

Colonialism and Imperialism

1. Colonialism

The Historical Context

From 1870 a series of great economic changes in advanced capitalist powers ("Second industrial revolution") brought a wave of new technologies that radically transformed the economy of the most advanced countries.

Cheaper transportation and communication allowed people to travel throughout the world in a way and in a quantity hitherto inconceivable. This process of global integration has been called the first globalization.

In this context we should understand the phenomenon of **colonialism or imperialism**. Both terms are used interchangeably to refer to the territorial expansion of the European industrial powers, especially after 1870. The result of this expansion was the formation of large overseas empires.

The Causes of Colonial Expansion

The colonial and imperialist expansion undertaken by the industrial powers from 1870-1914 was motivated by several factors:

- **Economic factors** (raw materials, new markets to sell and buy, valve for population pressure in the metropolis)
- **Political factors** (national prestige, lobby groups interested in colonization, action of highly influential politicians)
- **Geopolitical factors** (geographic privileged enclaves)
- **Cultural and scientific factors** (thirst for knowledge, extension of Western culture)

Causes of Colonialism

When asked about the causes of the European imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century, historians have traditionally favored **economic causes**.

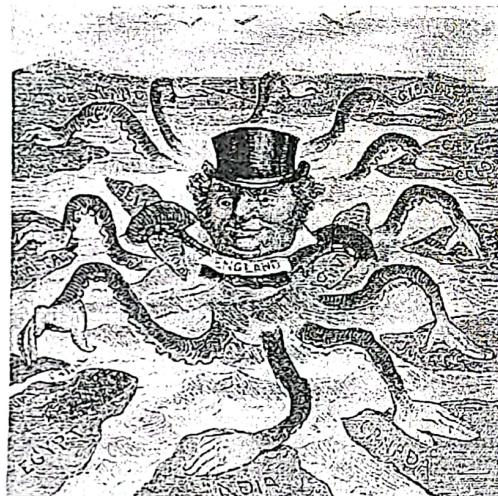
Capitalist development led European powers to seek new spaces in which they could obtain:

- Raw materials to supply its industries (textile fibers, minerals...)

- Markets in which to sell their products
- Territories in which the colonial powers could profitably invest capital, usually in infrastructure such as railways, roads, or bridges
- New lands to locate the growing European population, allowing emigration to ease population pressure in Europe

These factors were important, but have been often overstated. It is now known that many colonies were not a good deal for the European countries that formed empires and that, in many cases, the cost of invading and controlling the colonies considerably exceeded the benefits. In fact, commercial exchanges, demographic flows, and financial investments were much more intense between free countries than between the colonial powers and their colonies.

So, without underestimating the economic reasons, which are keys to understanding imperialism, we should focus our attention on other factors.

