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978-0-521-09652-2 - The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century

Anil Seal

Excerpt

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I

Political India

British rule in India became the most spectacular case of imperialism in modern times, but it was a special case as well. The early conquests seemed glittering to the men who made them, but half a century later the mid-Victorians, who relied on influence and looked askance on rule, were clear that they wanted no more Indias out of the bargain basements of Asia. Their Indian empire was not a millstone but neither had it turned out to be a treasure-trove. Only gradually was India made into a credible economic asset to the British economy as a whole rather than to a favoured few. Nevertheless the narrow interests originally confined to traders, shipping men and dabblers in stock broadened out to embrace cotton masters and railway builders. Railways also attracted the investor, and the flow of private capital increased with the growth of such cash crops as tea, indigo and jute. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the patterns of Indian trade were fitting conveniently into the international needs of the British economy.

Yet many of these new advantages might have been drawn from an India controlled informally, without the administrative loads, the diplomatic liabilities and the foreign wars to which Britain was committed by her oriental empire. On the logic of Cobdenism it was hard to justify so gigantic a possession in terms of the links between Britain and India alone. The advantages showed to the full only when they were placed in the larger context of British interests in Asia as a whole. Once it had been unified and rationally organised, India took its place beside the United Kingdom as a second nucleus of British expansion. In absolute terms her trade might not be massive; but it was large enough to throw her influence around her neighbours in Asia. Her systems of communication linked her far more tightly to the world market, and her activities were backed

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by far longer lines of credit. With the exception of the Russian Empire in Central Asia, no neighbouring state was impervious to her influence. From the Indian base, British influence flowed eastwards across Burma into Malaya, Siam and Indonesia; it moved into China, either through the shuttling of trade between Calcutta and the Yellow Sea, through diplomacy in Sinkiang, or through reconnaissance past the Irrawaddy into the south-west provinces. From the western flank of India, Bombay had spun a web of influence over the Persian Gulf and across the Trucial Coast to the Red Sea; and from there to Zanzibar, where it exploited the prestige of the client sultan to loom over the mainland of East Africa. These elegant and economical systems of informal control were typical of the Victorian mode of expansion through 'mere influence'; but what underpinned them was the formal empire in India. Much of the later influence depended on the fact of the earlier conquest. It was wise of Victorian statesmen to decide that they wanted no more Indias; but it was well for them that they possessed one already. As the British Empire became more and more an oriental empire, linking the Middle East, South-east Asia and the Far East, India had become its linchpin.

This second centre of British world power possessed formidable resources of its own. A nation of shopkeepers in Europe, in Asia the British were a militarist power. Here the Indian army guaranteed the security of the base, while providing the force to overawe or strike down its neighbours east or west. Its operations were largely outside the control of parliament, and their cost fell lightly upon the British taxpayer, who had a vote, while falling heavily upon the Indian taxpayer, who had not. Behind this unparliamentary army, an enormous reserve of manpower stood ready for British purposes, if the Sarkar was minded to stay. The events of 1857 showed that it was so minded. The armed challenge proved that the Indians could not turn the British out by force: not because the foreigners were the stronger, but because they were more united. As long as any internal crisis in the future was capable of a military solution, then they would be able to solve it. For some decades after 1857 this seemed to be the only type of internal crisis likely to threaten them; consequently the Raj sheltered behind a panoply of force which could evoke terror and inspire respect.

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On the face of it, British dominion was an unabashed autocracy, tempered by the rule of law, but governing without any system of representation; the only open question in its constitution was whether to exercise the autocracy mainly from London or from Calcutta. In fact the mode of rule was much more subtle and conditional. But before going behind this outward appearance, it will be as well to look at the formal system of government as a whole.

Since the Act of 1858, government had lain partly in London with the Secretary of State for India, and partly in Calcutta with the Governor-General. Ultimate responsibility lay in parliament, but its members gave little heed to the problems of India. The taxpayers were not troubled. The parties were at one. The problems seemed far away. Furthermore, they were so arcane as to seem unintelligible. This freed the hands of the India Office, but its administrators were wary of asserting any detailed control over Indian affairs. In 1858 the Cabinet had agreed that 'the government of India must be, on the whole, carried out in India itself'.¹ In practice this meant that London was disinclined to intervene except in issues affecting the sub-continent as a whole or in provincial issues which had some bearing on general policy. But as communications quickened, London could keep in closer touch, and it grew harder to decide large issues in India. The Secretary of State did not discuss them entirely in the abstract since he was assisted by a council of retired Indian administrators, on whom he could draw for advice that was as skilled as it was sometimes dated. In theory, the India Council was merely a consultative body; in practice, it sometimes exercised an unofficial veto, either because the Secretary of State was weak or because he used its prestige to obstruct a Viceroy whose judgement he suspected.²

But the system still left great powers of initiation and control in the hands of the government of India. At the apex of this system stood the Governor-General of British India, who was Viceroy as the symbol of British paramountcy over the princes. With the exception of Lawrence, all nineteenth-century vice-

¹ Quoted in H. H. Dodwell (ed.), *The Indian Empire 1858-1918*. The Cambridge History of the British Empire, v (Cambridge, 1932), 211.

