

# Gandhi and the End of Empire

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Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World, 1914-1948*, Penguin Random House, 2018.

David Gilmour, *The British in India: Three Centuries of Ambition and Experience*, Allen Lane, 2018.

NEW DELHI – The books under review both describe the people and events that shaped the final years of the British Raj in India, and demonstrate a magisterial command of their subject. But the similarities end there: these books could not be more different in the ground they cover or, ultimately, in their sympathies.

The first is by Ramachandra Guha, a well-known Indian historian whose previous works include an excellent biography of Mahatma Gandhi's early life until 1914 (*Gandhi Before India*), and a historical survey of modern India following the Mahatma's assassination in 1948 (*India After Gandhi*). Guha's new book, *Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World, 1914-1948*, fills the gap in between, describing the final three and a half decades in the life of a saintly nationalist hero who would eventually be remembered as the father of a newly independent India. By contrast, the Mahatma plays no role in *The British in India: Three Centuries of Ambition and Experience*, the historian David Gilmour's study of India's colonial tormentors.

## Gandhi's Larger Truth

Gandhi, as we know, was the extraordinary leader of the world's first successful non-violent movement against colonial rule. But he was also a philosopher committed to living out his own ideas, whether they applied to individual self-improvement or social change; hence the subtitle of his autobiography: "The Story of My Experiments with Truth."

No dictionary definition of "truth" captures the depth of meaning that Gandhi found in it. His truth, Guha notes, emerged from his convictions, and contained not just what was accurate, but what was just and therefore right. Such truth could not be obtained by "untruthful" or unjust means, especially the use of violence.

Gandhi described his method as *satyagraha*, which literally means "holding on to truth," or, as he variously described it, harnessing a "truth-," "love-," or "soul-force." He disliked the English term "passive resistance," because *satyagraha* required activism. To Gandhi, one who believes in truth and cares enough to obtain it cannot afford to be passive, and must be

prepared to suffer actively for it.

Viewed in this way, non-violence – like the later concepts of non-cooperation and non-alignment – is not merely about renouncing violence, but about vindicating truth. In non-violence, suffering is intentionally taken upon oneself – instead of being inflicted on one's opponents – because only by willingly accepting punishment can one demonstrate the strength of one's convictions *vis-à-vis* one's oppressors.

Guha details how Gandhi applied this approach to India's movement for independence. Non-violence succeeded where sporadic terrorism and moderate constitutionalism had both failed. Gandhi showed the masses that freedom was a simple matter of right and wrong, and he furnished them with a form of resistance for which the British had no response.

Non-violent civil disobedience enabled Gandhi to expose the injustice of the law, giving him a moral advantage. By accepting his captors' punishment, he held a mirror up to their brutality. And through hunger strikes and other acts of self-imposed suffering, he demonstrated the lengths to which he was prepared to go in defense of truth. In the end, he rendered the perpetuation of British rule impossible, by exposing the lie at the heart of imperialist paternalism.

### **An Enigmatic Life**

Yet as Guha reminds us, Gandhi's fight was not just against imperialism, but also against religious bigotry at home – a commitment that is very relevant to the current era. The descendants of Gandhi's detractors on the Hindu right now hold power in India, and support for their brand of nationalism is at an all-time high. In their estimation, Gandhi went too far to accommodate Muslim interests. Within the jingoistic *Hindutva* movement, his pacifism is regarded as unmanly.

## **GANDHI**

THE YEARS THAT  
CHANGED THE  
WORLD

1914–1948



RAMACHANDRA GUHA

But Gandhi, an openly practicing and deeply committed Hindu, defended a version of the faith that was inclusive and universalist, and thus demanded respect for all other faiths. Gandhi was murdered for being too pro-Muslim, and yet he died with the name of the Hindu god Rama on his lips. In the event, he had just come out of a fast that was meant to pressure his own followers, the ministers of the new Indian government, into transferring a larger share of undivided India's assets to the new state of Pakistan. (Much to the Pakistanis' horror, Gandhi had also announced that he would spurn the country he had failed to keep

united, and spend the rest of his years in Pakistan.)

Such was the enigma of Gandhi. An idealistic, quirky, quixotic, and determined man, he marched only to the beat of his own drum, and often got everyone else to pick up the same rhythm. It has been said that he was half saint, half Tammany Hall politician. Like the best crossbreeds, he managed to synthesize the qualities of his component parts while transcending their contradictions.