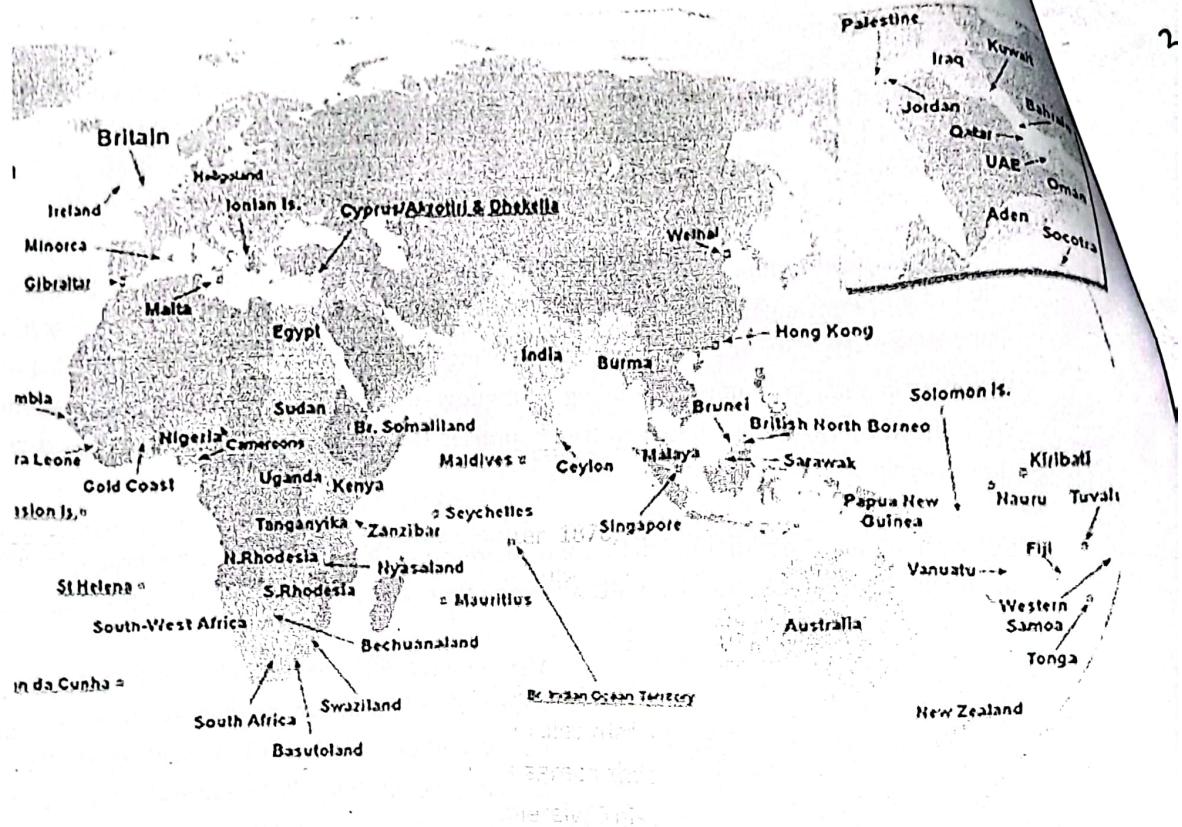


The nineteenth century was the century of nationalism. European powers faced a race for power and prestige that eventually would lead to the First World War. These political causes, based on national prestige, were keys to triggering and maintaining the colonial expansion.

Each country had its own motivations: France, to forget its defeat by Prussia in 1870; Germany and Italy, recently born nations, to reach the greatness of the old European states. Important politicians like the British Disraeli or French Ferry ardently defended the importance of colonial

expansion to their respective countries.

Geostrategic considerations joined the political motives. Countries often conquered a country to hinder the expansion of a rival power or to facilitate communication between different regions of the empire. This was the case of Gibraltar, Malta, or Cyprus or the Suez Canal for the British.



We also should mention what can be called **ideological and scientific factors**:

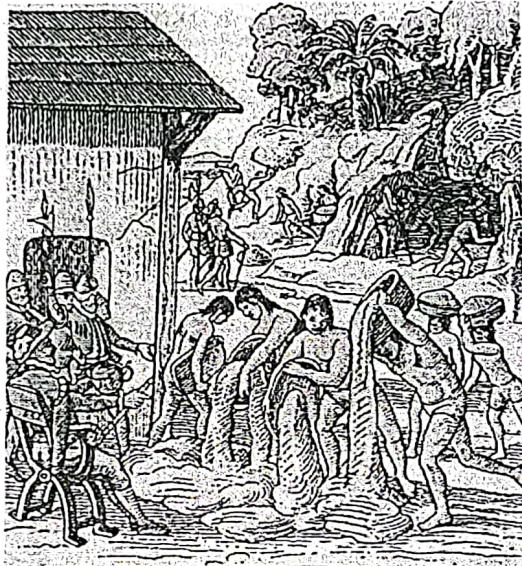
- the eagerness to discover new and unknown territories, something that Europeans had experienced since the fifteenth century.
- the belief on European superiority linked to "social Darwinism".
- the desire to evangelize non-Christian populations.
- the will of extending the values and progress of Western culture.

