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The Encounter Britain-India: An Example of Adjustment to Imperialism

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Abstract

When Britain undertook to colonize India, it was quick to realize that it was faced with quite a special case in its history as a colonizing power: the subcontinent was the cradle of an ancient and highly complex civilization, which made it all the more difficult to administer, especially in the specific domains of politics and market economy. This short study aims to look into the various ways in which the necessary adjustment to the new situation was achieved – not only by the conquered, but also by the conqueror.

Keywords: Britain, India, encounter, adjustment imperialism, economy

1 Introduction

With the battle of Plassey in 1757, British imperialism started taking hold on the Indian sub-continent. The old conqueror, namely the Mughal dynasty, was conquered in its turn through the British East India Company. A totally new situation was created, with the arrival of a new and different kind of imperialism that was there to stay. The credo of the civilizing mission was often trumpeted in an attempt to justify the formidable invasion – a justification that could have been made unnecessary by the military superiority of the invaders. So it was mainly in the economic and political domains that the war had to be fought. After examining the situation in pre-colonial time, we look into the different phases of the

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adjustment – phases that roughly correspond to the different attitudes and reactions of the two parties in the new order of things.

2 General Background

2.1 The European Context

European interest in the other parts of the world in general and in India in particular seems to have been prompted by what is commonly referred to by historians as “the crisis of feudalism” in the 14th century.

Different scholars have attempted to pinpoint the causes of this crisis; the most widely accepted theory is that of Edward Perroy who explains the situation by a chain of causes and effects that led to an economic stagnation. The peasants, overexploited by the landlords, resorted to a series of rebellions all over Europe¹, thus overthrowing the hegemonic rule of feudalism. The solution to the problem was twofold: commerce and agriculture had to be improved; and for this to be feasible, both land and marketable products had to be found. New colonized areas were to provide the land, and the products were readily found in the form of precious metals, slaves and spices. To have a clear idea of what the Europeans went to India for, let us hear Immanuel Wallerstein about what the situation was like, later in the 16th century.

At this epoch, the relationship of Europe and Asia might be summed up as the exchange of preciousities. The bullion flowed east to decorate the temples, palaces, and clothing of Asian aristocratic classes and the jewels and spices flowed west. (Wallerstein 1974: 41)

Among these Asian aristocratic classes, those of India were, of course, widely represented.

As for the way the Europeans entered India, we can say that they did so both peacefully and through the use of force, the latter alternative being by far the most important one. Indeed, although Europe at the time was said to be technologically backward, this was only on the agricultural plane. In terms of weaponry, the

¹ Conf. the French *Jacquerie*, a peasant rebellion staged in 1358 against the nobility during the captivity of King Jean Le Bon in England. In England itself, King Richard II in 1381 had to face a massive revolt launched by peasants who were clamoring, among other things, for the abolition pure and simple of serfdom.

continent was well advanced as a result, possibly, of the hunting traditions of the nobility on the one hand, and on the other, the need to suppress peasant revolts or to ward off barbarian invasions. The “factories”² the Europeans built all along the Asian coasts and which were characterized by the famous canon-equipped fortifications prove that, most of the time, they entered India at gunpoint.

The consequences of this expansion for Europe were colossal. It resulted in the creation by Europe of what Wallerstein calls a “capitalist world economy” (Wallerstein 1974). But the commerce with India flourished within a much wider system spread all along the coasts of Western Europe, Africa, Asia, and as far as the eastern shores of China. From this system Europe drew wealth, power and prestige.

2.2 The Indian Context

When Vasco da Gama arrives in Calicut in 1498, he finds India with about the same level of development as the European nations; although certain practices like *suttee*³ were described as cruel and backward, the community in general rested upon a highly sophisticated social and economic structure. It was divided into castes (or *jati*) in which people were grouped according to their occupations: thus, in an ordinary Indian village, we have *Brahmans* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaisyas* (traders), *Shudras* (farmers), which are the main higher classes, so to speak, and at the very bottom, the famous Indian-specific caste of “untouchables” (or *Dalit*). Contrary to the latter group, the Brahmans are revered, even held to be a God-created caste. This, of course, is only the visible part of the iceberg, for there is a host of other castes and sub-castes.

It is to be noted that even today, although the system has been largely outlawed by modern legislation, it survives in a variety of subtle forms that look quite offensive to foreign eyes – among other things, ignorance and extreme poverty that keep thriving in one of the emerging economies of the world.

² According to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, a *factory* is a trading station where “factors”, that is agents, reside and transact business.

