

ARENAS OF ASIATIC PLUNDER

CHAPTER 4 OF JACK P. GREENE, SPEAKING OF EMPIRE

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“Who could have imagined three hundred years ago,” Adam Anderson wrote in 1764, “that those parts of the Levant from which, by means of the Venetians, England, and almost all the rest of Christendom, were supplied with spices, drugs, &c. of India and China, should one day come themselves to be supplied with those and other articles by the remote countries of England and Holland, at an easier rate than they were used to have them directly from the East.”¹ With these words, Anderson marked the steady growth of British commerce with India under the auspices of the East India Company over the long era since Elizabeth 1 chartered it on the last day of the year 1600. By the early 1750s, Malachy Postlethwayt could describe the company as “the most flourishing trading company in this kingdom, as likewise one of the greatest of Europe, for wealth, powers, and immunities; which appears by the ships of burden they constantly employ, the beneficial settlements they have abroad, their large magazines and storehouses for merchandizes, and sales of goods at home, with the particular laws and statutes made in their favour.”² At the date of Postlethwayt’s writing, India, insofar as metropolitan Britain was concerned, was still principally a site for gainful commercial transactions, and the East India Company that presided over those transactions was a lucrative opportunity for investment.

Nor, in the national mind, did this situation change in response to the company’s conquest of Bengal in 1757, when, in response to the capture of the company factory at Calcutta by a new Nawab, Siraj-ud-Daula, Robert Clive and his troops, hastily summoned from Madras, defeated the Nawab’s forces at the battle of Plassey and brought the rich territories and revenues of Bengal, then the most impressive principality in India, under company control. Indeed, within metropolitan Britain, Clive, whom George II knighted for his exploits, became a figure of national acclaim, the valorous prototype for British military and naval commanders from Bengal to Quebec in the late 1750s.

As late as 1764, Adam Anderson could speak glowingly about the East India Company and its activities. Not only did it enjoy “an extensive trade, and” be “seemingly in a very prosperous condition, having many fine forts and factories, and a considerable territorial property, in India,” but it also made “at home considerable dividends,

and such immense sales, too, as were never known in former times, having also, of late years,” built a fine office and extensive warehouses in London and provided the commodities for an extensive re-export trade to Europe and Africa. Upon the whole, Anderson concluded, “our East India trade, under its present circumstances, is really a beneficial one for Great Britain; and . . . , moreover . . . it is highly for the nation’s as well as for the company’s interest, to support, and increase our East India commerce as much as possible.”³

Even as Anderson wrote, however, it was becoming clear that the expansion of British activities in India after Clive’s conquest of Bengal in 1757 was producing consequences that, over the following thirty years, would powerfully reinforce the image of colonial degeneracy in metropolitan Britain. The fabulous private wealth acquired by Clive and many of his successors among the company officers in India and the suspicion that much of that wealth had been gained through plunder, rapacity, and villainy gave rise in the 1760s to the creation of a new social type, the Asiatic plunderer, who, like the creolean despot of the American colonies, violated all metropolitan standards of morality and decency in a frenetic and totally unprincipled quest for gain, and then brought their ill-gotten wealth back to Albion, where it resided as a symbol of the betrayal of British values beyond the line in the voluptuous East. To this new social type, metropolitans, during the last half of the 1760s and increasingly thereafter, applied the name *nabob*.

Initially an Indian title of rank, the term *nabob* rapidly became, as an anonymous contemporary later complained, “a general term of reproach, indiscriminately applied to every individual who” had “served the East India Company in Asia” and implying, as “every body” understood, “that the persons to whom it is applied, have obtained their fortunes by grievously oppressing the natives of India.” Insisting that “In no part of the British Empire” had “Englishmen served with more honour to themselves, and advantages to their country, than in the East Indies, and” lamenting that “in no part of have their actions been so much represented,” this writer argued that Clive was the “only *real and genuine English Nabob*” and took his readers through an elaborate deconstruction of the term, distinguishing among “Spurious Nabobs,” those who had served many years in India and were too generous with their money when they returned; “Reputed Nabobs,” those who served long in India, returned home, and lived moderately; and “Mere Adventurous or Mushroom Nabobs,” who acquired riches quickly during a short stay in India and behaved scandalously when they returned, but whose total numbers were few. Caring not for such distinctions, however, the British public, much to this author’s disgust, treated the term *nabob* like an earlier generation had used the term *Jacobite*, as a term of extreme social opprobrium. “Rapacity, or greediness or plunder,” he objected, were the adjectives that immediately arose “in the mind of almost every man and woman in the kingdom, on their hearing any person called a Nabob.”⁴ The great wealth of some of these nabobs and their own

flamboyant behavior drew public attention upon them. In the sort of revolution that occurred in Bengal during the decade after 1757 “it was impossible but that a number of individuals should have acquired large property,” the philosopher Richard Price remarked in 1777: “They did acquire it; and with it seem to have obtained the detestation of their countrymen, and the appellation of *nabob* as a term of reproach.”⁵ Although both creoles and nabobs were the “common subject of envy and declamation,” remarked the proslavery West Indian writer James Tobin in 1785, “their enormous riches” gave the “*Nabobs* of the East . . . a very material advantage over the *comets*,” that is, the creoles, “of the West.”⁶

By the time the Timothy Touchstone published his poem Tea and Sugar in 1792, the Nabob’s diisgraceful character had been thoroughly established. As Touchstone began his Nabob canto,

Tis not of Nabob’s who . . . are Indian born,
 Such as fam’d TIPPOO, or old ALI-CAWN,
 I mean to sing--No! Let their action’s sleep
 Upon their native plains or in the deep,
 ‘Tis *British* NABOBS’S claim my tuneful verse,
 My Country’s shame, and poor Hindostan’s curse
 Such, who from very nothings have begun;
 Some *Borough-Lawyer’s* or some *Barber’s* son;
 Whose Sire’s eloquence, or low chicane
 Can, with the help of gold, election gain
 For some rich plunderer, from eastern climes,
 Of which, we may have many seen. In latter times;
 Assassins, pamper’d high, by lux’ry’s treats,
 Who, shove our ancient gentry from their seats:
 Who load St. Stephen’s benches, or its stools
 With Pimps and Bravoës,--the ready tools
 Of trembling despots--all alive to fear,
 Who dread by ev’ry res’lute tone they hear;
 Men, who bring *Britain’s* edicts into shame,
 And make its MAGNA-CHARTA, *merely* name.⁷

In this canto, Touchstone tells the story of Bob Snare, a youth patronized by a borough monger named “Sir *Rupee*” with connections to the East India Company, who goes off to India, where he soon takes

. . . the field,
 And by his prowess, makes the Indians yield:
 His name, becomes annex’d with those of yore,
 Who stain’d Hindostan’s plains with human gore.
 Forward in enterprize, he gains command,

And mighty power's grasp'd within his hand;
That pow'r, which made, at least, half INDIA droop,
Its native Princes, to a Conq'ror stoop.

Rais'd high for *Valour*, by the gossip *Fame*,
Although 'twas *Rashness* first announc'd his name,
The spoils of Cities in conjunction meet,
And costly presents lye beneath his feet:
Insatiate still, for gold and sparkling gems,
Affluent innocence, his voice, condemns,
Whole kingdom's, humbly walk, beneath the yoke,
And Nobles bleed, by his death-dealing stroke.