All these factors were key to understanding European colonial expansion.

- Finally, the European imperial expansion cannot be understood without taking into consideration the European **technological superiority**, the use of quinine to protect Europeans from malaria, and the internal rivalry between ethnic groups that facilitated European invasions.

2. The Great Colonial Empires and Conflicts between the Powers

European colonial empires were born in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. First Portuguese and Spanish, then French, English and Dutch had conquered vast territories on other continents.



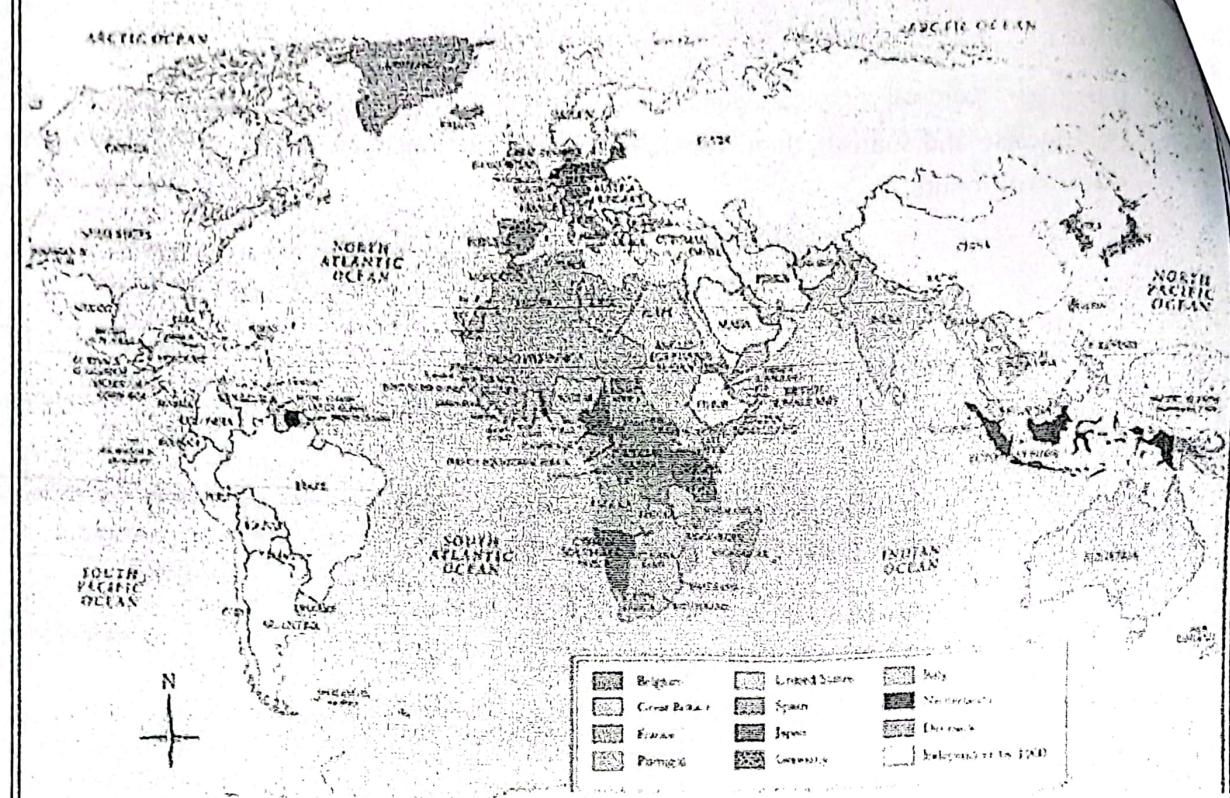
The new expansion of the nineteenth century was led by the great industrial powers.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the various powers were handed an important part of the planet.

- The British Empire constituted the largest in history.
- The French Empire occupied important territories in Africa and Indochina.
- Other empires. European countries like Germany, Italy, Portugal, Holland, or Spain and non-European powers like the United States and Japan.