³ Indian custom consisting, for a widow, in burning herself either on the funeral pyre of her dead husband or in some other fashion soon after his death (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Made illegal by the British, it has now fallen out of use.

There was, however, the other side of the coin, and that looked a lot brighter. Speaking of the economy, we can say that although it was tightly linked to the caste system, observers were always struck by the high standard of organization it had reached. We notice, for instance, that it operated at two different levels: at village level, the common feature was the *jajmani* system which was aimed at self-sufficiency and which consisted in the sharing of crops and the exchange of services – a kind of communal life. On the other hand, the State itself was kept going through a sophisticated system of land revenue collection based on revenue farming and prebend. Here, the *mansabdar* (or revenue collector) played a key role of transmission belt between the peasants and the crown. The crafts also occupied a paramount position in the Indian economy. Its cotton and silk items were known worldwide, and exported to the European countries, including England itself. Raychaudhuri, speaking of the Dutch merchant Francisco Pelsaert who is known to have conducted business in the region long before the English, states that “He [Pelsaert] mentioned a hundred different crafts in Agra, which was probably an understatement” (Raychaudhuri 1983: 20).

This Indian textile industry is characterized by two highly important features. Firstly, it was ancient and was established as a major, thriving activity long before European intervention, that is to say in the pre-raj era. Here is, in quite a poor French, what an online document says about it:

Les textiles indiens ont influencé des textiles d'autres régions de l'antiquité par l'ère moderne. Un type de tissu imprimé de coton, calicot appelé par Européen (après un centre indien de textile appelé Calicut), a été exporté d'Inde vers l'Europe en grande quantité au 16^{ème} siècle. (*Femme blouse*)

Secondly, and as a consequence, its development was entirely based on Indian technology and know-how. According to Raychaudhuri:

The magic hand of the master craftsman did one particular job at a level of almost incredible excellence, applying skills transmitted down the centuries (Raychaudhuri 1983: 20).

But this Indian expertise went far beyond the textile industry. It also covered the domains of art and architecture, which constitute the most conspicuous achievements of that civilization. It has been established, for example, that no less than 22 Indian artistic, architectural and cultural sites are registered as UNESCO world heritage. Among these the Ellora Caves (registered 1983) near Aurangabad, Maharashtra, and dating back to ancient India (AD 600 to AD 1000); the Bhuddist

Monuments (1989) at Sanchi near Bhopal, dating back to the 2nd and 1st centuries BC, and the more recent ones including the Taj Mahal (1983), the Agra Red Fort (1983), the Fatehpur Sikri (1986), and so on and so forth. What is even more interesting about these monuments, however, is that they transcend the visible artistic beauty they exude, reaching up to the higher spheres of the spiritual and the moral. Here is what an observer says about them:

Not only is the Ellora complex a unique artistic creation and a technological exploit but, with its sanctuaries devoted to Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, it illustrates the spirit of tolerance that was characteristic of ancient India (*Unesco*).

Now if, as I am much inclined to do, we consider that tolerance is one of the cardinal values of world civilization, we can easily accept that India's was a greatly advanced civilization at the time of European incursion, this in spite of the recurrent religious feuds that are now pestering the region.

3 India under British raj

3.1 The Pacific Co-existence

When the British landed on the Indian coasts in 1601, they found India in the same social conditions described above. But the economic condition had somewhat changed. Their predecessors, the Portuguese, had reopened the Indian economy to European commerce (before colonization, there was a link with the African and Arabian worlds through Muslim merchants). There were already some “factories” on the coasts which served as ports of entry for European items (mainly gold and silver), and also as ports of exit for Indian goods (mainly cloth and spices).

Between 1600 and 1700, there was some degree of tolerance, what we can call a pacific coexistence between Indian and European merchants, the latter trying to adjust to the existing system. In Raychaudhuri's words:

The participation of Asian, particularly Indian, merchants to this trade which had suffered in the sixteenth century owing to Portuguese efforts to control it at gunpoint, revived and expanded (Raychaudhuri 1983: 25).

Still, according to him:

By and large, the companies latched onto the existing commercial organization for the procurement of their supplies and it coped with their demand quite comfortably without undergoing any major modification (Raychaudhuri 1983: 27).

Moreover, the European merchants used the services of agents, bankers and brokers who knew the country and its system better.

