ATLANTIS
Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies
46.2 (December 2024): 169-185
e-ISSN 1989-6840
DOI: http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2024-46.2.09

Reconsidering Britain's Civilizing Mission in India: Genuine Altruism or a Self-Serving Strategy?

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Imperial apologists often ascribe Britain's construction of its huge empire in the past to the noble urge to bring modernity and the benefits of Western civilization to less fortunate Africans and Asians, an enterprise historically named 'civilizing mission'. These scholars tend to support their assertion by highlighting the achievements accomplished throughout the colonies, especially the spread of modern education among the natives as well as social reformism. Nonetheless, this position has been vehemently counter-argued by critics of empire, who cast doubt on the very genuineness of such a presumed altruistic drive. As such, within the framework of this controversial issue, this article attempts to reconsider the notion of benevolence as a central theme in the imperial discourse within the context of British India.

Keywords: British Empire; civilizing mission; education; social reform; cultural imperialism; British India

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Una reconsideración de la misión civilizadora de Gran Bretaña en la India: ¿Altruismo genuino o estrategia interesada?

Los apologistas del imperialismo a menudo atribuyen la construcción del enorme imperio británico en el pasado a la noble aspiración de llevar la modernidad y los beneficios de la civilización occidental a la población africana y asiática menos afortunada, una empresa históricamente denominada 'misión civilizadora'. Esta parte del mundo académico tiende a respaldar su afirmación resaltando los logros alcanzados a lo largo del proceso colonizador,

especialmente la difusión de la educación moderna entre la población nativa, así como el reformismo social. Sin embargo, esta postura ha sido cuestionada con vehemencia por la crítica del imperialismo, que duda de lo genuino de tal impulso, supuestamente altruista. Así, en el marco de tan controvertido tema, este artículo intenta reconsiderar la noción de benevolencia como tema central en el discurso imperial en el contexto de la India británica.

Palabras clave: Imperio británico; misión civilizadora; educación; reforma social; imperialismo cultural; India británica

A great deal of historical scholarship has been devoted to the study of British involvement overseas from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. However, the most striking part of this scholarship is that contributed by many imperial apologists, who attempt to portray British colonialism as an altruistic agency whose sole purpose was to bring modernity and the benefits of Western civilization to backward societies in Africa and Asia. It is under this assumption that the proponents of this interpretation, commonly labelled cultural imperialism, tend to justify Britain's expansionism in the past at the expense of other people's territories. Yet, to what extent is this a convincing argument? This article is an attempt to look into the plausibility of this assertion by considering Britain's 'civilizing mission' in the once most valuable colonial possession of the Empire, India.

Before tackling this issue, it is necessary, first, to note that lying at the core of cultural imperialism was the very idea that people with white skin, and in particular the Anglo-Saxons, belonged to a race that was incontestably superior, both culturally and biologically, to other races of a different color. This formerly widespread racial philosophy was intellectually supported and propagated by the ideology of Social Darwinism, a pseudo-scientific branch that was *en vogue* in Western Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. This viewpoint was, as a matter of fact, easily justifiable on the ground at the time, given the flagrant gap that existed between, on the one hand, Western European societies, which had attained a higher level of sophistication and material development by the standards of the time, and, on the other, African and Asian societies, which were, by comparison, backward and—mainly in the case of Asia—stagnant. As noted by Michael Adas, "[l]ate Victorians were convinced that the standards by which they gauged their superiority […] were both empirically verifiable and increasingly obvious" (2004, 32).

