

The Jewel in the Crown

Two Hundred Years of Colonizer and Colonized in British India
by Jerry James

No romance can compare with the story of the handful of Englishmen... who, in barely two centuries built up the majestic structure of an Imperial system under which peace, order and good government are secured for 350 million human beings.

– British Indian official, 1942

What honour is left to us, when we have to take orders from a handful of traders who have not yet learned to wash their bottoms?

– Mughal Empire official, 1765



British India, 1914

Christopher Chen's *Passage* takes place not in India, colonized by England, but in Country X, colonized by Country Y. But because it is a fantasia on E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), let the following tale serve as our starting point.

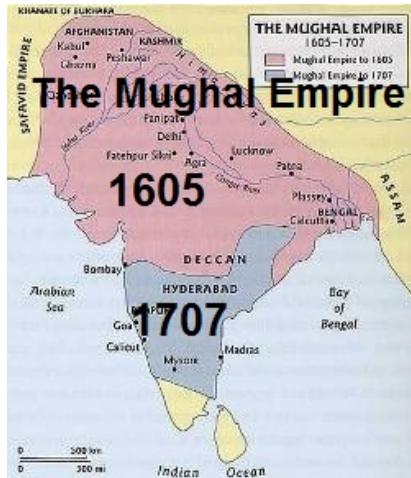
The 1975 film, *The Man Who Would Be King*, (adapted from the 1888 Rudyard Kipling short story) is set in India at the height of British rule. Peachy, a former Soldier of the Queen, finds he must return the watch he's just pick-pocketed before his victim, an Englishman, discovers it's missing. Boarding a railway car, they are soon joined by an Indian, wearing a business suit and a turban, obviously Westernized. No matter. He stands in the way of Peachy's

plan to return the watch unnoticed to his snoozing victim.

Attempting to get rid of the Indian, Peachy insults him several times. Each time, the response is, "Thank you, sir!" Suddenly, Peachy grabs the Indian and throws him off the moving train, awakening the Englishman, who is shocked. But Peachy has an explanation: The blighter stole your watch! Receding in the distance, we hear the Indian's plaintive cry, "Thank you, sir!"

This might serve as an encapsulation of the relationship between colonizer and colonized in the 200 years of British rule in India, the Raj (Hindi: "rule"). But how did it happen? How did the British, starting from one small trading post, become rulers of the Indian subcontinent?

The Mughal Empire



Europe had been importing spices from India since antiquity, but the long and arduous land route meant only the wealthy could afford them. Late in the 15th century, the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope, reaching India in 1498. In time, the Portuguese would take over the existing trade network and establish a century-long monopoly with the Mughal Empire.

The Mughals (Persian: “Mongols”) had swept out of Central Asia beginning around 1525. By 1600, the Mughal Empire was, with Ming China, one of the two wealthiest dominions in the world, covering most of the subcontinent. William Dalrymple states, “India accounted for around a quarter of all global manufacturing. In contrast, Britain then contributed less than 2%...” Yet here came the British, armed with their secret weapon, the joint-stock company.

The East India Company

In 1600, Queen Elizabeth granted a Royal Charter to the East India Company for “trade to the east.” The EIC was a joint-stock company, then a radically new form of doing business. It could “issue tradeable shares on the open market to any number of investors, a mechanism capable of realizing much larger amounts of capital.” (Dalrymple) Almost as an afterthought, the charter also gave the EIC permission to “wage war.”

Trade attempts were rebuffed by the Moghuls, until James I sent an ambassador to their court. The first EIC trading post opened at Surat in 1620, the year the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. A second was soon established at Agra, but further expansion meant fighting the Portuguese. To do that, the EIC hired a mercenary army, native troops (sepoys) under British command. The British paid well and on time. The EIC took Bombay in 1626 and Madras in 1639. By 1696, it was strong enough to defy a Moghul prohibition and build Ft. William on a site that would become the city of Calcutta. India would eventually be conquered by an Indian army.



The Mughal emperor transfers tax collecting rights to the EIC, 1765 (Benjamin West)

By 1712, 15 % of the imports in England came from India through the EIC—textiles, indigo and spices. An entity devoted solely to profit? The Moghul Empire shrugged and traded. Then, in 1739, the Moghuls were crippled by a raid from the north, rendering them too weak to expel the British, even if they wanted to.