The metropolis struggle to extend their territories and their interests often clashed and led to diplomatic conflicts. Despite attempts at an agreed upon solution, such as the Berlin Conference in 1895, colonial conflicts were an important factor of international instability.

IMPERIALISM IN THE MODERN WORLD, 1900



The British Empire

Great Britain had been established since the seventeenth century as the great European naval power. Encouraged by its spectacular industrial development, the UK configured an empire stretching from Canada in America to Australia and New Zealand in Oceania, from Egypt and South Africa in Africa to the "jewel of the empire," the large colony of India in Asia. Many colonies in Asia and enclaves ranging from the Caribbean (Jamaica) to Asia (Hong Kong and Singapore), to Europe (Gibraltar, Malta, and Cyprus) shaped the most extensive empire in history.

The French Empire

The French threw themselves into an active colonial expansion with a strong nationalist attitude and a remarkable industrial development. Its empire extended around two areas: Saharan and equatorial Africa (Algeria, Morocco...) and the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia).

Other Empires

Some former colonial powers like Spain in North Africa; Portugal in Africa; and the Netherlands in the Antilles, the Caribbean, and Indonesia remained remnants of its once vast empires. New countries like Germany and Italy struggled to get a place, mainly in Africa, in the grand colonial division that was alive across the globe.

At the end of the nineteenth century, two non-European powers joined the small group of colonist countries. The United States annexed the Philippines and Puerto Rico, while maintaining an indirect domination over Cuba after beating Spain in 1898; and Japan annexed Taiwan and Korea after defeating China in 1898 and Russia in 1904-1905.

Conflicts between the Empires: the Scramble for Africa and the carve up of Africa

Tensions between European powers were not new. However, after 1870, the colonial powers threw themselves into an unprecedented career expansionism that spawned multiple tensions in parts of the world.

The principle central conflict was Africa. After various frictions, the powers, led by German Chancellor Bismarck, decided to meet in order to establish general rules that would give order to the colonial race. In the Berlin Conference of 1885, it was agreed that a country would have rights to a territory it should have explored it completely. This resolution further accelerated the colonization process.



The resolutions of the Berlin Conference did not end tensions. The two great empires, the British and the French, fought to extend their influence and were about to go to a general war over an incident in Fashoda (Sudan), in 1898. However, London and Paris reached an

agreement in the early twentieth century and began a lasting friendship, the *Entente Cordiale*, which eventually led to a military alliance.

There were also the expansionist ambitions of Germany, which had more serious consequences. Their frictions with France in Africa were very important and were key elements in the road to the First World War.

An example of brutal colonialism: Belgian colonization in Congo

The invention of the inflatable tire for J.B. Dunlop in 1887 and the growing popularity of automobiles greatly increased world demand for rubber. King Leopold of Belgium did not hesitate to implement a brutal system of forced labor on the Congolese population. The tribal leaders were forced to organize work in their villages and black workers were brutally exploited. To ensure discipline, Belgian colonial agents were holding women and children of the tribe until the men returned with the amount of rubber that had been assigned. Those who refused or failed saw their villages were burned and their children as punishment were amputated.



3. The Consequences of Colonization

The consequences of Western imperialist expansion are complex and it is very difficult to simplify.

Conquest and occupation were based on violence and the colonial system was based on racial oppression and discrimination. In some cases the economic effects were harmful and indigenous people saw as a foreign culture imposed on their own.