² For the role of the Council see S. N. Singh, *The Secretary of State for India and his Council (1858-1919)* (Delhi, 1962).

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roys came to India as aristocrats, and with the exception of Curzon these aristocrats came with a sketchy knowledge of the country. Inevitably then, they were deeply dependent upon the advice of the Governor-General's Council, which came to consist of six members, dividing among themselves the main departments of government in a portfolio system. Of the members, both the commander-in-chief and the Finance member were sometimes brought in from outside. But it was the traditions of the Indian civil service which dominated the Council, and sometimes the Viceroy as well. In much the same way the service dominated the governors of the Madras and Bombay Presidencies, usually politicians or notables sent out from England. But the lieutenant-governors of Bengal, the North-western Provinces, and the Punjab,¹ together with the chief commissioners of the Central Provinces, Assam and Burma, were themselves officers of the covenanted civil service. Influential in policy-making, the service was supreme in the administration of British India.

In most provinces the main unit of administration was the division, controlled by a commissioner who had several districts in his charge. By common consent the district was the key unit of administration, and the deputy commissioner, collector or district officer who ruled the 250 districts of British India was the vital figure in the system. His charge exceptionally might contain more than three million people and might extend over as many as seventeen thousand square miles. Here his tasks were to keep the peace, to supervise the courts, to collect the land revenue, to contrive local improvements, to report on local conditions, and to administer statutes by the stick. In the classical theory of district administration which the British evolved in India and were later to take to Africa, the essential function of this man of all work was to discover and to mould the state of opinion in his district. To do this, he had to be constantly on tour, attentive to grievances, representing the Sarkar, acting, as the old phrase has it, as the Father and Mother of his district. But this was an idealised view. In the first place, the amount of touring depended on the type of

¹ Until 1911 Bengal included Bihar and Orissa; after 1902 the North-western Provinces and Oudh were known as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. Until 1901 the Punjab included what then became the North-west Frontier Province.

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land settlement in his province. Where the revenue system called for a regular inspection of the crops by the district officer, then he would necessarily see more of the villages than an officer would see in another province, where the assessment of revenue had been permanently settled. Secondly, the pioneering style of rule was fast being replaced by a more sedentary administration, and it was a constant source of complaint that men who ought to be in camp were shut up in offices, grappling with the paper work forced on them by the growth of the secretariats, both at the centre and at provincial headquarters.

From the central secretariat at the top to the district officer at the bottom, the administration was reserved for the nine hundred or so members of the Indian civil service, the covenanted service.¹ In practice, this meant that it was reserved for the British. Indians were free to take the entrance examination for the service, but it was usually a freedom to fail.² By 1887 there were only sixteen Indians among the 890 members of the covenanted service, and not until the twentieth century did any of them rise higher than the commissionership of a division. Neither were matters easier for them in those branches of the executive where the top posts were not the preserve of the covenanted service; for here also the British still held the senior places. In government service, as in private practice, the career most open to Indian talents was the law. By an Act of 1861 the high courts at Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Allahabad had been designated as supreme provincial courts; below them came the district and sessions courts. Here there were covenanted civilians on the bench, but Indians were joining them from the uncovenanted provincial services, and from the local bar.

In terms of formal constitutional analysis then, British India was ruled autocratically. At all levels from the Viceroy's Council

¹ The covenanted service consisted of those officers who had been duly examined and selected, then entered into a covenant with the Secretary of State, swearing loyalty to the crown and engaging themselves to accept the codes and discipline of the service. The Indian Civil Service Act 1861 (24 and 25 Vict. c. 54) expressly reserved to the service all the more important civil posts under the rank of member in council in the Regulation Provinces.

² By the end of the 1860s, only sixteen of them had attempted the examination, and only one had passed. See Argyll to Governor-General in Council, 8 April 1869, *Parliamentary Papers* [henceforth *P.P.*], 1878–9, LV, 305–6.