Rich now beyond compare, to *England's* shores
He bends his way, with all his precious stores;
Gets titled, as Sir *Rupee* had foretold,
What statesmen have ye--but will bow to Gold?⁸

In conclusion, Touchstone carefully put Snare's exploits into context and spelled out their meaning for his readers. In India, he rhymed,

Some, for love of gold, have famine caus'd,
Nor, until thousands perish'd, ever paus'd:
While others, fortunes make, by unjust wars,
Or *Murd'ring* MAN! By *Ex post facto* laws.

* * *

Thus do the British-Chiefs, on India's soil,
Gain a full million, as a ten years spoil;
While ev'ry under-rogue, that tends those grounds,
In the same space, will make ten thousand pounds.

Thus, Briton's, are procur'd the Eastern wares,
Your Iv'ry Cabinets, and your Iv'ry Chairs;
Your Silks, your costly Gems, and baneful Tea,
Pernicious DRUG!--to health an enemy!
Which for to gain, thousand's of Indian's bleed,
And base Corruption's ready-growing seed
Is largely strewn, O'er *Britain's* famous land,
By an unprincipled, a savage band.⁹

Initially, this negative conception of the nabob seems to have arisen out of the debate over Clive's behavior in India and, more especially, his entitlement to the *jagir*, or annual subsidy, of £28,000 which Mir Jafar, the new Nabob of Bengal, indebted to Clive for his position, settled upon him in 1759. Given the enormous wealth Clive brought back with him from India--it exceeded £300,000--a faction in the Company opposed his receiving this private present, and his right to it remained under challenge until, following a series of uprisings in Bengal, he agreed to return to India as governor of Bengal on condition that the company confirm his *jagir*, which he thenceforth enjoyed for the rest of his life.

In the wake of this contest, the political maneuverings within the Company over Clive's *jagir* became the butt of ridicule in the mid-1760s. One example, published anonymously in 1767, was an extended and heavy-handed satire on the Company meeting that confirmed the *jagir*, entitled Debates in the Asiatic Assembly. In this piece, an ignorant and self-interested group of supporters with names like Sir Janus Blubber, Shylock Buffaloe, the Jew, Skeleton Scarecrow, Jaundice Braywell, Caliban Clodpate, Sir Judas Venom, and Donald Machaggies made fatuous speeches praising Lord Vulture, that is, Clive, for his service in India and supporting his claims to the *jagir*. Throughout this meeting only the independent George Manly rose to expose the other speakers as "a troop of desperate banditti," to denounce their efforts as "a scandalous confederacy to plunder and strip" the Company, and to demand "an enquiry more deeply into" Clive's "avarice and oppression and tyrannical management of our affairs; his insolence, inhumanity, and breach of order." "What shall we think of a man, who is at this hour in our own service, possessed of an income more than double that of the most ancient families in England, all which he has acquired in our service, and who shall yet demand more?" asked Manly:

Who shall insist on a continuance of this enormous j--g--re, in defiance of every independent and impartial Proprietor? Shall we tamely behold all his engines employed in every dark practice of promises and threats, of corruption and prostitution, to procure a majority of votes on his favour, to establish a precedent that strikes at the very root of our existence? Shall we exalt the destructive engineer so high above us, as to place him out of the reach of law, and inaccessible to the scourge of justice?--Shall we fall prostrate, and adore the rapacious idol we have formed?

Labeling Clive a person who was "utterly deaf to every sentiment of justice and humanity," the author, through the persona of Manly, called upon Company directors "to rescue" the Company's "effects from the luxury, the extravagance, the wanton profusions of this insatiable harpy, whose ambition in unparalleled, and whose avarice knows no bounds."¹⁰

Such criticism became even more biting after Clive during his second stint in India accepted Company responsibility for collecting public revenues in Bengal. This action involved the Company in the governance of an

Indian state to a degree previously unprecedented and led to calls for a parliamentary inquiry in 1766-67. The Jamaican William Beckford was one of several M. P.'s to issue such a call in 1766. Pointing out that the Company had "a revenue of two millions in India, acquired God knows how, by unjust wars with the natives" and that "their Servants came home with immense fortune[s] obtained by rapine and oppression," he contended that Parliament was obliged to look into "how these revenues were consumed," why stockholders had "received no increase in dividend[s]," and "whence those oppressions so loudly talked of" derived.¹¹

Over the next four years, the discussion that followed such calls identified a complex variety of issues arising out of the Company's expanded role in India. Whether the East India Company was constitutionally capable of holding and governing territory; whether Britain should have political jurisdiction over any territory in Asia;¹² whether Parliament could take over the governance of India without violating the charter rights of the Company; whether the government could siphon off part of the vast revenues of the Company for state purposes; whether, if Indian territorial revenues were collected by the Crown, it would upset the balance of power within the British constitution;¹³ whether it was either possible or desirable to establish a system of British laws in ancient and highly civilized polities such as those then existing in India;¹⁴ and whether a government bureaucracy in India would not only subject the Indians to even "a higher degree of despotism" than they then suffered under the jurisdiction of the Company¹⁵ were all questions raised and canvassed during the years between 1767 and 1771. The issues defined in this period continued to shape the debate over what to do about the East India Company for the next fifteen years. But while Parliament conducted its first inquiry into Indian affairs in 1767, it made no recommendations for resolving any of these questions after the company agreed to provide the government with an annual subsidy of £500,000 and to endeavor "to correct all the abuses which" had been "felt in Bengal from Lord Clive's mistakes."¹⁶

As several of the questions raised during this period suggest, a recurring theme in these discussions was that Britain's problems in India, like those it faced in America, were at least partly attributable to metropolitan neglect. From "the little concern" Britain had bestowed on India, complained one writer, one could "imagine that she regards it rather like an adventitious excrescence, or as an encumbering burden unadvisedly taken up, from which she would willingly disengage herself." However, for just "a small share of her attention," this writer contended, Bengal alone was "capable of yielding to Britain . . . not only more riches, but also more durable benefit, than all her other foreign possessions." In contrast to the situation with the American colonies, moreover, that benefit was entirely secure, because Britain now possessed "the unlimited power of imposing, collecting and applying the revenues of that country." "Whereas the commerce with America, not being the effect of free choice or of necessity, will," he

predicted, “most probably prove the cause, that Britain will, one day, lose her dominion over that country,” the commerce with India would “ever [be] preserve[d] to Britain” through its complete “dominion” there.¹⁷

Some writers were skeptical that turning Indian affairs over to the government would solve India’s problems. Thus in 1769 did Alexander Dalrymple, one of the most prolific defenders of the East India Company during these years, express doubts about the wisdom of turning to a government that had not been “successful at home or in America” for counsel on “the management of our affairs in India, which have hitherto been managed *successfully* without them.”¹⁸ Yet the feeling persisted that, notwithstanding the fact that, as an anonymous writer claimed in 1770, India, through the “two channels of revenue and private fortune[s]” and re-exports, was providing Britain with an estimated £2,400,000 per year,¹⁹ its vast potential was as yet not realized. As Adam Smith pointed out in 1776 in the Wealth of Nations, the civilized “empires of China, Indostan, Japan, as well as several others in the East Indies, without having richer mines of gold or silver, were in every other respect much richer, better cultivated, and more advanced in all arts and manufactures than either Mexico or Peru,” much less than the “mere savages” who “inhabited the rest of America.” “Rich and civilized nations,” said Smith, could “always exchange to a much greater value with one another, than with savages and barbarians.” Yet, he acknowledged that Britain, like Europe as a whole, had “hitherto derived much less advantage from its commerce with the East Indies than from that with America.”²⁰ In contrast to other writers, Smith did not advocate government intervention as a way of exploiting Asia’s vast potential for trade.