Thus, confident in the superiority of their race and culture, the British imperialists felt duty-bound to commit themselves to the 'noble' cause of dominating less fortunate societies in order to pass on their refined culture to them and bring them peace and freedom. It is worth mentioning that besides intellectuals and politicians, even businessmen in the metropolis were convinced by this outlook. Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902), for instance, who became a prominent imperialist and whose

contribution to the expansion of British hegemony in southern Africa cannot be overstated, perfectly reflected this tendency. Having imbibed the ideas popularized by the British philosopher John Ruskin (1819-1900), he decided to commit himself to this cause in Africa. John Ruskin, it is worth recalling, held the view that the British had been entrusted by God with the mission of ruling primitive, ignorant societies and teaching them how to be civilized. This led him to exhort his fellow Britons to conquer lands across the earth in order to enhance the glory of England. "England," as he put it, "must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men" (quoted in Huttenback 1966, 101). Along the same lines, Cecil Rhodes was of the conviction that "only the Anglo-Saxon race could be God's agent in effecting His purpose, and the proper way to implement God's will was therefore to make the Anglo-Saxons supreme on Earth" (Huttenback 1966, 101-102). This is what actually induced Rhodes the imperialist to declare arrogantly: "We are the first race in the world, and [...] the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race" (quoted in Goodlad 2005, 32).

Cecil Rhodes had many parallels in colonial India. A long line of statesmen and officials in the service of the East India Company—henceforth referred to as the Company—went to the subcontinent primarily with an 'honourable' mission to fulfil: that of civilizing native Indians, or so they claimed. Perhaps the best example is found in the person of Lord William Bentinck, Governor-General of India between 1828 and 1835. As a liberal politician with a strong evangelical tendency, he was bent on reforming those various socio-cultural aspects of the indigenous society which he regarded as disgusting and shocking to any civilized person. Bentinck had, unsurprisingly, come under the influence of the liberal and utilitarian ideologies preached by the reform-minded British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and James Mill (1773-1836), who sought to regenerate societies and enhance their potential by means of individual freedom and good governance. In one of his writings, Mill once wrote: "The most effectual step which can be taken by any government to diminish the vices of the people is to take away from the laws every imperfection" (quoted in Smith 1998, 51). Bentinck upheld this recommendation and upon arriving in the subcontinent, he was determined to put it into practice.

Interestingly, Smith reports that even before setting sail for India, Bentinck was said to have told his mentor James Mill: "I am going to British India, but I shall not be the Governor-General. It is you that will be Governor-General" (quoted in Smith 1998, 51). Simultaneously, Judith M. Brown quotes him saying in another letter to Jeremy Bentham: "I shall govern in name, but it will be you who govern in fact" (quoted in Brown 1991, 69). If these words meant anything, they reflected the level of enthusiasm the newly appointed Governor-General had for the moral duty that his source of inspiration, Mill and Bentham, had so often lectured on. On that account, immediately after assuming office in India, Bentinck the humanist set about targeting some of the local customs which he qualified as 'barbaric'. *Suttee*, for instance, a Hindu

ritual performed by a widowed woman whereby she voluntarily threw herself on her husband's funeral pyre—thus burning herself to death—as a sign of devotion to him, was seen as an extremely cruel practice that needed eradication.[1] In reality, as pointed out by Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, this practice was more often than not a stratagem devised by the male members of the family of the deceased person in order to prevent his grieved wife from inheriting his property (2007, 65). Indeed, it was ubiquitous among the upper strata of Hindu society and, according to figures provided by Percival Spear, somewhere between 500 and 850 acts of widow self-immolation were reported to have occurred on an annual basis in Bengal alone during the first two decades of the nineteenth century (1990, 125). Expressing his revulsion at the cruelty of this ritual, Bentinck wasted no time in stamping it out through Regulation XVII, passed in December 1829, which declared it "illegal and punishable by Criminal Courts" (Prasad 1981, 434). Nevertheless, this prohibitive measure failed to bring the custom to a complete halt and only forced it to go underground since, as mentioned by Judith M. Brown, it continued well into the twentieth century (Brown 1991, 74-75).[2] Actually, the difficulty encountered by the colonial authorities in enforcing the anti-*suttee* regulation lay in the fact that the act itself was often "hushed up or adequate proof for prosecution was lacking" (74).