But the Mahatma had a personal life, too. Guha describes in some detail Gandhi's intimate friendship with a married woman, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani (though there is no suggestion of a physical relationship). He also recounts the troubling story of Gandhi's experiments in sleeping naked with young women (including his own grand-niece) to test his vow of celibacy. Though there can be no doubt about the purity of his intentions – Gandhi gave up sex at the age of 35 – nor can there be any question that such idiosyncratic behavior alienated many of his followers (and remains controversial today).

Still, nothing in Guha's thorough account diminishes Gandhi's greatness or the extraordinary and lasting resonance of his life and message. While the world was disintegrating into fascism, violence, and war, the Mahatma espoused the virtues of truth, non-violence, and peace, and left colonialism utterly discredited. Moreover, he set an example of personal conviction and courage that few will ever match. He was that rare leader who transcends the inadequacies of his followers.

## **India for the English**

The British ruled India for centuries with unshakeable self-confidence, buttressed by protocol, alcohol, and a lot of gall. Stalin, for his part, found it "ridiculous" that "a few hundred Englishmen should dominate India." Though his numbers were off, he was right in principle: the British Raj operated with remarkably few people. Even at the peak of the empire in 1931, there were just 168,000 Britons – including 60,000 in the army and police, and a mere 4,000 in civil government – to run a country of some 300 million people. The British in India never accounted for more than 0.05% of the population.

In his monumental book, Gilmour sheds light on how they did it. He delves meticulously into the lives of Britons who lived and worked in India over the course of "three centuries of ambition and experience." (An Indian might be tempted to substitute "looting and racism" to describe the colonial period, but we won't dwell on that.) A decade ago, in *The Ruling Caste*, Gilmour took readers on a similarly deep dive into the lives of the Englishmen who worked in the Indian Civil Service (ICS). But in his new volume, he has broadened the range substantially to include the soldiers, journalists, and "boxwallahs" (commercial classes), as well as the hunters who single-handedly decimated most of the subcontinent's wildlife. In the case of the latter, they lived by the motto, "It's a fine day, let's go and kill something."

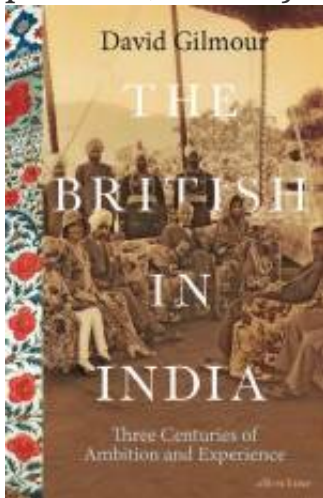
In describing the social backgrounds of the young men whom Britain sent to govern its far-flung empire, Gilmour takes us through their examinations, training, postings, social lives, professional duties, and extracurricular (sometimes extramarital) activities. Much of this is familiar ground, notably trodden by the ICS's own Philip Mason in his 1985 book *The Men*

*Who Ruled India*. But Gilmour has pored over a wealth of private papers and unpublished correspondence, leaving his narrative enriched by an intimacy that humanizes his subjects.

More broadly, Gilmour explains how the British sustained their empire in India through an extraordinary combination of racial self-assurance, superior military technology, the mystique of modernity, the trappings of enlightened progressivism, and brute force. Of course, it should also be said that the British benefited a great deal from the cravenness, cupidity, opportunism, disunity, and lack of organized resistance on the part of the vanquished.

## **Paternalism and Oppression**

The British were in India to do a job: to advance the strategic, commercial, and political interests of their home country. Interestingly, Gilmour notes that two-thirds of the viceroys in the six decades from 1884 had attended Eton, as had half of the governors of the richest province, Bombay. Elitism at home reinforced racism abroad.



Though Indians were permitted to take the civil-service examination from 1868 onward, they were long relegated to inferior positions. As one viceroy, Lord Mayo, put it, “We are all British gentlemen engaged in the magnificent work of governing an inferior race.” Needless to say, few shared Queen Victoria’s “romantic feelings for brown skins.” In Gilmour’s telling, the British had no illusions about preparing Indians for self-government. Their view of Indians was paternalistic at best, but more often contemptuous. Well into the twentieth century, Britons on the subcontinent spoke and wrote of the need to treat Indians like “children” incapable of ruling themselves.