The identification of issues that occurred during the late 1760s did little to allay the feeling that the East India Company was presiding over the wholesale plunder of India. Both the servants of the company and the company itself seemed to be at guilt. “No officers should have the means either clandestinely, or by connivance,” declared a writer signing himself “An *untainted* ENGLISHMAN” in 1767, “to make sudden princely fortunes, and return, after a few years absence, to their own country with millions, or half millions; which are sums too large for particular persons, too vast and unreasonable for them to acquire at the expence of their employers; and give great room to think that such servants . . . make every thing subservient to the accomplishment of their own views.” Advocating the expropriation of Indian revenues to pay off Britain’s vast national debt and thereby help “the rest of the nation to share in the future emolument of that extensive commerce,” this writer asked “whether it is not a great reproach to the understanding of the British state, to suffer a few of her subjects *only*, to acquire the greatest opulence, and suddenly make as great fortunes as eastern princes, while the state itself is *sinking*, for want of money to pay off only the interest of her debt.”²¹

Samuel Foote's popular play The Nabob, first performed in 1768, both encapsulated and reinforced popular resentments about the behavior of Britons in India. The Nabob of the title is Sir Matthew Mite, one of those "new gentlemen, who from caprice of Fortune, and a strange chain of events, have acquired immoderate wealth, and rose to uncontroled power abroad," and have returned to England determined to marry into an ancient family and, using the familiar connection "between Bengal and the ancient corporation of Bribe'em," to buy election to parliament. In pursuit of these objectives, Mite endeavors, with "so much contrivance and cunning" that he is "an overmatch for a plain English gentleman, or an innocent Indian," to gain control over the debts of the Oldhams, a gentry family, in order to coerce them into marrying their daughter Sophy to him. "Preceded by all the pomp of Asia," complains Lady Oldham, Mite "came thundering amongst us; and, profusely scattering the spoils of ruined provinces, corrupted the virtue and alienated the affections of all the old friends of the family" until the Oldhams had no one to whom to turn to fend off Mite's attack. Nevertheless, Lady Oldham stubbornly refuses to give in, accusing Mite of "voluptuously rioting in pleasures that derive their source from the ruin of others," and her steadfastness pays off when her merchant brother-in-law agrees to assume the Oldhams' debts in return for Lady Oldham's permission for Sophy to marry his son, the man she truly loves.

During the play, Foote uses the negotiations between Touchit, an election broker, and the mayor of Bribe'em, to drive home his larger point about the corrosiveness of empire in India. In response to the mayor's question about the character of the Indian settlements, Touchit recounted how, in the beginning, "a body of merchants . . . beg[ged] to be admitted as friends," took "possession of a small spot in the country, and" carried "on a beneficial commerce with the inoffensive and innocent people, to which they kindly" gave "their consent. . . . Upon which, Mr. Mayor. We cunningly encroach, and fortify by little and little, till at length, we growing too strong for the natives, we turn them out of their lands, and take possession of their money and jewels." When the mayor asks if Touchit does not think such behavior "a little uncivil in us?," Touchit replies, "Oh, nothing at all: These people are but little better than Tartars or Turks." At another point in the play, an old school chum whom Mite refuses to recognize, pointedly take Mite's measure as a man who has "grown rich by robbing the heathens." "Nabobs," declares Putty, "are but a kind of outlandish creatures, that won't pass current with us."²²

As this negative stereotype was being fashioned in the metropolis, the East India Company was failing in its efforts to bring its servants under control. As George Johnstone, an M. P., complained in a 1771 pamphlet, Thoughts on our Acquisitions in the East Indies, particularly respecting Bengal, the company had sent a series of "secret and select committees, armed with plenipotentiary authority," which had only substituted new "monopolies and deprivations" for the old and, in the process, crushed "every honest spirit, who might be daring enough to

oppose their iniquitous acts, or give intelligence of them to the public” and in just three years brought Bengal into a “ruinous state,” while metropolitan Britons saw “with astonishment, the immense fortunes that have been amassed under the distresses of the inhabitants, by those very members to whom the [company] directors had intrusted the absolute management of their affairs.”²³ Unfortunately, added Edmund Burke in 1772, the company’s committees “pretended reformation,” but “meant nothing but plunder,” looking “on the Companies[’] unfaithful Servants in India,” “not with resentment, but with Envy . . . and instead of punishing their delinquency they imitated their conduct.”²⁴

The continuing difficulties in Bengal, a severe famine in many parts of India, and a disastrous liquidity problem for the East India Company led in 1772 to a second round of public inquiry and passage of the Regulating Act of 1773 which empowered the metropolitan government to appoint a governor and to establish a supreme court in Bengal with jurisdictions over all cases that could come under British law throughout British India.

In the debates and print conflicts that swirled around this debate, most participants realized that the economic stakes for the metropolis were high, and the East India Company did not lack for defenders. Employing the language of commerce and writing at the very time when the affairs of the East India Company were in highest agitation, John Campbell in his Political Survey of Britain sought to put the most positive possible spin on the situation. Although he acknowledged “that the several Revolutions that gave us the Possession [of Bengal], and certain Measures that either were or were supposed necessary to preserve it since, have for the present brought some Distress on this Country by diminishing the Quantity of Silver that circulated therein, discouraging Industry, and lessening Commerce,” he argued that the situation in India had never been more favorable for metropolitan Britain than it had been since the conquest of Bengal in 1757. “Instead of that uncertain and precarious State in which our Commerce remained here for many Years,” he wrote, “we enjoy now the most certain and ample Security from the Nature of our Fortifications, and particularly the extensive and highly improved Fortress at Calcutta, the large Body of Troops that we maintain and pay, who from that Circumstance it is hoped may be depended upon, as the Natives, to use their own Expression, have hitherto been faithful to those whose Salt they eat.” Together with “the Experience of our Officers and their Knowledge of the Country, with the Reputation arising from our Success,” Campbell reported, this new “Security hath enabled and disposed us to acquire a very large Property in these Parts, for such our Fortifications, Magazines, and in general all our Effects there may be considered,” while the “territorial Income arising from the Rents of Lands, Duties on Cattle, Inland Trade, Customs, &c. amount to an immense Sum, from which all Deductions being made there may, or at least ought to remain in the Company’s Treasury what is sufficient for the Purchase of the Company’s Investments without sending an Ounce of Silver from hence. To all

this,” he noted, “we may add the Capacity the Company is in to furnish a comfortable Subsistence, and in a reasonable Space of Time, without either Fraud or Oppression, ample Fortunes to British Subjects whom they employ in their several Establishments.”²⁵