The practice of *thuggee*, meanwhile, was another socio-cultural phenomenon that the Governor-General found most appalling and wanted to discontinue. This custom had been practiced for some time throughout the subcontinent by groups of criminals called thugs—the latter being originally an Indian word which made its way into English—in reverence for Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction. It was a savage ritual because it involved the killing of innocent travellers—offered as human sacrifices to Kali—by strangling them with a piece of sacred scarf after having befriended them on their journey. The killing was followed by stripping the victims of their possessions. Denis Judd refers to these Kali-worshippers as "the cunningest Robbers in the World. […] They use a certain slip with a running noose which they can cast with so much slight about a Man's Neck when they are within reach of him, that they never fail; so that they strangle him in a trice" (2004, 66). According to Anthony Read and David Fisher, there were between forty and fifty groups of "assassin-priests"—as Lawrence James termed these thugs (1997, 221)—operating in India during Bentinck's governor-generalship, and they claimed between 20,000 and 30,000 victims a year (Read and Fisher 1998, 36). However, the authors noted that these figures were only estimates and could by no means be verified given that *thuggee* was conducted in total secrecy, besides the fact that there were no survivors to report the incidents (36). In addition,

[1] The women who followed this custom—which was practiced among high-caste Hindus—would be praised and, as a reward, she would be given the status of "widow martyr." According to Hindu tradition, she would be reunited with her dead husband in their subsequent incarnations (Hay 1992, 16).

[2] According to a recent newspaper article, the last known case of *suttee* in India happened in 1987 when an 18-year old woman threw herself on her dead husband's pyre. See Khan (2019).

as Bisheshwar Prasad remarks, people could hardly notice the disappearance of their friends or relatives traveling throughout India, or be alarmed by their long absence, since a trip within the subcontinent could take months (1981, 456).

The abolition of *suttee* and *thuggee* were but examples of numerous other progressive acts for which the colonial administrators in India so often claimed credit, leading them to indulge in a self-congratulatory discourse. This is corroborated by Percival Spear, who states that the British in India were "exhilarated by the magnitude of their achievement, which they thought could compare with that of Rome" (1990, 120). Such achievements indeed became useful tools, utilized by pro-imperial scholars in the postcolonial era to praise, retrospectively, Britain's role in purging indigenous societies of their own harmful superstitions and counterproductive customs. Niall Ferguson, who epitomizes this orientation among modern scholars, in his widely-read book, *Empire*, depicts Britain's imperial enterprise as a humanistic endeavor whose positive aspects far outweighed the negative ones. Accordingly, he does not miss a single opportunity to remind the reader about the good intentions of the British rulers and their commitment to the moral and material uplifting of their ignorant and uncivilized subjects. For instance, when referring to Captain William Sleeman, the soldier to whom Bentinck had assigned the task of dealing with *thuggee*, Ferguson does not fail to highlight the zeal of the British officials in fulfiling their noble mission in India. He portrays Sleeman as the embodiment of that commitment and seriousness with which the British sought to bring about a positive change in Indian society. As he puts it: "His [Sleeman's] dedication to his self-appointed task well illustrates how seriously the British took their mission to modernize Indian culture" (Ferguson 2002, 117).

This mission was not limited to the eradication of the inhuman aspects of the indigenous life. In fact, it was strongly believed that no moral uplifting of the local society could occur without exposing its individuals to education. In this regard, the choice of the type of education fit for colonial subjects was a bone of contention among British intellectuals and administrators at the time, which translated into the emergence of two divergent schools of thought: the Orientalists versus the Anglicists. The former group, also known as educational conservatives, vehemently opposed the idea of imposing Western thought and educational curricula on native Indians and were, instead, in favor of promoting local languages and culture (Johnson 2003, 25). In their view, it would be both wise and judicious not to disrupt the pre-British Indian educational system, which used local classical languages—namely Sanskrit and Arabic—as well as vernacular languages as media of instruction. The advocates of this position, who had a keen interest in exploring the Orient, assumed that it is only through the languages which their Indian subjects were familiar with that they—Indians—would be able to revive India's past and rediscover their own cultural heritage.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Anglicists, or educational reformers, categorically rejected the previous perspective and sought to promote the imparting of Western scientific knowledge and literary subjects among their colonial subjects using

English as a medium of instruction. Prominent among those who espoused this view was Thomas B. Macaulay (1800-1859), a legal member of Bentinck's Supreme Council of India, who considered the use of local languages to be "useless" (Bose and Jalal 2007, 67). In fact, contrary to the Orientalists who admired India's ancient culture and literature and showed deep respect for its traditional institutions (Smith 1998, 50), Macaulay openly expressed his disdain for them. This is clearly reflected in his historic "Minute on Education" (1835) where he commented that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Macaulay 1835, 3).