3.2 Collaboration

3.2.1 In the Economic Field

The definition of “collaborate” by the *Webster’s Dictionary* reads as follows:

To willingly comply with, co-operate with, or assist enemy forces occupying one country – usually with an implication of treacherous dealing in distinction from passive acquiescence. (*Webster’s Dictionary*)

Apart from the fact that this definition implies a situation of war, it seems quite appropriate here. The category of people who were most likely to collaborate were those who shared the same interests with the British. Among others, we can mention the traditional ruling class – *rajahs*, princes and the aristocracy in general, their subordinates such as the *zamindars*⁴, the *baniyas* (or merchants), the bankers, etc. On the other hand, there were the professional groups who worked for money and did not care who the boss was: among them the *sepoys*⁵, the *kayasthas* (or scribes), etc.

Not to be overlooked in this issue of collaboration are also some rich families that had long been established in the textile business, for example those bearing the prestigious names of Tagore and Kasimbazar. Raychaudhuri has this to say about them:

He [Dwarakanath, the most notable member of the junior branch of the Tagore family] provided from time to time indigo and silk to the English Company, established some indigo factories of his own during the indigo boom of 1823–1825, and later some silk factories.

⁴ The *zamindari system*, run by the *zamindars*, was established and used by the Mughals to collect Islamic taxes from peasants.

⁵ The *sepoy* is defined by the *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* as “a native of India employed as a soldier by a European power, esp. by Great Britain”. It is these native “modern” soldiers who staged the famous 1857–1858 *Sepoy rebellion* against British tyrannical rule.

The Kasimbazar family was also for long connected with the silk business, mainly provision of raw silk and silk goods to the English Company. (Raychaudhuri 1983: 111)

In some cases, the hydra-like system extended its tentacles far beyond individuals and families, reaching up to the ruling spheres of the rajahs and their courts: for example, with the 1765 Treaty of Allahabad, Emperor Shah Alam had gone so far as to appoint the East India Company as his *diwan*⁶ for the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

3.2.2 In the Political Field

At the political level too, this collaboration had existed since the time when the Indians realized that the Europeans had become a force to be reckoned with. Thus, back in the 18th century, the puppet Nawab of Bengal Mir Jafar, with the help of the British, had usurped the throne of Siraj-ud-Daulah⁷.

After the final defeat of the Marathas in 1818 and the fall of the Sikhs in 1848, the situation had somewhat changed: the British had by then become the sole masters of the Indian sub-continent. As Peter Marshall put it, “the company was at the same time soldier, general administrator, tax collector and merchant” (Marshall 1988: 102).

Obviously, this was too much for a single entity to handle. So the Company needed the collaboration of the classes mentioned above; and these classes also needed its collaboration, if only for their legitimation. There was clearly an exchange of benefits in this case.

During the upheaval of 1857 and those of the 1900s, the collaboration still involved about the same categories of people. To quote Gyanendra Pandey:

At this more advanced stage of the struggle, the peasants also identified more clearly the forces that were ranged against them. In Faizabad, the targets of the peasants’ violence spread out from the talukdars and their direct agents to patwaris, small zamindars, large cultivators and the high castes in general (Pandey 1988: 89–129).

⁶ *Diwan*: “a chief officer or steward, such as a minister of finance in Indian traditional system” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*).

⁷ Siraj-ud-Daulah was the Nawab (1756–1757) who lost Bengal to the British as a result of the battle of Plassey.

Sometimes, however, collaboration did not involve direct dealings with the British. It took on more sophisticated forms: those who opposed or retarded in any way the Nationalist Movement were stigmatized as collaborators: for example, those who opposed the formation of sections of the Movement in their areas.

It is to be noted here that the sepoys and the police were the last group of collaborators but not the least, in the sense that they belonged in organized structures directly administered by the conquerors.

It is also interesting to note that there is clear difference between collaboration and accommodation. The latter attitude is usually observed when one side finds the other so strong that it has to adapt itself or disappear. The adaptation is often made at heavy costs; this was, for example, the situation of many princes who, willy-nilly, accepted what historians call *subsidiary alliance system* – a doctrine introduced in 1798 by Lord Wellesley, Governor General of India from 1797 to 1805. In accordance with this doctrine,

Indian rulers under British protection suspended their native armies, instead maintaining British troops within their states. They surrendered control of their foreign affairs to the British. In return the East India Company would protect them from the attacks of their rivals (*Subsidiary...*).

So at the start of the encounter, there prevailed not only mutual tolerance between the two protagonists, but even some kind of collaboration – both the positive and negative forms. This situation was, however, bound to change as time went by and de facto colonization settled in.

3.3 Reversal: Resistance and Confrontation

3.3.1 In the Economic Field

The notion of resistance is defined by *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* as “any opposing or retarding force”.

