



# From Plunder to Dominion: British Imperialism and its Impact on Indian Society in Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Literature is a mirror of life. It changes our perspective about things, people and events and broaden our minds and shape our worldview. This study examines the devastating impact of British imperialism on Indian society, from the East India Company's plunder of India's resources to the establishment of the British Raj. Drawing on Shashi Tharoor's seminal work, *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*, this paper delves into the complex and nuanced history of British imperialism in India. It explores how British imperialism led to the exploitation of its resources, the erosion of India's cultural heritage and the perpetuation of social inequalities. This study argues that a critical examination of this history is essential for understanding the complexities of modern India. It serves as a reminder of the ongoing legacy of colonialism and the need for recognition, reparations and redemption.

**Keywords:** British Imperialism, Economic exploitation, cultural destruction, social inequality

Indian English Literature is an honest enterprise to demonstrate the ever rare gems of Indian writing in English. It has a relatively recent history and only one and a half centuries old. It refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in the English Language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian diaspora who are of Indian descent. The English literature of India has originated to be important outcome of English education introduction in India under the rule of colonial era. The study of New English Literatures is concerned with colonial and postcolonial writing which emerged in former British Colonies. India with a huge number of writers is leading globally in the field of New English Literature. Indian English writers have been contributing much, adding new trends, themes and techniques to the English literature of the world. Regarding the contribution of Indian English writings to the world, K.V. Suryanarayana Murti has rightly mentioned in his book titled *Kohinoor in the Crown Critical Studies in Indian English Literature* (1987) that "the rich Indian cultural and spiritual heritage and imagination is like the precious Kohinoor, cut and polished, emitting its brilliant light through its myriad facets, in the crown of English" (11).

Wide ranges of themes are dealt by the writers of Indian English Literature. This literature reflects Indian culture, tradition, social values and even Indian history through the depiction of life in India and Indians living elsewhere, recent Indian English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicaments. One such among them is Shashi Tharoor. He is an Indian politician, writer and former diplomat. He was born on 9 March 1956 in London and raised in Mumbai. He graduated from St. Stephen's college, Delhi and culminated his studies in 1978 with a doctorate in International Relations and affairs from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. He has been serving as a member of

Parliament for Thriuvananthapuram, Kerala since 2009. A Sahitya Akademi Award winner, Tharoor has authored many works of fiction and non-fiction. He has won prestigious literary honours including the Commonwealth's writer's prize and the Crossword lifetime Achievement Award. He has about two dozen titles to his credit and was awarded by World Economic Forum as "Global Leader of Tomorrow".

*An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* is a historical non-fiction work contributed to the reevaluation of British Colonial legacy in India. Awarded the 2016 Sahitya Akademi Award, this work arose out of a speech Tharoor made at the Oxford Union. Tharoor wrote, "this book, somewhat unusually, began as a speech". He was invited to deliver a speech on the debate proposition "Britain owes reparation to her former colonies" in May 2015. The discussion and debate had a broad audience of readers, critics and supporters that inspired him to write this book. The book examines the impact of British colonial rule in India. In this Tharoor called for the British government to pay "colonial reparations" to India. He points out how British colonial power exploited and fractured Indian economic institutions and washed out its resources. It contributes to the ongoing effort to decolonize Indian history and challenge dominant narratives. His arguments resonate with contemporary concerns about globalization, imperialism and cultural identity. The book's themes remain relevant in today's India, where nationalism and identity politics are increasingly prominent.

Imperialism is the ideology that recommends, furthers and justifies colonial rule. It is the concept that proposes the conquest of newer regions for the sake of economic exploitation. Imperialism is the political theory behind colonial conquest. It justifies conquest in the name of evangelicalism, economy and politics. It situates the non-European region on the periphery and controls it through economic measures. Imperialism is the theory and colonialism is the practice. In the sixteenth century, Britain began to build its empire by spreading the country's rule and power beyond its borders through a process called imperialism. British imperialism refers to the expansion of British political control over many countries, especially in Africa and Asia during the late nineteenth and twentieth century. This brought huge changes to societies, industries, cultures and the lives of people all around the world. England wanted more land overseas where it could build new communities, known as colonies. These colonies would provide England with valuable materials, like metals, sugar and tobacco, which they could sell to other countries.

British imperialism in India was a period of British rule over the Indian subcontinent that lasted from 1757 to 1947. During this time, the British gained political and economic power, and their policies had a significant impact on the people of India. Trading settlements were created in India by a company called the East India Company in the early seventeenth century. It marked the beginning of a long period of colonial exploitation. Its primary objective was to extract India's wealth and resources, rather than to modernize or develop the country. The company became so powerful, it allowed England to control of the trade of luxury goods like spices, cotton, silk and tea from India and it even influenced politics. This exploitative approach led to the draining of India's resources, shifting its economic growth and perpetuating poverty and inequality.

Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* presents a scathing critique of British imperialism in India. The India that the British East India Company conquered was no primitive or barren land. It is the glittering jewel of the medieval world. Its accomplishments and prosperity were succinctly described by a Yorkshire-born American Unitarian minister, J.T. Sunderland in *India in Bondage: Her Right to Freedom and a Place Among the Great Nations* as:

Nearly every kind of manufacture or product known to the civilized world –nearly every kind of creation of man's brain and hand, existing anywhere, and prized either for its utility or beauty –had long been produced in India. India was a far greater industrial and manufacturing nation than any in Europe or any other in Asia. She had great architecture in the world. She had great engineering works. She had great merchants, great businessman, great bankers and financiers. Not only was she the greatest shipbuilding nation, but she had great commerce and trade by land and sea which extended to all known civilized countries. Such was the India which the British found when they came. (367)

In the work, Tharoor argues that British imperialism drained India's resources, stifled its economy and imposed exploitative policies. It is evident in the economy before and after the arrival of the British. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, India's share of the world economy was 27 per cent, as large as all of Europe put together. By the time the British departed India, it had dropped to just over 3 per cent. The reason was that India was governed for the benefit of Britain. The British East India Company's primary objective was to extract India's wealth and resources, draining the country's economy for the benefit of Great Britain. The amount of wealth siphoned off from India is estimated at today's Three Trillion US dollars that was greater than Britain's GDP in 2015.

Britain's Industrial Revolution was built on the destruction of India's thriving manufacturing industries. Textiles were an emblematic case in point. As late as the mid-eighteenth century, Bengal's textiles were still

being exported to Egypt, Turkey and Persia in the west, and to the Java, China and Japan in the East, along well-established trade routes, as well as to Europe. India had enjoyed a 25 per cent share of the global trade in textiles in the early eighteenth century. But this was destroyed; The British systematically destroyed India's textile manufacturing and exports, substituting Indian textiles by British ones manufactured in England. The company imposed unfair trade practices, such as monopolizing India's textile industry and forcing Indian artisans to work in poor conditions. The British deliberately deindustrialized India, destroying its native industries and reducing the country to a mere exporter of raw materials. As a result, India's economic growth was stunted, and lost its self-sufficiency, becoming heavily dependent on British imports and exports. This exploitative approach led to the draining of India's resources, stifling its economic growth and perpetuating poverty and inequality.

One of the most devastating consequences of British colonial rule was the destruction of India's cultural heritage. Tharoor contends that British rule eroded Indian culture, suppressed native traditions and imposed western values. British's cultural imperialism had a profound impact on Indian identity. It marginalized the native art, literature and music led to a loss of cultural confidence and self-esteem among Indians. It also caused cultural fragmentation, as different regions and communities were forced to adopt western cultural practices.

India is the land of the Vedas and Upanishads. Throughout India, there was a system of communal schools managed by the village communities. The traditional method of learning Guru-shishya in which students lived with their teachers and imbibed an entire way of thinking had thrived in India. Monasteries became important centres of education, receiving student from distant lands. Monasteries such as Vikramashila, Nalanda, Somapura Mahavihara, Odantapuri and Jaggadala were premier educational institutions. In a period of Muslim rule, in addition to madrasas, schools of religious instruction especially to muslims, there were maktabas, which imparted Persian- Islamic education to Indian students. When the British came to power in India, it imposed Western education by suppressing native educational systems and cultural knowledge. They also suppressed India's native languages, by imposing English as the dominant language. The English language was not a deliberate gift to India. It is an instrument of colonialism, imparted to Indians only to facilitate the tasks of the English. Educating the masses was not a British priority. In his notorious 1835 Minute on Education, Lord Maculay articulated the classic reason for teaching English: "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". As a result, when the British left India, the literacy rate came to 16 per cent, with a female literacy rate of 8 per cent in 1947.

The social impact of British colonial rule was equally profound. The British had a talent for creating and exaggerating particularist identities and drawing ethnically-based administrative lines in all their colonies. Bernard Cohn, a scholar of British colonialism in India, has argued that the British simultaneously misinterpreted and oversimplified the features they saw in Indian society, placing Indians into stereotypical boxes they defined and into which they were assigned in the name of ancient tradition. In his work *An Anthropologist Among The Historians and Other Essays* he says: "In the conceptual scheme which the British created to understand and to act in India, they constantly followed the same logic; they reduced vastly complex codes and their associated meanings to a few metonyms" (122). Tharoor argues that the British reinforced and exacerbated existing social inequalities, particularly with regards to caste and gender. The colonial administration's policies and practices perpetuated the oppression of marginalized groups, further entrenching social hierarchies. He also examines the moral and ethical implications of colonialism, arguing that the British Empire's action in India were morally reprehensible.

In conclusion, Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* presents a powerful critique of British imperialism in India. The book highlights the devastating impact of colonial rule on India's economy, culture and society. His analysis serves as a reminder of the ongoing legacy of colonialism and the need for recognition, reparations and redemption. It will serve to correct many misconceptions about one of the most contested periods of Indian history.

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