These developments, in Campbell’s opinion, illustrated “the vast Importance of the East India Company” and the considerable extent to which it was a significant “Benefit . . . to this Nation.” Moreover, he suggested that the “Profits accruing to the Nation from the Shipping and Seamen in the Service of the Company, the Price of Freight, the Provisions they consume, the Stores they carry with and are sent to them, and the Commodities and Manufactures of this Country exported thither,” the “raw Goods, especially Silk and Salt Petre, imported from thence, that give Business and Bread to Multitudes here, the annual Produce of the Company’s Sales, which bring in great Sums from foreign Countries, the Customs and other Emoluments that accrue to Government, and in that respect operate in Diminution of our National Expence” would all “continually increase” in the future. Any difficulties in India, Campbell was sure, could be easily remedied by applying the wisdom and authority of Britain to the establishment of “a mild and settled Government, under which all Europeans in general” could “enjoy the Protection of our Laws and the Natives be permitted to live according to their own Customs, free in all respects from Constraint and Oppression.”²⁶

In a similar vein, Burke argued that most of the problems of India could be explained by circumstances and necessity, rather than by moral decay. He did not deny that in “such a multiplicity of affairs, and in a government without laws, some enormities must have been committed.” But he was persuaded that the main problem was the absence of “a comprehensive and well-digested code of laws, for the rule of every man’s conduct” and the lack of appropriate institutions to enforce them. “When discretionary power” was “lodged in the hands of any man, or class of men,” he declared, “experience proves, that it will always be abused. This was the case with the East-India company,” whose “charter . . . was well enough calculated for the purposes of a factory” but was “totally insufficient upon the acquisition of extensive territories. Hence,” Burke explained, “unlimited authority fell necessarily into the hands of their governors. The directors, attentive to the extension of their trade, had not time, nor perhaps capacity, to make general regulations sufficient for the good government of so great an empire; and, had they been possessed of these requisites, yet they wanted the power to exert them.” Because the company found it impossible “to keep in awe” its “servants, who knew that” they “did not derive” their “authority from law, and that they could not be punished for disobedience beyond the ditch of Calcutta,” the servants themselves, just “to preserve some kind of subordination,” were in turn “forced occasionally to act the despot, and to terrify the refractory by the arm of power or violence.”²⁷

But such arguments did little to deflect parliamentary and public attention away from the long catalogue of the misdeeds of East India Company and its servants in India that came to light during the extensive consideration of Indian affairs both in and out of Parliament in 1772 and 1773. In 1772, William Bolts, a former company servant in India whom the company's select committee had removed from his position and deprived of his income, published the most extensive and systematic exposé of the situation in India yet issued. His Considerations on Indian Affairs; Particularly Respecting the Present State of Bengal and its Dependencies, which ran to 228 pages, was, as Burke later said, the first full-length book to turn "the national attention to the state of our affairs in the East Indies."²⁸

Bolts began his volume with a compelling summary of the nature of the problems with British rule in India. "From a society of mere traders, confined by charter to the employment of six ships and six pinnaces yearly," he wrote,

the Company are become sovereigns of extensive, rich and populous kingdoms, with a standing army of above sixty thousand men at their command. In this new situation of the society, . . . there is scarcely any public spirit apparent among their leaders, either in England or India. The loaves and the fishes are the grand, almost the sole object. The questions, How many *lacks* shall I put in my pocket? Or, How many sons, nephews, or dependents shall I provide for, at the expense of the miserable inhabitants of the subjected dominions? are those which of late have been the foremost to be propounded by the Chiefs of the Company on both sides the ocean. Hence the dominions in Asia, like the distant Roman provinces during the decline of the empire, have been abandoned, as lawful prey, to every species of peculators; in so much that many of the servants of the Company, after exhibiting such scenes of barbarity as can scarcely be paralleled in the history of any country, have returned to England loaded with wealth; where, intrenching themselves in borough or East-India-stock influence, they have set justice at defiance, either in the cause of their country, or of oppressed innocence."²⁹

Point by point, Bolts made his way through an extensive catalogue of the company's many crimes. First was its adventures in "*Nabob-making*," in substituting for legitimate Indian rulers people who were beholden to the company for their positions. The Grand Mogul and "the pretended NABOBS of Bengal and Bahar" were "the actual stipendiaries of the said Company, and the DEWANNEE, under which title" the company "pretend[ed] to hold those territorial possessions," was "a mere fiction, invented for the private purposes of the Company and their servants; and particularly intended, if possible, to screen their seizing on the sovereignty of the country, by imposing on the British nation; though the disguise was too flimsey to deceive either the inhabitants of Hindostan or other European nations who have settlements in those countries." "The Nabobs of Bengal," he declared, were "no other than the tools of the East India Company and their representatives in Asia, through whom not only the natives, but even

Englishmen, in those remote parts, are exposed to every species of oppression; for so grievous is the present situation of British subjects in those countries, that it is in fact now easily in the power of the Governor of Bengal, whenever he pleases, to deprive any one of so much of his property as lies within the *Nabob's* dominions, or even of his life.³⁰

The Company's second crime was the complete abolition of "freedom in trade" in Bengal, "though by that alone it can be made flourishing and importantly beneficial to the British state." "All branches of the interior Indian commerce," he wrote, were, "without exception, entirely monopolies of the most cruel and ruinous natures; and so totally corrupted, from every species of abuse, as to be in the last stages towards annihilation." The "baneful effects of" this "continued scene of oppression," he contended, had been "severely felt by every weaver and manufacturer in the country, every article produced being made a monopoly; in which the English, with their Banyans and black gomastahs," terms for the Indian agent who mediated between company servants and Indian society, "arbitrarily decide what quantities of goods each manufacturer shall deliver, and the *prices* he shall receive for them."³¹

The Company's third crime was the eradication of civil justice, which left "millions . . . entirely at the mercy of a few men, who divide[d] the spoils of the public among themselves; while, under such despotism, supported by military violence, the whole interior of the country, where neither the laws of England reach, or the laws and customs of those countries are permitted to have their course, is no better than in a state of nature," "a state of the most deplorable anarchy, under the despotic sway of one, or at most a very few English gentlemen, and their Banyans." In India, he proclaimed, there was no "right but that of the longest sword, nor any law except the will of the conquerors." Under these conditions, Bolts charged, the Company had "exercised such unbounded despotism as was wholly incompatible with the laws of this kingdom, those of humanity, or such as would be thought intolerable even in Turkey or Barbary."³²

The effects of these deficiencies upon India, according to Bolts, had been catastrophic. "While the poor industrious natives" were "oppressed beyond conception, population" was "decreasing, the manufactories and revenues" were "decaying, and Bengal, which used not many years ago to send annually a tribute of several millions in hard specie to Dehly," was "now reduced to so extreme a want of circulation, that it" was "not improbable [that] the Company" would "soon be in want of species in Bengal to pay their troops, and in England seen pleading incapacity to pay the very annual four hundred thousand pounds which is now received from them by Government." Not just Bengal, but all British possessions in southwest India, "Bahar, and part of Orissa," were, to "the disgrace of the British government," in "every way exhausted by plunder and oppression; and while this nation is gazing after

the fruit, the Company and their substitutes” were being “suffered to be rooting up the tree.” Bolts likened this behavior to “the idiot-practice of killing the prolific hen to get her golden eggs all at once.”³³

Bolts did not leave his case on this general level. Rather, he cited in chapter and verse incident after incident in which the East India Company, to which had been entrusted “the British dominions in Bengal,” had through its own immoral and exploitative behavior, rendered its government “hateful to the natives by oppressions,” had “occasioned desertions of many of the people,” and had generally made itself “odious in India, disgusting to and envied by many of the powers in Europe, and tyrannical in the extreme towards their resident fellow-subjects.” Indeed, he professed to know of “Many other instances” that would provide additional proof of “the badness of the government, police, and administration of justice in those distant dominions; some of which, though there looked upon as trifles, would in this country be considered as matters of the most serious consequence.” To illumine all the facts of that nature which have come within the writer’s knowledge, he wrote, “would be to fill a large folio volume. It would moreover be a task shocking to humanity.”³⁴