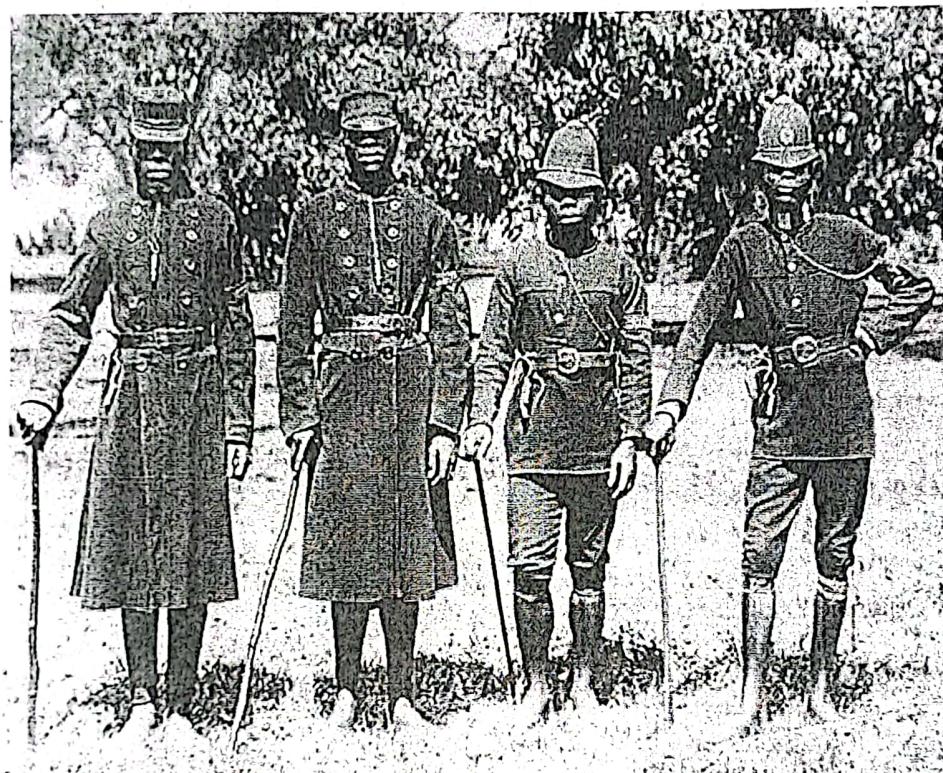
These were some of the most harmful consequences of European colonization:

- Economic exploitation

- Subjection to a foreign control
- Foreigners became the dominant social class
- Loss of its own culture

On the other hand, the Western scientific and technological progress contributed directly or indirectly benefited the colonized populations. We could say that to some extent there were positive consequences:

- Improvement of health conditions
- Access to education for the native elite
- Construction of railways, ports...



Colonialism in Sub-Continent

If looked at the brighter side, even something as out rightly barbaric as colonialism stands a chance of being justified. **Apologists for colonialism often** use this trademark approach to sweep the British colonial atrocities under the carpet – upon which, then, they construct their sandcastle of ‘advantages of colonialism’.

Ascribing advantages to a policy that was premised on oppression not only downplays the endless sufferings that were endured by the millions but also undermines rational thinking. If we start measuring even the most heinous of the acts in terms of the accidental benefits that they might have delivered, as in the case of colonial rule of India, we lose the yardstick to differentiate between the good and bad. But since possessing any such yardstick was least of their concerns, the colonists, and later their apologists, mustered the gall to claim benefits out of the Britain’s sordid rule of the subcontinent.

Economy:

The process of colonial rule in India meant economic exploitation and ruin to millions, the destruction of thriving industries, the systematic denial of opportunities to compete, the elimination of indigenous institutions of governance, the transformation of lifestyles and patterns of living that had flourished since time immemorial, and the obliteration of the most precious possessions of the colonised, their identities and their self-respect. In 1600, when the East India Company was established, Britain was producing just 1.8% of the world's GDP, while India was generating some 23% (27% by 1700). By 1940, after nearly two centuries of the Raj, Britain accounted for nearly 10% of world GDP, while India had been reduced to a poor “third-world” country, destitute and starving, a global poster child of poverty and famine. The British left a society with 16% literacy, a life expectancy of 27, practically no domestic industry and over 90% living below what today we would call the poverty line.

