society, which Travers discusses superbly. The absolute centrality of revenue collection to everything the Company did made it alter its structure frequently in search of increasing, secure sources of cash. The tension between these rapid, anxious twists and turns and the search for stable sources of historicist legitimacy is a crucial theme of the book. The rigidity of the Company's fiscal concerns, as well as the corporate character of its civilian chain of command, marked ways in which British officials were doing something very different and peculiarly colonial in governing Bengal.

A second process, which also marks colonial India's difference from Britain but which Travers pays less attention to, was the military conquest of Bengal. That process required the practical mobilisation of troops long after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. But its conceptual consequences were just as significant.

Travers rightly emphasises the importance of the language of ancient constitutionalism in the period. But in both Europe and India the idea of the 'ancient constitution' was deployed to minimise the rupturing force of conquest. In Britain the idea of the 'ancient constitution' was used to deny the transformative impact of the Norman Conquest, in Bengal of events such as Plassey. Within the colonial discourse Travers describes, conquest was always implicitly present as the figure in opposition to which the discourse of ancient constitutionalism was deployed. But however hard they tried to suppress it, Britons writing about India could not avoid a more explicit counter-discourse which described British actions as conquest. By the early

nineteenth century, this discourse had stabilised into a discussion of ‘the right of conquest’, an idea that brought with it the assumption that where they ‘tolerated’ pre-colonial institutions they did so from a sense of expediency not law. In the era of high European imperialism, the ‘right of conquest’ became a stable principle of international law.⁽³⁾ But in the period that Travers is discussing, the situation was more complex, the idea of conquest confirming suspicions about the illegitimacy of British rule, or the ease with which colonial order could be undermined by empire’s more emotional and atavistic side. Travers’s discussion of the languages of legitimacy deployed by British officers only considers one side of the unstable opposition between conquest and constitutionalism, rupture and continuity. Yet it was the unsteady balance between the two which governed imperial minds.

Ideology and Empire superbly excavates the forgotten history of a moment in early colonial political thought, and in doing so forces us dramatically to rethink accounts of British rule in India during the period. Travers’s emphasis on the importance of historicist languages of legitimacy would have been diminished by discussion of other ideas and forces, and the impact of the argument book weakened as a result; it is up to other scholars to place the arguments Travers highlights in the broader context this reviewer has just indicated. In any case, such criticisms are merely the comments of a scholar with his own agenda and his own argument to sell.⁽⁴⁾ They offer nothing more than a starting point for how one might begin to engage with the significant intervention offered by this enormously engaging book. There is no doubt that scholars of empire, India and the history of political thought will need to respond to this work for some time to come.

Notes

1. Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: an Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Paris, 1963).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For a number of very different versions of this approach, see Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: a Study in Nineteenth-Century Liberal Thought* (1999); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (2003); and Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: the Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (2005).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See Sharon Korman, *The Right of Conquest: the Acquisition of Territory by Force in International Law and Practice* (1996).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Jon E. Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780–1835* (2008).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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