Considerations of humanity, Bolts concluded, as well as the national honor of Britain required that “the Country never . . . consent, for the paltry consideration of a short-lived pecuniary emolument to effect the devastation of such rich and fertile countries, and the extirpation or ruin of so many millions of civilized, inoffensive and industrious inhabitants; or to sacrifice those solid and permanent advantages which might be derived to this country from a proper System of Government.”³⁵

Many other writers and speakers in Parliament expressed outrage at the revelations of Bolts and others. “It is universally allowed,” said Colonel John Burgoyne, who spearheaded the move in Parliament to bring India under metropolitan civil authority, in November 1772, “and indeed it is clearly proved, that the East India Company is rotten to the very core. All is equally unsound; and you cannot lay your finger on a single healthy spot whereon to begin the application of a remedy. In the east the laws of society, the laws of nature, have been enormously violated. Oppression in every shape has ground the faces of the poor defenceless natives; and tyranny has stalked abroad. The laws of England,” he continued, “have lain mute and neglected, and nothing was seen but the arbitrary caprice of despotism. Every sanction of civil justice, every maxim of political wisdom, all laws human and divine, have been trampled under foot, and set at nought,” while at “home, there has been egregious mismanagement and variety of roguery.”³⁶

Sir William Meredith expanded upon Burgoyne’s remarks. “From all that we read in tales or history,” he said, never did such a system exist as that” in British India, “where mercantile avarice was the only principle, and force the only means of carrying on a government. Comparisons of other tyrannies,” he declared, gave “no idea of

English tyranny in Bengal,” where, in contrast to most tyrannies, the tyrants “use[d] their rod of iron,” not just upon the rich but upon “rich and poor . . . alike. They who have lands are dispossessed; if money, it is extorted; if the mechanic has a loom, his manufacture is cut out; if he has grain, it is carried off; if he is suspected of having treasure, he is put to the torture to discover it.” Moreover, unlike most tyrants whose behavior was moderated by fear of popular revolt, Meredith said, “our country men in Bengal” were “free from all” such “apprehensions; they have no resistance to fear from a poor disarmed people, inured to slavery and broken to oppression. And so much in reverse are they in fear of shame, that their ambition is spurred on by knowing that they are to secure honour, love, importance, dependents and friends, in proportion to the riches they bring home.”³⁷

How this malignant system could have taken such a deep hold in India, how India had become a place “where lordly traders, impatient of controul” and concerned with nothing more than the gratification of their “own sordid avarice”³⁸ had been able to divert such vast sums from the “great Terretorial revenues in Bengal” into “the coffers of private men”³⁹ was a question to which metropolitan analysts had many answers. “If the public enquires after the cause to which this wretched state is owing,” observed Thomas Pownall in 1773, “they are told of the want of wisdom and power in the company at home; of mischievous errors in the directors; of factions in general courts; of ungovernable disobedience in their servants abroad; of peculation of public treasure; of frauds in expenditures; of fals[e]hoods in accounts; of plundering, pillaging , and rapine, both public and private; of rapacious extortions in trade, which have ruined the commerce and manufactures of the country; of tyranny, in every exertion of the cruel spirit, which had absolutely destroyed the country itself.” In Pownall’s view, all of these problems were the “necessary effects of a prime original evil,” the fact that the territorial acquisitions of the late 1750s and the fiscal responsibilities of the mid-1760s had required the merchant to “*become the sovereign*; that a trading company have in their hands the exercise of a sovereignty, which the company by its direction within the realm is not adequate to, and with which its servants . . . should not be trusted.”⁴⁰

Other observers agreed with this point and elaborated it. A writer using the pseudonym A. B. offered a more detailed diagnosis in a 1773 pamphlet. “As the possessions of the Company were extended in India,” he pointed out, “the Directors [of the company in London] increased in importance, and became after their acquisition of the territorial revenues one of the great objects of avarice, ambition, and party; artifice, fraud, corruption, means usual and natural to them, were employed to operate upon the body of electors.” As a result, “the sober, honest, and discreet Proprietors” who had previously dominated the Company retired, “satisfied with a large and unexpected increase of fortune; and were succeeded by adventurers and gamesters, a fluctuating set, who bought in or sold out as their overvarying speculations directed them.” These new people made “the plunder of the Indies . . . the reward

and wages of corrupt service; while the uncertainty of tenure spread quicker and wider the scenes of cruelty and devastation.” With no law to restrain them, Company servants had no restraints upon their “avarice and rapacity” and, “in the pursuit of their objects,” created “scenes of villainy and horror” that “surpass[ed] all the creative powers of invention.”⁴¹ The principal Company officers in each Indian presidency, declared another writer, were each one, “probably, the greatest Criminal in their several Provinces; for their power” was “unbounded, both in conferring benefits, and inflicting punishments, [so] that none of those frauds and oppressions” could have been committed without their contrivance.⁴²

In retrospect, A. B. was certain that India had become lawless from the moment she passed under our government; the sceptre, wrested from the gentle grasp of Asiatic despotism, was thrown aside, and rods of iron put into the hands of British barbarians: No rule for direction, no sanction for punishment, no interest in the rulers for the protection and preservation of the governed, prevailed there. The harvest was abundant, but the season short and precarious: not a moment was lost in gathering, not an art was omitted that could expedite the hoarding. Pride and emulation stimulated avarice; and the sole contest was, who should return to that home, which they almost all quitted beggars, with the greatest heap of crimes and of plunder.⁴³

Noting that Clive had described “the inhabitants of Indostan . . . ‘as servile, mean, submissive, and humble, in inferior stations; yet in superior, luxurious, effeminate, tyrannical, treacherous, venal, cruel,’” this author inquired whether “the contrast . . . between the servants of the Company and the Indians in superior stations” were “so great as he would have us believe” and “whether those *English Gentlemen* had not adopted and improved upon the last set of Eastern qualities?” “By all laws human and divine,” this writer declared, the “miserable actors who started up into Nabobs in India” had “since become Lords of no inconsiderable possessions in Great Britain; and some . . . become legislators here, who . . . would for far less crimes committed in any civilized country, be punished there with imprisonment, confiscation, and death.” “Nabobs black with crimes of the deepest dye,” he observed in an obvious reference to Samuel Foote’s comedy, were emphatically “not objects to excite laughter: the magnitude of” their crimes demanded “a more solemn audience, and” pointed “them out as proper persons in a more serious drama.” The splendor in which nabobs lived in Britain, he reminded his readers, had been purchased with “the destruction of India and the infamy of Great Britain.”⁴⁴

The most visible defender of the East India Company and its servants in parliamentary debate, Clive traced Indian problems to the guiles of the East. He did not deny that corruption was rampant among the Company’s servants in India. In his view, however, it was principally traceable to their youthfulness and the artfulness of the Indian banyans under whose sway they came almost immediately upon their arrival in India. Using these fine