First of all, let us mention that on the whole, the goals pursued by the *Mughal* emperors and the Europeans were so similar that after the power had effectively passed into the hands of the British, there was a kind of continuity. This was apparent mainly in the economic sector, with the same system of tax collection going on.

Between 1700 and the mid-1800s, however, the situation took quite a different turn, mainly for two reasons: on the one hand, the power of the *Mughal Emperor* was fast waning and, on the other hand, Britain had begun to be industrialized. This meant that the British had a lot more leeway in their commercial activities. Indeed, the balance of power had by then largely turned in their favour, and the so called *Golden Firman*⁸ was no longer in force. Besides, the commerce of textiles was reversed as a result of the mass production process made possible by the famous industrial revolution. This was an unprecedented situation which constituted a serious threat to the long-established Indian textile industry.

It is to be noted here that, for a long time, the Company and the British Government in India had been practically the two sides of the same coin; and that, before the Charter Act of 1813⁹ came with contrary dispositions, the Company had developed an economic and commercial system that was entirely monopolistic and domineering in essence.

It is needless to say that Britain was then exclusively in command of the sector of banking and services, a sector in which it has always excelled. This was already what we can call a kind of “normal” monopoly, given the fact that Britain was the power that modernized and expanded it in India. As for the ordinary type of monopoly, it was meant to cover not only the two principal export products, namely silk and cotton, but also a few secondary items such as salt, opium and saltpetre (Raychaudhuri 1983: 288); and it was meant to apply at all stages in the process, from production to exportation. All sorts of rules and regulations were therefore developed and ruthlessly enforced by the Company to the detriment of Indian producers. “In the late 1770s and the 1780s,” says Tapan Raychaudhuri about one of the most prosperous periods for the silk industry:

the so-called *contract system* brought in its wake *indenture regulations* [emphases added] binding the artisans to sell exclusively to the Company – a measure intended to deny them any improvement in their bargaining position as a result of the boom of the 1780s (Raychaudhuri 1983: 288).

⁸ Generally speaking, the *firman* was simply the equivalent of a royal decree, mainly in Ottoman Turkey and in some Oriental countries such as Iran, Mughal India, etc.

The *Golden Firman* was a specific *firman* which had been granted back in 1632 in order, theoretically, to protect the Company’s interests, but in actual fact condoned the collection of customs duties from it.

⁹ The Charter Act of 1813 officially abolished the exclusive monopoly of the Company in India.

The all powerful institution is even known to have developed an elaborate system of coercion and sanctions meant to make the monopoly a reality on the ground. This was reflected in its desire to destroy native units of production: for example, referring to the silk reeries of Bengal, Raychaudhuri describes them as “an institution which the company had to destroy by force after Plassey as it was a challenge to their ambitions of monopoly” (ibid.: 23). But it did not use force only, it also used some tactics: after 1753, the crucial turning point, it started to circumvent the native intermediaries and deal directly with the producers through its own intermediaries, or agents.

As for the forced selling the peasants and artisans were submitted to, it was only the tip of the iceberg: the *zamindars* and *gomasthas*¹⁰ were free to use all sorts of illegal methods such as, among other things, the remeasurement of the cultivated plots or the resettlement of the *ryots*¹¹ in case any cheating was suspected, and even the distraint of the crops and other properties of the defaulting ones. Interestingly enough, all these practices were made possible by official regulations (mainly VII of 1799 and V of 1812) (Raychaudhuri 1983: 139).

Then, after the Company had been formally thrown out of the system, the gap it left had to be filled, for nature, as is well known, abhors a vacuum. This is when a third thief in the form of private companies – the famous *Agency Houses*¹² – appeared on the scene of export trade. In the first half of the 19th century, they rapidly expanded, acquiring considerable leeway. As Raychaudhuri further suggests:

it appears that in 1830 only six Agency Houses owned or managed 65 per cent of the vessels belonging to the port of Calcutta, and all the dockyards used by larger ships, and the collieries and the only textile mill in Bengal (Raychaudhuri 1983: 20).

These companies, however, did not have the caliber of the Company, nor did they have its experience in the field. So they had to find a way to adjust; they decided to unite for at least two major objectives: form a block against the old native

¹⁰ “Gomastha described an Indian agent of the British East India Company employed in the Company’s colonies, to sign bonds, usually compellingly, by local weavers and artisans to deliver goods to the Company” (*Gomastha...*).

¹¹ A peasant or cultivator of the soil (*New Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*).

¹² The firm Watson & Co in the silk industry is a case in point.

businesses that were not ready to clear the stage, and avoid competition among themselves. This was the system known as “collective monopoly”¹³.