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down to the district, the system spurned any recourse to representative government;¹ the first slow steps towards it in the districts and municipalities were not to come until the local government reforms of Ripon's viceroyalty, and in the provinces until the Indian Councils Act of 1892. As the heirs of despots, the British must be despots too, so the argument ran. The Indian Empire could not be governed by rosewater; on the contrary, the rulers of so vast, so various, so turbulent a land needed to keep their powder dry and their prestige intact. But if the price of India was eternal vigilance, then clearly the technique of decentralising the empire through responsible government, which the mid-Victorians had applied to the colonies of white settlement, could not apply to India.²

While inveighing against Oriental Despotisms, the British had created one of their own. The izzat, the prestige, of government was as matchless as that of the Mughals in their prime. Its interventions in the affairs of the Indian princes grew higher-handed. The protocol surrounding the Viceroy and Governor-General grew more complex. The prose of the administration might be as bland as that in any other of the Queen's dominions, yet its government ruled with a majesty all its own. Nevertheless, this administration, so renowned and peremptory, was hobbled by serious checks to its authority. Some of these limitations could be seen in the working of the system of government; others of a more fundamental kind were inherent in the

¹ In 1861 the Viceroy's Executive Council had been expanded by up to twelve additional members, of whom at least half had to be selected from un-officials. This body, which came to be known as the Legislative Council, had legislative powers over all persons and courts in British India. It was not of course a representative body; it was merely an extension of the Executive Council. The 1861 Act also provided that the Executive Councils of Madras and Bombay might be extended for legislative purposes. Legislative Councils were established for Bengal in 1862, and for the North-western Provinces and Oudh in 1886.

² The autocracy of the rulers of India was matched by the growing liberalism of Britain's attitude towards the 'Greater Britain' of her white settlements, striking a discord between these, the two most important modes, of British expansion. 'How can the same nation pursue two lines of policy so radically different without bewilderment, be despotic in Asia and democratic in Australia, be in the East . . . the greatest Mussulman Power in the world . . . and at the same time in the West be the foremost champion of free thought and spiritual religion, stand out as a great military Imperialism to resist the march of Russia in Central Asia at the same time that it fills Queensland and Manitoba with free settlers?' J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, 1883), p. 177.

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very nature of British imperialism in India. As the structure of politics changed in Britain itself, the division of powers between London and Calcutta became a matter of more concern to the rulers of India. It might be self-evident to them that the country had to be ruled by command from above, not through representation from below. Yet how was this steadfast authoritarianism of the British overseas to be reconciled with the turn towards democracy of the British at home? After Disraeli had shot Niagara in 1867, it seemed that the traditional constants of British policy were imperilled by the unpredictable tastes of his new voters. In many ways these fears of Lord Cranborne and his circle turned out to be exaggerated; but in the later 1870s they both inhibited and irritated the Viceroy of India. Lytton wrote that 'England is fast losing the instinct and tact of Empire. The model English politician of the day... appears to me an exceedingly foul bird, who cannot help dirtying his own nest, and cackling over his own squitter';¹ behind the complaint lay his feeling of '...our great difficulty of working efficiently a despotic executive in India without bringing it into collision with a democratic legislature in England'.² Sure enough, Lytton's Afghan adventure was one of the targets in the Midlothian campaign, in which Gladstone's success seemed to show that a forward policy might be an electoral disaster.³

But this was not the only force tying the hands of the government of India. As the needs of defence and administration grew, so too did financial difficulties. British India was self-supporting: had it not been, the criticisms from the Little Englanders would have been much louder. Indian revenues were inelastic, since the bulk of them came from the land, and in spite of strict economy and decentralisation they balanced so uneasily that any sudden increase in expense, such as famine relief, a crisis on the frontier or a falling exchange, might threaten a deficit. With the failure of the thorough-going financial reform after the mutiny, the government of India delegated some of its general financial authority to the provincial administrations, for

¹ Lytton to Stephen, 28 January 1878, Stephen Papers, Additional Manuscripts (hereafter Add.), 7349.

² Lytton to Stanhope, 9 May 1878, quoted in M. J. Cowling, 'Lytton, the Cabinet, and the Russians, August to November 1878', *English Historical Review*, LXXVI (January 1961), 70 n. 4.

³ This is not to say, however, that the election of 1880 was really won and lost over these overseas issues.

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the sake of retrenchment.¹ From 1870, when Mayo launched this experiment in devolution, until 1887, when it was temporarily halted, Calcutta's total control over financial allocations to its subordinates was slowly reduced. During these vital years for Indian political growth, when the critics of the Raj were calling for social reform and economic expansion, the government was too poor to meet their demands.

But these divisions of authority and opinion between Calcutta and London, and between Calcutta and its provincial administrations, are less important than the power relations between the British rulers and their Indian subjects. Constitutions are poor guides to the realities of power in any colony, and this is particularly true of so complex a dependency as India. Whenever a Mr Mothercountry stated that the sub-continent was governed autocratically, he was producing a dramatised generalisation out of a special case. It might have needed the ironhanded methods of a Nicholson to launch the Punjab style of administration, and the cannon of Lord Clyde to batter flat a rebellion on the plains of Hindustan, but after the turbulences had been quelled, it was by the political methods of 'Clemency' Canning and John Lawrence that the talukdars of Oudh and the sardars of the Punjab had been won over. Self-interest, not self-abnegation, brought them to the side of the Raj. This argument was all the more true of the Presidencies of Madras, Bengal and Bombay. Here British power had been firm before its extension to upper India; here during the crisis of 1857 not a dog had barked; here there were districts and cities undergoing much more rapid economic and social change than any parts of Hindustan proper. If political devices diluted the autocracy in Lucknow and Lahore, then clearly they were still more influential in Calcutta and Bombay. Indeed this system of control by manipulation rather than by force extended far beyond the areas of pavements and street lighting. All the hills and jungles of Orissa were ruled by less than a hundred Englishmen.² Evidently there were large parts of British India where autocracy was tempered by consent.