There were British families that served the empire in India over the course of several generations – some for more than 300 years – without ever establishing roots. They would often send their own children “home” for schooling while they “endured” years of separation from loved ones. But it was not all self-sacrifice and hard work. The British in India were afforded not just generous furloughs and a guaranteed pension, but also the highest salaries in the empire. Some found it “quite impossible” even to spend their income. It is little wonder that English political reformer John Bright once described the empire as a “gigantic system of outdoor relief for the aristocracy of Great Britain.”

British society in India was shamelessly committed to its own pleasures. The families and

hangers-on of senior officials routinely withdrew to mountain redoubts for months on end. As they whiled away their time with dances, banquets, and social fripperies, the Indian people, well out of their sight, continued to be ruthlessly exploited. In the summer capital of Simla, for example, so-called grass widows took in the cooler air while their husbands stayed behind to toil in the hot plains. These socialites' principal activities included gambling, drinking, dancing, and adultery – usually in that order.

Meanwhile, racism became entrenched, pervasive, and increasingly repugnant over time. But while Gilmour acknowledges the racism, he does not address its connection to British self-interest. The Indians were systematically shown their place, with even those in government service being condemned to inferior ranks, piddling pay, and scarce opportunities for career advancement. As independent India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, once said of the ICS, it was “neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service.”

### **White-Washed Imperialism**

Gilmour writes accessibly, often wittily, and with a wealth of telling anecdotes to bring the story to life. But he is unforgivably non-judgmental toward his subjects. The British imperial system was hopelessly disconnected from the Indians in whose interests it claimed to govern. Yet the very foreignness that Indians regarded as an indictment of colonial rule, Gilmour takes for granted, sometimes even framing it as a virtue.

Accordingly, he presents his cast of characters not just impartially, but often in an affectionate, sardonic light. Rarely does it seem to have occurred to him that these same men were racist oppressors, or at the very least the embodiment of a larger system of iniquity and injustice.

As a result, *The British in India* comes across as a curiously old-fashioned book, oblivious to the post-colonial currents that have already upended its assumptions. Because Gilmour demonstrates little awareness of the Indian perspective toward the British, we never learn what the subjects actually thought about their subjugators. The growing political consciousness among Indians that Guha describes makes no appearance, even though it provoked a British reaction.

Gilmour also disregards the unforgivable British attitude toward famines. Yet the deaths of 35 million Indians as a result of British imperial policy would seem to undermine his portraits of glittering *durbars* and elegant soirees.

The fact is that the British did little to advance the welfare of the people they were exploiting. As foreign rulers, they were more concerned with stability. Their job was to ensure imperial profit, not Indian progress, which would have undermined imperial rule anyway. Britain's presence in India was motivated principally by pillage and plunder, but you wouldn't know that from Gilmour's telling. Only an Englishman could write about an emotionally fraught subject like colonialism with such benign detachment.

In reality, by the early nineteenth century, the British had established themselves as a ruling caste not within Indian society, but on top of it. They did not intermarry or even dine with Indians. They lived in bungalows within exclusive cantonments or “Civil Lines,” well apart

from the “Black Towns” where the locals lived. They ensconced themselves in little islands of Englishness in the hill stations, where they planted ferns and roses, and built cottages with nostalgia-suffused names like Grasmere Lodge in Udhagamandalam (which the British, unable to pronounce the name, re-baptized “Ooty”). They patronized whites-only social clubs from which even Indian ICS men were blackballed.

More to the point, the British in India sneered at the people whose oppression paid for their comforts. Their loyalties remained staunchly wedded to their faraway homeland. Neither they nor their children mingled with the “natives.” Their clothes, books, and ideas all came from Britain, and British interests always took priority over those of the Indians under their rule. For the most part, the Britons would return “home” at the end of their careers. As the English writer Henry Nevinson observed in 1907, “A handful of people from a distant country maintain a predominance unmitigated by social intercourse, marriage, or permanent residence.”

That was the life of the British in India. Gandhi led the revolt that brought their sordid sojourn to an end. Guha and Gilmour offer an indispensable portrait of the people on each side of the colonial drama. As an Indian, though, I have little doubt about who is the worthier subject.



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