When the Seven Years War broke out in 1756, the EIC saw its chance. Not only could it grab the Indian outposts of its enemies, it could also compel the Moghul emperor to assign it the right to collect taxes, in exchange for a comfortable income. “The collecting of Mughal taxes was henceforth subcontracted to a powerful multinational corporation—whose revenue-collecting operations were protected by its own private army.” (Dalrymple) The Battle of Plassey (1757) secured the EIC’s position. Over the next hundred years, it

would so despoil southern Asia that the Hindi word for “plunder” would enter the English language: “loot.”

India’s thriving textile export market was destroyed to make possible the Industrial Revolution in England. Tracts of village land that had served to feed their inhabitants were now given over to cotton, cotton that would go to feed the mills of Manchester. Those textiles would then be *imported* into India, in a perfect circle of mercantilism. In India, what mattered the occasional famine? Feeding the hungry would reduce the profit margin. Of course, in 1773, the EIC had to be saved from commercial failure by a Crown bailout, thereby becoming the first company “too big to fail.”

Let this fact linger: In 1750, India’s largest export was cotton textiles. By 1850, its largest export was opium, grown for the China trade.

The EIC began building three great things in India—but only because they were good for profits. These were the postal system, the telegraph system and the railways, all protected by that private army. By 1857, the EIC’s army in Bengal alone numbered 159,000, with only 15% of them English. That year, the troops mutinied.

The Mutiny



The Mutiny, as seen by the British

Call it the Sepoy Mutiny, the Great Mutiny or the First War of Independence, the British were completely unprepared for it. The causes had long been festering: poor terms of military service and pensions, lack of promotion, Christianization, and racial insensitivity. The situation lacked only an inciting incident. It found one in the issuing of new rifles. These used paper cartridges

that had to be ripped open with one’s teeth. The rumor quickly spread that the cartridges were coated with beef/pig fat, taboo to Hindus/Muslims. The rumor was both contradictory and deadly.

The Mutiny began on May 10, 1857, but only the Bengal Army rebelled. The EIC’s armies in Madras and Bombay did not. After initial successes, the rebellion faltered, as the British brought in reinforcements. During the year of the insurrection, atrocities were committed on both sides; neither discriminated between soldiers and civilians. But while official British losses totaled only 2,392, Indian losses were estimated at 800,000.

On August 2, 1858, Parliament passed the Government of India Act, abolishing the East India Company. India would now be ruled by the British Crown.

The Crown



Christmas in India, 1881 (An idealized view by E. K. Johnson)

Technically, the British Raj begins here, with Victoria crowned Empress of India—the Jewel in the Crown—and swarms of British civil servants, military men and merchants (plus their families) voyaging out to take up what Kipling would call, with absolutely no irony, the White Man’s Burden. The Burden, of course, was borne by the native peoples, as shown in Peachy’s encounter with the Westernized Indian.

Under the Crown’s viceroy, the British would now embark on what they saw as a civilizing mission, especially since the Queen had proclaimed the people of India were to be treated as British subjects. These included not only the people under direct

British rule, but those in the 175 princely states, stretching from Cape Comorin to Afghanistan to Siam. As they continued to extract wealth from the subcontinent over the next 90 years, the British made two choices that would aid eventual Indian independence. The first was to make English the state's official language, which would unknowingly unite India's polyglot peoples.

The second involved bureaucracy. India needed civil servants, not only in government, but to run its railways and its postal and telegraph systems. But who would they be? The same thinking that had led the EIC to hire Indian soldiers now led the Crown to establish schools to train those who were intelligent (and lucky and of the right caste). The most promising were sent to study law in England. These included Jawaharal Nehru and Mohandas K. Gandhi, who would later lead opposition to British rule.

After World War I, at the time when E. M. Forster was private secretary to an Indian noble, it was clear that India would eventually be free. But that freedom was still 25 years, a depression, and a world war away—freedom at midnight on August 15, 1947.

It is easy to mock the people of the Raj, those *pukka sahibs* and *memsahibs*, unwittingly training their successors as they carried on through famines that killed thousands of Indians and massacres that killed thousands more, aided only by tea breaks. But let us end with Martin Deming Lewis's question: "Is it possible that British rule was both destructive and creative at the same time?"

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for nearly sixty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.