3.3.2 In the Political Field

In any case, though, there was a great difference under the raj because everything had become more strict due to two fundamental elements: first, the phenomenal administrative capacity of the Europeans, based on an intimate knowledge of the region and a unique sense of order and control; second, the general census of the 1870s meant to better grasp the colony’s assets in terms of both persons and goods, and, of course, to administer more efficiently. This allowed for harsh revenue assessments and heavier taxes upheld by all the economic and political deciders of the new order. The resentment that resulted among the peasants gave rise to frequent riots and rebellions. In this respect, two major events that deserve special attention are to be mentioned: the 1857 Sepoy rebellion, and the nationalist Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, which culminated in the Quit India Movement of 1942–1944. The 1857 rebellion was, of course, started by a precise social group, the *sepoys*, and on precise and specific grounds which were supposedly religious¹⁴. But in actual fact, it was an expression of the general discontent of the masses and as such, it involved people of different backgrounds. When it got out of the barracks, the movement became chiefly a peasant action carried out under the direction of what certain mainstream historians called the “natural leaders”, that is the *zamindars*, *mansabdars*, *talukdars*¹⁵, etc.

What is interesting to note, though, is that the movement was so popular that, in many areas, the ordinary people did not wait for “the natural leaders” to supervise them. This is the view defended by subaltern historians. Gautam Bhadra, for example, notes that “there were several instances of lower status individuals who stood up and took the lead in the insurrection”. He mentions four such

¹³ *Collective monopoly* is defined as “an agreement among a group of competing price makers to restrain competition among themselves”. The attractive side of it is that “it secures an advantage for its members by lessening or eliminating the scope for substitution among their products”. (Scitovsky 2003: 378)

¹⁴ The story goes that, within the framework of their different activities as soldiers, the *sepoys* were led to touch cow grease – an act that was strictly forbidden by Hinduism which was the avowed faith of most of them.

¹⁵ These are all titles that were held by officials in the *Mughal* tax collection system.

individuals, namely Shah Mal, Devi Singh, Gonoo and Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah. And to make it clear that they did hail from a low social level, he goes on to add the important precision that these peasant-leaders, such as Devi Singh, were “barely distinguishable from their followers” (Pandey 1988: 123).

As for the Quit India Movement of the 1940s, it was the continuation of the Non-Cooperation Movement started earlier in the 1920s by Mahatma Gandhi. It was based on the principles of civil disobedience in the form of passive resistance and non-violence, summed up in the concept of *satyagraha*¹⁶. Its leaders seem to have tried to take advantage of the war situation to drive the British from India. In spite of the credo of non-violence, here again, the movement got out of control and quickly became a mass action. This time, even women and children were involved in various activities carried out within the framework of the struggle. Professor Paul Greenough, who looked closely into the history of the movement, states that “as early as October 11, 1942, *Biplabi* gave instructions of self-defence to village women...”, and goes on to add that:

Despite the initial success of mass attacks on police stations in Tamluk, the heroes according to *Biplabi* were not the Congress leaders of the huge crowds – and certainly not the People – but the handful of innocent women and children mowed down by police firing (Greenough 1983: 353–386).

In addition to these various riots and rebellions meant to directly counter the British through actual physical violence, some non-violent attitudes were also observed which were ultimately aimed at retarding the British enterprise. Among other attitudes, we can mention the refusal to work, to vote and to pay taxes: the latter form of resistance was mainly resorted to by certain *zamindars*, who knew better than anyone else that the whole system rested upon money, and that an important part of that money came from revenue collection.

4 Conclusion

As is well known, Britain had the largest colonial empire on earth. But the experience it had in India is quite unique. For example, the way the colony acquired its independence is totally different from the way, say, African colonies acquired theirs – offered in some cases almost as a gift, and in others at gunpoint

¹⁶ *Satyagraha*: “A politico-religious movement initiated in 1919, favouring passive resistance and non-co-operation as means of opposing abuses” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*).

with liberation wars waged by guerrilla forces. The spirit of the Mahatma allowed the whole process to unfold in a relatively peaceful manner through the Quit India Movement, without independence wars as such.

But it is the economic situation that illustrates better the specificity of the encounter between Britain and India. In spite of the fact that Britain was militarily superior and was therefore able to exert an unfair form of competition, it had to reckon with the colony which had a long manufacturing experience, mainly in the silk and cotton textiles. So the adjustment ended up taking a mutual form, with the stronger side devising ways and means to deal with the weaker one, rather than the latter doing everything to satisfy the desires of its new master.

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Mahamadou DIALLO: The Encounter Britain-India

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