British lads as a front behind which they could line their own pockets, these banyans seduced them by providing them with the funds to “live in splendid apartments or have houses of their own, ride upon fine prancing Arabian Horses, and in Penqueens and Chaises;” and to “keep Seraglios, make Entertainments, and treat with Champagne and Claret,” while they simultaneously tutored them in eastern ways of bribery and chicanery. Through these banyans, Clive admitted, many of these young servants became virtual “Nabobs and Sovereigns in the East” and acquired impressive fortunes. But he insisted that they left their abandoned ways in India and that when they returned home, they behaved so honorably that there had “not yet been one character found amongst them sufficiently flagitious for Mr. Foote to exhibit on the theatre in the Haymarket.” The unspoken assumption underlying Clive’s remarks was that the crimes of nabobry were merely youthful excesses committed in a land far outside Britain where corruption was already an entrenched system. Profligate and rapacious behavior by Britons, he suggested, was not damnable if it occurred in the overseas empire.⁴⁵

Whether corruption was endemic to Asian societies, as Clive suggested, or was the fault of the East India Company and its servants, as most of his opponents believed, many analysts believed that the prospects of the rapid and extensive accumulation of wealth were difficult even for virtuous people to resist. “The degree of integrity, and strength of mind, which is sufficient to carry a man blamelessly through life in England, where the laws are many, and the temptations few,” said one analyst, “may not be of sufficient proof to encounter the assaults of India, where . . . *the temptations are such, that flesh and blood cannot withstand them*, and must still be more dangerous when that flesh and blood is trusted entirely to its own legs, without any stay to keep its feet from sliding,” a “Scheme of Government, which cannot be executed but by men of perfect virtue and moderation.”⁴⁶

A search for a political solution accompanied the search for blame. What seemed to be needed, as one anonymous writer put it in 1772, was a solution that would provide “an impartial administration of justice in India, without its being subject to the controul of those who are most likely the greatest delinquents”; “an end to those cruel monopolies, carried on by the Servants of the Company, in the necessaries of life, and to which the wretched natives are obliged to submit, with the bayonet at their throats”; and that would make “those Servants once more attentive to the commercial interests of their employers; without attempting to equal, in riches and splendor, the first nobility of the Kingdom.” The most ambitious and extreme solution called for the metropolitan government to abolish or modify the company’s most recent 1758 charter, “commonly called” by company critics “*the Charter of Plunder*,”⁴⁷ and take over the full task of governance, establishing a British-style polity in India with British-style laws. This position had powerful support in Parliament.

But many people worried with Henry Verelst, a former governor in Bengal, that the “nature of the people, and the relation in which they stand to us,” rendered “impossible a free government in Bengal;” and that British laws were entirely “inadequate to the controul of distant governors armed with such extensive authority as must ever be upheld in India.”⁴⁸ The colonies in America offered no model for British governance in India. “Nothing of the Constitution of Great Britain or her Colonies,” said one writer, could possibly “be transplanted to Bengal, where there can be no Council, no Assembly of the native proprietors of the lands to check any set of tyrants which their hard fate may bring upon them.”⁴⁹

Opponents of extensive reform were eloquent in their cautions against the adoption of any system that relied for its effectiveness upon any significant interference with customary Indian modes of governance. “The Indians,” said Alexander Dalrymple, were “so devoted to their own Customs, which they enjoyed many ages before we had even *painted Ancestors*, that the English Laws” were “not suited to them; and although in criminal Cases they may *in general* be introduced, they are not by any means applicable to common government. Every Conqueror of India,” he said, “must follow the example of former Conquerors and leave the Indians to themselves, who have existed as a civilized and polished People many thousand Years *without any laws but religious, and without ONE Lawyer amongst them.*” Professing his deep veneration for British liberties, he insisted “that *Freedom*” could “be enjoyed only by men *who enact[ed] their own Laws, or who live[d] under equal laws of ancient usage.*” It was impossible, he said, “for that state to be *free*, where the inhabitants, in *general*, have no share in the government; and therefore no plan, to be executed by *Europeans only*, can convey the *smallest portion of freedom* to the Indians; abuses may be corrected, their persons and properties may be secured. But these are very compatible with an *absolutely despotic government.*” An “*Englishman*, he declared, was “the fittest to enact laws for *Englishmen*: He knows their wants, and he feels their grievances. But *he* is unfit to form laws for the *Indians*. He can never conceive that *eating a piece of beef* can be sufficient reason for driving a man from society as a monster of impurity.”⁵⁰

For that reason, Dalrymple observed, the Company had “never had the most distant view of introducing a code of laws, which should regulate the manners and minds of the Indians; establish a new religion amongst them,” or “by destroying the casts, attempt a new mode of awakening industry, and impressing motives of action.” Rather, the “Idea of the Company’s Government” take “up the Indians where it finds them, under a regular system of civilization, secured by casts and religious ceremonies, and leaves them perfectly free in the exercise thereof; not assuming the power of enacting general laws, it can never promulgate the institute of destruction, by subverting the manners and customs of the Indians.”⁵¹

Other writers less favorable to the Company conceded Dalrymple’s point. Because

the “bulk of mankind” were “governed in their opinions not by reason, but by authority; and [because] the strongest of all authorities” was “that which” had “the stamp of antiquity upon it,” advised an anonymous exponent of a plan for governing Bengal, a “nation which would preserve its conquest, with the will of the conquered, must carefully preserve the old forms of government” and “affront in nothing the old manners.” “Conquests. . . not accompanied with extirpations,” he observed, “have in all ages been secured or lost, according as these rules have been observed or neglected.” Still, he thought it possible for Britain to introduce into India “new laws, which new circumstances require,” without depriving the “inhabitants . . . of their old ones.”⁵² Whatever system was introduced, agreed still another analyst, the facts remained that Britain had “acquired the actual government of this Country by force” and that it could only acquire “the *rightful* Government” of it “by exercising our power over the inhabitants, according to the laws of God and Nature, with justice and humanity, that they who have the best *right* to dispose of themselves, may voluntarily acknowledge the King of Great Britain as their *lawful* Sovereign, and become anxious to retain his protection.”⁵³

Difficulties of devising a different political system for India along with the problem of assigning blame and the widespread reluctance to interfere extensively with the Company’s charter rights dictated that the reforms undertaken by the Restraining Act of 1773 should be limited, while the extraordinary economic and political clout of the East India Company, an early example of a highly successful special interest group, meant that none of the perpetrators of the troubles in India was punished. That “Great Crimes” had been charged on “the Servants of the India-Company, from a *National* Inquiry, and yet no one has suffered” had, one deeply disappointed observer complained, “stained the very Name and Annals of our Country with Crimes scarce inferior to the Conquerors of *Mexico* and *Peru*.” Predicting that the “Historians of other Nations, (if not our own) will do Justice to the oppressed Subjects in *India*, and will hand down the Memory of the Oppressors to the latest Posterity, loaded with the Infamy due to the Magnitude of their Cruelties, Extortions, and new modes of Murder,” he called upon metropolitan Britons “to perpetuate an honest Indignation against the[se] Enemies of Mankind, Tyrants clothed with civil Authority, and abusing their sacred Trust” and to continue “to call down *National* Justice on their Heads.”⁵⁴

This writer drove this point home in a long satirical poem entitled The Nabob: or Asiatic Plunders. In this work, he expressed his amazement that in Britain,

. . . Laws will punish ev’ry petty knave;
 Hang low-born pilf’rers;--scourge the toil-worn slave;
 While greater villains all their threats despise,
 And by strange crimes to highest honours rise.