The India the British entered was a wealthy, thriving and commercialising society: that was why the East India Company was interested in it in the first place. Far from being backward or underdeveloped, pre-colonial India exported high quality manufactured goods much sought after by Britain's fashionable society. The British elite wore Indian linen and silks, decorated their homes with Indian chintz and decorative textiles, and craved Indian spices and seasonings. In the 17th and 18th centuries, British shopkeepers tried to pass off shoddy English-made textiles as Indian in order to charge higher prices for them.

The story of India, at different phases of its several-thousand-year-old civilisational history, is replete with great educational institutions, magnificent cities ahead of any conurbations of their time anywhere in the world, pioneering inventions, world-class manufacturing and industry, and abundant prosperity – in short, all the markers of successful modernity today – and there is no earthly reason why this could not again have been the case, if its resources had not been drained away by the British.

If there were positive byproducts for Indians from the institutions the British established and ran in India in their own interests, they were never intended to benefit Indians. Today Indians cannot live without the railways; the Indian authorities have reversed British policies and

they are used principally to transport people, with freight bearing ever higher charges in order to subsidise the passengers (exactly the opposite of British practice).

Railways:

The construction of the Indian Railways is often pointed to by apologists for empire as one of the ways in which British colonialism benefited the subcontinent, ignoring the obvious fact that many countries also built railways without having to go to the trouble and expense of being colonised to do so. But the facts are even more damning.

The railways were first conceived of by the East India Company, like everything else in that firm's calculations, for its own benefit. Governor General Lord Hardinge argued in 1843 that the railways would be beneficial "to the commerce, government and military control of the country". In their very conception and construction, the Indian railways were a colonial scam. British shareholders made absurd amounts of money by investing in the railways, where the government guaranteed returns double those of government stocks, paid entirely from Indian, and not British, taxes. It was a splendid racket for Britons, at the expense of the Indian taxpayer.

The railways were intended principally to transport extracted resources – coal, iron ore, cotton and so on – to ports for the British to ship home to use in their factories. The movement of people was incidental, except when it served colonial interests; and the third-class compartments, with their wooden benches and total absence of amenities, into which Indians were herded, attracted horrified comment even at the time.

And, of course, racism reigned; though whites-only compartments were soon done away with on grounds of economic viability, Indians found the available affordable space grossly inadequate for their numbers. (A marvellous post-independence cartoon captured the situation perfectly: it showed an overcrowded train, with people hanging off it, clinging to the windows, squatting perilously on the roof, and spilling out of their third-class compartments, while two Britons in sola topis sit in an empty first-class compartment saying to each other, "My dear chap, there's *nobody* on this train!")

Nor were Indians employed in the railways. The prevailing view was that the railways would have to be staffed almost exclusively by Europeans to "protect investments". This was especially true of signalmen, and those who operated and repaired the steam trains, but the policy was extended to the absurd level that even in the early 20th century all the key employees, from directors of the Railway Board to ticket-collectors, were white men – whose salaries and benefits were also paid at European, not Indian, levels and largely repatriated back to England.

Racism combined with British economic interests to undermine efficiency. The railway workshops in Jamalpur in Bengal and Ajmer in Rajputana were established in 1862 to maintain the trains, but their Indian mechanics became so adept that in 1878 they started designing and building their own locomotives. Their success increasingly alarmed the British, since the Indian locomotives were just as good, and a great deal cheaper, than the British-made ones. In 1912, therefore, the British passed an act of parliament explicitly making it impossible for Indian workshops to design and manufacture locomotives. Between 1854 and 1947, India imported around 14,400 locomotives from England, and another 3,000 from Canada, the US and Germany, but made none in India after 1912. After independence, 35

years later, the old technical knowledge was so completely lost to India that the Indian Railways had to go cap-in-hand to the British to guide them on setting up a locomotive factory in India again. There was, however, a fitting postscript to this saga. The principal technology consultants for Britain's railways, the London-based Rendel, today rely extensively on Indian technical expertise, provided to them by Rites, a subsidiary of the Indian Railways.

Democracy and Rule of Law?