By the consent of whom? Here the argument can be generalised. Colonial systems of government, in which the alien few

¹ Bisheshwar Prasad, *The Origins of Provincial Autonomy...* (Allahabad, 1941), p. 158.

² S. Gopal, *British Policy in India 1858-1905* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 7.

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rule the native many, have tended to rely upon the support of some of their subjects, and the passivity of the majority; such a system is cheaper, and frequently less embarrassing. In India understandings between the Raj and some of its subjects were a necessity if an off-shore island in north-western Europe was to govern hundreds of millions in South Asia. But these collaborations themselves varied both in their nature and in their intensity. Collaboration is a slippery term which may apply at any level between acquiescence and resignation. Men who worked with the foreign regime did so from a variety of motives: the wish to keep a position of importance or the hope of gaining such a position, the intention of working for an attractive regime or the habit of working for any regime, however unattractive. But in the physiology of colonialism it is results not motives that matter; and all those groups may be classed as collaborators whose actions fell into line with the purposes of the British.

Such a system was not static, for yesterday's enemies might be tomorrow's allies. Neither was it uniform, because the unevenness of development throughout India called for different techniques in different regions. Nevertheless it is possible to identify certain broad groups as the allies or the enemies of the Raj in the decades after 1857. Collaboration in its most palpable form was embodied in those Indians who were employed by the state. Outside the charmed circle of the covenanted service, there was a multitude of Indians who held official positions under the central government, and in the service of the provincial governments. Many of the subdivisions, talukas and tahsils (the largest units inside a district) were administered by Indian officers who thus controlled another hierarchy of Indians down to the headman in charge of a village (the smallest unit inside a district). The British made no difficulty about employing Indians in the uncovenanted service; naturally enough, because India was too poor to justify the use of Europeans in close administration. Consequently, the government was never sure what the mass of its subjects were thinking.¹ It might exhort its European officers to tour their districts, but

¹ As Lyall put it after returning to a province from a term on the Viceroy's Council: 'the big Government people can only guess faintly and vaguely what will be the effect of their measures'; H. M. Durand, *Life of the Right Hon. Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall* (Edinburgh and London, 1913), p. 275.

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their reports could be impressionistic at best. It was only at lower levels that opinion could realistically be tested, and here, as Sir Walter Lawrence recognised, 'the real administration was in the hands of the Indian officials'.¹

There were other Indians standing outside the hierarchy of officials, whose support was of greater political importance to the Raj. During the first half of the century the British had often met resistance from landowners and notables, the traditional leaders of their localities, who were cut down for their pains.² But to dwell upon their resistance would be to pity the plumage and to forget the dying bird. For the most part, the Indian notables were moribund, and their resistance was scattered and spasmodic. Some of this old political elite had been blown into historical footnotes by the cannons of the redcoats, others had been shrunk into administrative agents by the pressures of British rule. For the princes the moment of truth had come in 1857, when the majority chose to be puppets rather than proto-martyrs. In any case all the great chiefs were brought into line after the Rising, when the British displaced the stiff-necked and cajoled the remainder. In a sense the Durbars of Lytton and Curzon, with plumes waving and swords flashing, were entertainments staged to impress the groundlings who had to pay for them. Most of these magnates became ineluctably committed to the Raj, although at the district level some of the local notables were more ambiguous collaborators. They had much to gain from collaboration. As landlords in the areas under permanent settlement, they enjoyed the prestige of collecting revenue for government; as talukdars or zemindars in upper India, they possessed tenurial rights certified by the Raj; wherever the government created them honorary magistrates, they were associated with the enforcement of its law. As landlords, they had an assured place in society; as men whom the Viceroy delighted to honour, as an unofficial local executive in the work of government, as the coadjutors of its official agents, their position was considerably enhanced. But if they gained from the connection, so too did the British. In a rural hierarchy founded on deference, the role of these local landowners could

¹ W. R. Lawrence, *The India We Served* (London, 1928), p. 113.

² These outbreaks are conveniently summarised in S. B. Chaudhuri, *Civil Disturbances during the British Rule in India (1765-1857)* (Calcutta, 1955), pp. 1-181, 198-219.