Being on the same wavelength as his utilitarian Governor-General, Macaulay had both the energy and zeal to take up the civilizing mission that Rudyard Kipling famously called the 'White Man's Burden'.[3] He held the opinion that it was incumbent upon the British, as privileged people, to share their liberty and cultural-cum-material development with other less advanced peoples, and that this privilege would be meaningless if they—his compatriots—failed to do so. In his words, "[w]e are free, we are civilized, to a little purpose, if we grudge to any portion of the human race an equal measure of freedom and civilization" (quoted in Smith 1998, 51).

Briefly speaking, the efforts of British imperialists in India such as Bentinck and Macaulay were but illustrative examples of Britain's intention, as part of its civilizing mission, to revolutionize the indigenous society—as imperial apologists would assert—by breaking their shackles of ignorance and obscurantism that had been perpetuated through centuries-long iron-clad socio-cultural traditions. It was this traditionalism that, from the Westerners' viewpoint, served as an ideological and psychological straightjacket hampering India's progress, a condition that justified the need to inject a dose of Western enlightenment as the (only) panacea. This argument was, in fact, to provide the *raison d'être* of British rule in India. In arguing in favor of Western education as an efficient alternative to the Oriental system, Macaulay and his like-minded colonial officials maintained that the introduction of Western science and literature would be beneficial to the inhabitants of the subcontinent as it would erode the caste system,[4] which was thought to be the root cause of India's social malaise, and by extension reverse the long-established traditions that allowed the upper-caste Hindus—i.e., Brahmins, or priests—to exercise limitless domination over the whole community.

[3] Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) was considered the mouthpiece of Western imperialism. Although his famous trope "The White Man's Burden" was primarily addressed to the Americans when exhorting them to take over the Philippines in the aftermath of the U.S.-Spanish war, it is the title of a poem that embodies the pro-imperial ideology which justified Western colonialism in the Orient. In his view, the superior race had to shoulder the responsibility of ruling the "new-caught, sullen-peoples, half-devil and half-child" (quoted in Fredrickson 2002, 107).

[4] This was a hierarchical division of the Hindu society sanctioned by the *Shastra*, the ancient sacred scripture of Hinduism. In accordance with this organization, there are four main and exclusive social classes, or castes: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (farmers and traders) and Shudras (serfs). Individuals falling outside this stratification are known as 'Untouchables', or 'Dalits', and are considered the dregs of society (Belmekki 2012, 179).

In other words, the Anglicists viewed keeping the pre-British Indian educational system as providing continuity of the same social environment that was festered by ignorance and evil traditions, reinforced by the existence of an unequal social stratification. Charles E. Trevelyan, one of Macaulay's colleagues, exemplifies this by describing the components of the Oriental system of learning as "wanting," and further adds that "to perpetuate them, is to perpetuate the degradation and misery of the people" (1838, 85).

Yet, to a twenty-first century person, the altruism with which the British imperialists pursued the—much-vaunted—civilizing mission throughout their Empire might seem overly idealistic. It is, admittedly, true that India's colonial era was marked by the introduction of several progressive measures which reflected positively on society, notably the elimination of some of the most brutal socio-cultural and religious practices. This was definitely an achievement for which the rulers could legitimately claim all the credit. However, rationalizing colonial domination simply through the commitment to ameliorate the moral and material conditions of the Indian population hardly sounds a convincing explanation to anyone. Indeed, the depiction of Britain's colonial enterprise as a humanitarian agency, whose sole purpose was to spread the benefits of Western civilization, has been challenged by a number of scholars. In particular, critics of the notion of the benevolence of Western imperialism have cast doubt on the very genuineness of British intention in the first place, in that they believe that the colonial officials often acted primarily out of expediency and in their own interests rather than those of the colonized. For instance, with regard to *thuggee*, it is believed that the driving force behind its eradication was the serious threat it posed to the Company's trade in the country's hinterlands. Percival Spear gives a glimpse of the lack of security in the interior of India owing to the prevalence of banditry in the guise of religion:

> All travellers had to have escorts, and find protection at night; at Delhi at the coming of the British it was not safe to picnic in daylight in the environs of the city for fear of snipers lurking behind tombs. A feature of this malaise was the religious sanction claimed by many of these groups. Thus we have the Thugs, who combined robbery with ritual murder in honour of the goddess Kali (1990, 119).

Put simply, then, the Company officials—so critics of Empire believe—reacted to *thuggee* more out of self-defence than out of concern for the safety of their colonial subjects simply because the 'assassin-priests' made traveling through India extremely hazardous, a situation that impacted negatively on the Company's inland trade activities. In the words of Prasad: "[O]nly when in Bengal and elsewhere the interests of British commerce called for safer travel did the government wake up to the necessity of eradicating the evil" (1981, 456).

As an aside, it is interesting to note that the veracity of the disturbing stories about this ritual has been questioned in some recent historical works. It can be surmised

from these new approaches that, in fact, most of what has been reported on *thuggee*-related incidents was but an imaginary construct, or, using one of Niall Ferguson's rare admissions about the role of the British Empire, a "figment of the overheated expatriate imagination," and that what Captain Sleeman was actually fighting against was a sharp increase in banditry, engendered by the disbanding of the local armies as a result of British expansionism (2002, 117). Bose and Jalal, meanwhile, go further by suggesting that *thuggee* was nothing but a "colonial stereotype" from which the imperialists drew a sense of pride and self-esteem for having restored peace and safety in their colony. "It is a story," Bose and Jalal remark, "that is increasingly being viewed with searing scepticism in history books, but has now found its rightful place in Hollywood films such as *Indiana Jones*" (2007, 63).

With regard to the latter point, a number of literary productions and films inspired by the ritual of *thuggee* were made in the West in which Indians were usually portrayed as savage, backward and irrational, the same kind of picture—mostly negative—that many Orientalists would draw in their representation of the Orient, as demonstrated by Edward Said in his seminal book *Orientalism* (Macfie 2008, 383).[5] This lends support to the claim made by some postcolonial scholars—mainly Indian—about the fact that, besides being invented, this supposedly religious practice became an effective element employed by the Orientalists to misrepresent the culture of the indigenous people. As Alexander L. Macfie puts it: "Viewed from their point of view, it is evident that Sleeman and his colleagues did to some extent at least invent thuggee as a widespread religious conspiracy, illustrative of the backwardness and irrationality of the Indian people" (2008, 395). The British move to abolish *thuggee* was not the only topic to arouse such heated controversy. In general, the social reforms central to the ideology of civilizing mission have been subject to reappraisal by critics of imperialism. Some have contested the assumption that British Utilitarians, such as Bentinck and Macaulay, were the *bona fide* originators of these reforms, and have contended, instead, that they acted only after being spurred on by Indian social reformers. To put it another way, according to this viewpoint, the campaigns to weed out evil practices from society were purely Indian initiatives. In this regard, Shashi Tharoor argues that with the exception of the abolition of *thuggee*, which was a matter of security for everyone on the subcontinent, other reforms, such as *suttee* and female infanticide, were initiated by reform-minded Indians such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (Tharoor 2017, 228).[6] Actually, Shashi Tharoor, who lambasts British imperialism in his most recent book *Inglorious Empire* (2017), held the view that the British intervened in local customs only when

[5] Alexander L. Macfie gave the example of *The Confessions of a Thug* (1839), a three-volume crime novel by Philip Meadows Taylor, and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), a film by Steven Spielberg.