“Concerns it you who plunders in the East,” he said in trying to awaken public consciousness to the enormities of British behavior in India,

In blood a tyrant, and in lust a beast?
When ills are distant, are they then your own?
Saw'st thou their tears, or heard'st th' oppressed groan?”

Although he emphasized that from Britain's oppression in India,

“My Country's honor has receiv'd a blot,
A mark of odium ne'er to be forgot,”

he was also concerned that the excesses of empire be confined overseas and not tarnish metropolitan Britain's shining reputation as a land of civility, humanity, and liberty:

“All are not slaves; nor has curs'd thirst of Gold
Our Liberty, our Lives, our Children sold:
In *Asia's* realms let slavery be bound,
Let not her foot defile this sacred ground,
Where Freedom, Science, Valour fix'd their seat,
And taught all Nations how they should be great
An hireling group in this great realm is grown
High Lords o'er millions, whose worn hands supply
Their pride, their pomp, and feast of luxury.
I feel my bosom rise at this sad thought,
By public wealth the public's foes are bought:
While all its motion, life is sweat and toil,
That lazy drones may banquet on the spoil.”⁵⁵

In a footnote and almost as an aside, the poet introduced into East Indian affairs the language of virtue, a language seldom used by metropolitan Britons when they spoke about empire. The despotism and the plunder that seemed to be so rife throughout the British overseas world, appeared to this writer to be a direct function of commerce, and he pointedly refused to join in that celebration of commerce that informed so much metropolitan British speech about empire during the eighteenth century. Rather, quoting Montesquieu's remark “that commerce refines the manners, but always corrupts morals,” he suggested that trade invariably drove out humanity. “What idea of christianity must Indians conceive from our traders?,” he asked his readers to consider. “What notions must the Africans entertain of our humanity in purchasing slaves of such who never injured us? What Religion . . . can [be] . . . seen in *Madras*, and particularly in *Bengal*, or in the *West-Indian* Islands.” Social and moral corruption, he lamented, was “the fruit of commerce every-where.”⁵⁶

Like the debate over slavery, consideration of the Indian problem fell out of prominence in Britain during the American War for Independence. That the political and legal reforms provided for by the Restraining Act of 1773 were insufficient to stem the tide of corruption in the East India Company's regime in India was, however, apparent by the late 1770s, when public complaints again caught the attention of the metropolis. For the second time in a decade, company revenues were falling because, as Burke remarked in May 1779, the "great military establishment kept up in that country" in order to control it had "swallowed up all the land-revenues."⁵⁷ At the same time, various critics were contending that the introduction of British law and the establishment of a supreme court in India had been a disaster, except for the British lawyers who found a new way to plunder India by encouraging Indians to file law suits.⁵⁸

The crescendo of criticism began to rise in 1779 when James McPherson, formerly a Company servant in India and a government pamphleteer, produced a detailed history of the company in which he revived most of the earlier charges against company mismanagement in India and accused its "principal servants abroad" of "following the example of their superiors, or obeying their orders," in committing acts "of treachery to the natives of India, and of acts of cruelty, injustice, and oppression to their fellow-subjects." As well as "the spoils," he charged, returned company servants had "acquired the manners of the East" and "frequently took arms against the authority, to which they owed their power; till by force, by negotiation or compromise, they obtained seats at the Board" in Leadenhall Street, where they could effectively pursue the "necessary business" of "the concealment of plunder." "The first use they made of their power," he declared, "was to cover the retreat of their own fortunes from India; and to support, in some friend, favourite, or partner in plunder, the same system of venality and corruption, which had enriched themselves."⁵⁹

In 1780, Henry Frederick Thompson, a former seeker of fortune in the company's service in Bengal, entertained the public with a lurid tale of seduction and corruption in the east. In a substantial volume entitled The Intrigues of a Nabob: or, Bengal The Fittest Soil for the Growth of Lust, Injustice and Dishonesty, Thompson exposed the amours, chicanery, and dishonesty of Richard Barwell, a high Company official and later a British Nabob and member of Parliament, who had seduced Thompson's paramour, a former prostitute who had been passing as Thompson's wife, and lived openly with her without benefit of matrimony, while he got Thompson cashiered from his post and refused to honor a contract in which he had agreed to pay Thompson a yearly annuity in return for leaving India quietly.⁶⁰

Although Parliament renewed the Regulatory Act of 1773 in 1780, continuing reports of corruption in India generated a demand for a parliamentary reconsideration of the East India question. Particularly disturbing were

reports that the Company's governors, Warren Hastings and his subordinates, were exhibiting a "general Spirit of Disobedience and Independence" by ignoring many metropolitan directives.⁶¹ The result was a parliamentary enquiry far more extensive than the one in 1772-73. This inquiry lasted from 1781 to 1782 and produced a mountain of evidence and reports that inspired the formulation of a number of bills for parliament to consider the next two years.

These events were simultaneous with the British capitulation in the American war and in Ireland, where the Irish Parliament had just secured home rule, and some writers touted India as a place upon which Britons could focus their misdirected imperial energies. "Could we be but convinced of the necessity of regulating it by wholesome laws, adapted to the genius of the inhabitants, instead of making it the theatre where European plunderers contend for pillage," wrote Thomas Day in his Reflections upon the Present State of England, and the Independence of America in 1783, India, with its "immense territories . . . so vast, so fertile, so well peopled . . . might compensate many of our losses" in America and Ireland.⁶²

But the lamentable conditions of India made others far less sanguine. Thus, the polemicist John King thought that "India, as the affairs of it" were "managed," did "not hold out any prospects of relief to this country, as a nation, in its present distressful situation." "In general," he wrote, it was "a receptacle for desperate and abandoned adventurers; and the industrious and valuable part of this nation" was "injured, rather than benefitted, by the East-Indies." "However exhausted with private oppressions and public wars," he explained, India was "still the dernier resort of all the desperate and profligate: a cheesemonger's boy metamorphosed to a general officer, Stratton, Sykes, Rumbold, and innumerable others, spring from filth and crimes, into elevated situations and splendid fortunes," providing models that had "maddened the brains of tradesmen and mechanics. When indolence or extravagance has reduced men to ignorance," he observed, "Asia" was "a magnet that" attracted "their hopes and views; to reach India, and to create sudden fortunes," seemed "but one and the same thing." Similarly, women who had "no pretensions to a settlement, from a want of beauty, of fortune, and of virtue, look there, not only for an asylum from distress, but as to a theatre of splendid success, where, with tolerable address, and a promptitude to villany, they must obtain the summit of their expectations." "The astonishing and rapid revolutions in Asia," he wrote, had "determined [many British] men and women to try whether they were born the children of fortune." Indeed, King lamented, whenever he thought about India he felt "a glowing shame at the degraded name and character of an Englishman; my fancy sees the sun-burnt coast swarming with the mournful spirits of the oppressed and famished natives, imprecating the vengeance on their sordid and inhuman tormentors; myriads of pale spectres,

starved by artificial famine, shock my busy fancy; and the once peaceful plains, hallowed by a venerable religion and learning, seem strewn with unhappy victims.”⁶³