Britain did not work to promote democratic institutions under imperial rule, as it liked to pretend. Instead of building self-government from the village level up, the East India Company destroyed what existed. The British ran government, tax collection, and administered what passed for justice. Indians were excluded from all of these functions. When the crown eventually took charge of the country, it devolved smidgens of government authority, from the top, to unelected provincial and central "legislative" councils whose members represented a tiny educated elite, had no accountability to the masses, passed no meaningful legislation, exercised no real power and satisfied themselves they had been consulted by the government even if they took no actual decisions.

As late as 1920, under the Montagu-Chelmsford "reforms", Indian representatives on the councils – elected by a franchise so restricted and selective that only one in 250 Indians had the right to vote – would exercise control over subjects the British did not care about, like education and health, while real power, including taxation, law and order and the authority to nullify any vote by the Indian legislators, would rest with the British governor of the provinces.

Democracy, in other words, had to be prised from the reluctant grasp of the British by the nationalists. It is a bit rich to oppress, torture, imprison, enslave, deport and proscribe a people for 200 years, and then take credit for the fact that they are democratic at the end of it.

A corollary of the argument that Britain gave India political unity and democracy is that it established the rule of law in the country. This was, in many ways, central to the British self-conception of imperial purpose; Kipling, that flatulent voice of Victorian imperialism, would wax eloquent on the noble duty to bring law to those without it. But British law had to be imposed upon an older and more complex civilisation with its own legal culture, and the British used coercion and cruelty to get their way. And in the colonial era, the rule of law was not exactly impartial.

Crimes committed by whites against Indians attracted minimal punishment; an Englishmen who shot dead his Indian servant got six months' jail time and a modest fine (then about 100 rupees), while an Indian convicted of attempted rape against an Englishwoman was sentenced to 20 years of rigorous imprisonment. In the entire two centuries of British rule, only three cases can be found of Englishmen executed for murdering Indians, while the murders of thousands more at British hands went unpunished.

The death of an Indian at British hands was always an accident, and that of a Briton because of an Indian's actions always a capital crime. When a British master kicked an Indian servant in the stomach – a not uncommon form of conduct in those days – the Indian's resultant death from a ruptured spleen would be blamed on his having an enlarged spleen as a result of

malaria. Punch wrote an entire ode to The Stout British Boot as the favoured instrument of keeping the natives in order.

Political dissidence was legally repressed through various acts, including a sedition law far more rigorous than its British equivalent. The penal code contained 49 articles on crimes relating to dissent against the state (and only 11 on crimes involving death).

Language and Culture:

Of course the British did give India the English language, the benefits of which persist to this day. Or did they? The English language was not a deliberate gift to India, but again an instrument of colonialism, imparted to Indians only to facilitate the tasks of the English. In his notorious 1835 Minute on Education, Lord Macaulay articulated the classic reason for teaching English, but only to a small minority of Indians: "We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."

The language was taught to a few to serve as intermediaries between the rulers and the ruled. The British had no desire to educate the Indian masses, nor were they willing to budget for such an expense. That Indians seized the English language and turned it into an instrument for our own liberation – using it to express nationalist sentiments against the British – was to their credit, not by British design.

This is why Britain's historical amnesia about the rapacity of its rule in India is so deplorable. Recent years have seen the rise of what the scholar Paul Gilroy called "postcolonial melancholia", the yearning for the glories of Empire, with a 2014 YouGov poll finding 59% of respondents thought the British empire was "something to be proud of", and only 19% were "ashamed" of its misdeeds.

And, Certainly, it does not take much of a rigorous inquiry to conclude that under the garb of democracy, bureaucracy and railways were instruments with which the contours of a totalitarian regime were traced; while some mechanisms were meant to perpetuate the British in power, others were intended to satiate their imperial ambitions. No wonder why the apologists are fond of quoting these 'advantages' in isolation from their context. For, once the context is established, this sandcastle of 'advantages' crumbles, unveiling an era riddled with murder, plunder and occupation.