The public and parliamentary debate that swirled around this inquiry in many ways represented a reprise of the discussions in the early 1770s, with the Company’s spokesmen dismissing the charges against the Company and its servants as “tedious farrago” that did “not much exceed in veracity, the Arabian Night’s Entertainments,”⁶⁴ arguing that Hastings had the Indian situation so well under control that “the sudden acquisition of wealth in India” was a problem that no longer existed,⁶⁵ and opposing government intervention as a violation of the company’s charter rights. Against this position, company antagonists contended that “the chartered right[s] of Nabobs and oppressors” were nothing more than the absolute “power of governing, or rather oppressing thirty millions of men,” which seemed to them to be a “pretty kind of liberty and franchise, which” meant “a despotic, unaccountable, and incontroulable authority over the lives and property of mankind!”⁶⁶ “From the year 1766, until the year 1783,” declared another writer, India “had exhibited a repetition of continual criminality in the servants of the Company, and of continual impunity.”⁶⁷

As the principal member of the Select Committee which conducted the parliamentary inquiry of 1781-84, Edmund Burke, building on “the research of years” and “wind[ing] himself into the innermost recesses and labyrinths of the Indian detail,” took a leading role in articulating the case against the East India Company’s Indian regime, and his speech of December 11, 1783, represented the culmination of nearly two decades of engagement with the Indian problem. India, he said, formed “a territory larger than any European dominion, Russia and Turkey excepted,” and included about thirty million people, who, so far from being “an abject and barbarous populace” were “a people for ages civilized and cultivated; cultivated by all the arts of polished life, whilst we were yet in the woods.” In India, he remarked, was “to be found an antient and venerable priesthood, the depository of their laws, learning, and history, the guides of the people whilst living, and their consolation in death; a nobility of great antiquity and renown; a multitude of cities, not exceeded in population and trade by those of the first class in Europe; merchants and bankers, individual houses of whom have once vied in capital with the Bank of England.” “All this vast mass, composed of so many orders and classes of men,” he said, was “infinitely diversified by manners, by religion, by hereditary employment, through all their profitable combinations.” This very complexity and civility rendered “the handling of India a matter in an high degree critical and delicate. But oh!,” he exclaimed, “It has been handled [very] rudely indeed.”⁶⁸

“In its best state,” Burke declared, “Our Indian government” was “a grievance, and although he deemed it “an arduous thing to plead against abuses of power which” originated “from your own country, and” affected “those

whom we are used to consider as strangers,” he condemned, with what he called a “map of misgovernment before” him,

the company’s “determined resolution to continue and countenance every mode and every degree of peculation, oppression, and tyranny,” denounced Hastings for his many “despotic acts,” decried the fact that “the transport of plunder” had become “the only traffic of the country,” and deplored “that universal systematic breach of treaties which had made the British faith proverbial in the East.” He spent much of his long speech illustrating three propositions: first, that in the whole of India, from the “large range of mountains that walls the northern frontier of India” to “where it touches us in the latitude of twenty-nine, to Cape Comorin, in the latitude of eight, that there is not a *single* prince, state, or potentate, great or small, in India, with whom” the Company’s servants had “come into contact, whom they have not sold. I say *sold*, though sometimes they have not been able to deliver according to their bargain.--Secondly, I say, that there is not a *single treaty* they have ever made, which they have not broken.-- Thirdly, I say, that there is not a single prince or state, who ever put any trust in the Company, who is not utterly ruined; and that none are in any degree secure of flourishing, but in the exact proportion to their settled distrust and irreconcilable enmity to this nation.” “These assertions,” Burke insisted, “are universal. I say in the full sense *universal*.”⁶⁹

For Indians, Burke was persuaded, the British conquest of Bengal and its neighboring provinces had been far more calamitous than any of the many previous invasions by other conquerors. If the “Tartar invasion” had been “mischievous,” he said,

it is our protection that destroys India. It was their enmity, but it is our friendship. Our conquest there, after twenty years, is as crude as it was the first day. The natives scarcely know what it is to see the gray head of an Englishman. Young men (boys almost) govern there, without society, and without sympathy with the natives. They have no more social habits with their people, than if they still resided in England; nor indeed any species of intercourse but that which is necessary to making a sudden fortune, with a view to a remote settlement. Animated with all the avarice of age, and all the impetuosity of youth, they roll in one after another; wave upon wave; and there is nothing before the eyes of the natives but an endless, hopeless prospect of new flights of bird of prey and passage, with appetites continually renewing for a food that is continually wasting. Every rupee of profit made by an Englishman is lost for ever to India. With us are no retributory superstitions, through ages, to the poor, for the rapine and injustice of a day. With us no pride erects stately monuments which repair the mischiefs which pride had produced, and which adorn a country out of its own spoils. England has erected no churches, no hospitals, no palaces, no schools; England has built no bridges, made no high roads, cut no navigations, dug out no reservoirs. Every other conqueror of every other description has left some monument, either of state or beneficence behind him. Were we to be driven out of India this day,

Burke declared, “nothing would remain, to tell that it had been possessed during the inglorious period of our dominion, by any better than the ourang-outang or the tiger.”⁷⁰

“Any one who” took “the smallest trouble to be informed concerning the affairs of India,” Burke concluded, knew “that the habitual despotism and oppression, the monopolies, the peculations, the universal destruction of all legal authority of this kingdom, which have been for twenty years maturing to their present enormity, combined with the distance of the scene, the boldness and artifice of delinquents, their combination, their excessive wealth, and the faction that they have made in England” would require years to root out and destroy, and he expressed his happiness that he could cast his vote for “destroying a tyranny that exists to the disgrace of this nation, and the destruction of so large a part of the human species.” “It is now to be determined,” he said, “whether the three years of laborious parliamentary research, whether the twenty years of patient Indian suffering,” were “to produce a substantial reform in our Eastern administration; or whether our knowledge of the grievances has abated our zeal for the correction of them, and whether our very enquiry into the evil was only a pretext to elude the remedy which is demanded from us by humanity, by justice, and by every principle of true policy. Depend upon it,” he said, “this business cannot be indifferent to our fame. It will turn out a matter of great disgrace or great glory to the whole British nation. We are on a conspicuous stage, and the world marks our demeanour.”⁷¹

In the end, Parliament heeded Burke’s call. The India bill it passed in the summer of 1784 effectively took the East India Company out of any territorial role. By putting India affairs under the close supervision of a metropolitan Board of Control in London and the Indian territories under the direction of a royally appointed governor general with veto powers over regulations in all three Indian presidencies, it effectively reduced the company to the status it had had before Clive’s conquests of the late 1750s, the status of a commercial trading company.

After the passage of Pitt’s reform bill in 1784, Indian affairs took a back seat to the crusade against slavery in discussions of imperial affairs in Britain. Like the debate over slavery and the slave trade, however, the airing of Indian excesses between the mid-1760s and the mid-1780s had contributed to a growing ambivalence about whether or to what extent metropolitans should embrace empire. Whatever the extent that empire had been responsible for Britain’s rising commercial vigor and its increasing national grandeur during the long period after the Glorious Revolution, the inhuman, uncivil, and tyrannical behavior of Asiatic plunderers in the east, like that of creolean despots in the west, had unleashed a powerful dissociative impulse that was skeptical about the effects of empire upon those most directly involved in it and fearful about their long-term implications for the metropolis. In the meantime, if they were increasingly aware that they bore some share of the responsibility for the behavior of Britons

overseas, their growing consciousness about the darker side of empire left them little doubt that there was a great social and cultural gulf between the metropolis and Britain's overseas possessions and that Britons overseas were emphatically inferior to Britons who remained at home.

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