[6] Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was a prominent Indian intellectual with progressive ideas. He led a reform movement called Brahmo Sabha, through which he sought to rehabilitate his fellow-countrymen spiritually and materially. His arduous efforts to root out the—religiously sanctioned—counterproductive and inhuman customs of society put him on a collision course with the most orthodox Hindus.

it suited them; and even when they did, they did it reluctantly. The colonizers, he maintains, saw India as "a career, not a crusade," therefore, "changing India was not the object; making money out of India was" (2017, 96).

Similarly, some scholars have pointed to the obvious gap between the lofty ideals the British claimed to hold and the nature of their colonial policy in terms of social matters. While openly disparaging local traditionalism and holding them responsible for India's backwardness, Company officials were supporting the old system when it suited their interests. After all, the first objective set by the colonizers was to create the conditions required for the smooth running of their business—namely peace and stability—and, by extension, the continuity of their rule. This could only be realized through the adoption of a non-interference policy regarding local traditional institutions, a conviction that was ingrained in the minds of the imperialists from the outset. "The Company should govern in the {…} general Indian tradition," writes Spear about the prevailing colonial policy at the time, clarifying further by adding: "that is, providing a framework of security beneath which traditional society could continue its wonted course." Hence, the bottom line, Spear states, was: "Peace would promote trade and trade would be to Britain's advantage" (1990, 121).

Therefore, instead of modernizing India as the imperialists constantly declared, they in fact continued doing the opposite by "inventing" and "consolidating" traditional aspects of Indian society, which was characterized mainly by the caste system. This was a subtle approach which stemmed from the British fear of seeing increased mobility among the rural population, something that could jeopardize the steady flow of land revenue from the peasantry. As pointed out by Bose and Jalal: "Uncomfortable with, and threatened by, the mobility of eighteenth century rural society, Pax Britannica and the British revenue collecting machine sought to sedentarize and peasantize Indian society" (2007, 60). In other words, when their self-interest was at stake, the Company officials were more than willing to compromise the lofty ideals of their noble mission. Their pragmatism meant that they had to nip in the bud any source potentially challenging the *status quo* in India. Hence, as explained by Bose and Jalal, the need for social stability impelled the Colonial administration to lend weight to a rigid social stratification, dominated by the upper-caste Hindus, the Brahmins (2007, 61).

By the same token, in a work that contrasts the nature of the caste system before and after the arrival of the British, Shashi Tharoor mentions that it was not a stable, fixed social structure in precolonial India. In fact, it was rather more complex owing to the fact that it kept mutating through time and space, being affected by changing spiritual and material parameters within society: "Caste had broadly been a mobile form of social organization constantly shaped and reinvented by the beliefs, the politics and quite often the economic interests of the dominant men of the times" (Tharoor 2017, 104). Nevertheless, it was the new context imposed by British rule that contributed to the "simplification" and "systemization" of Indian society, thereby engendering the idea of *varna*, that is, the division of the community into four homogenized social

classes, or castes, with the Brahmins at the top (see footnote 4). Perhaps the most striking aspect of this system, which A. R. Desai dubs the "steel frame of Hinduism" (2016, 152), was the nature of inter-caste relationship which was firmly subjected to iron-clad rules, a fact that only hardened division and promoted social exclusivism among them. In fact, the members of the four castes were not permitted to interdine or intermarry, and more importantly, were obliged to observe exclusive habits which were not shared by the members of the other castes. Failure to abide by the rules would result in the excommunication of the 'culprits'. Describing the peculiarity of this system, the French scholar Fernand Braudel writes that it was unquestionably "the worst aspect of Hinduism, which kept the population cooped up in so many separate compartments" (1995, 251-52). Naturally, this feature perpetuated social stagnation among Indians and, above all, maintained a rigid separation among members of the Hindu community.

In a similar vein, Bose and Jalal assert that while the caste system had existed in pre-British India it was only theoretical and, more importantly, had rarely been observed to the letter. However, under British rule, this social organization was given an extra boost. In Bose and Jalal's words, "[a]s part of their search for stability, the British gave substance to caste hierarchy and rigidity dominated by the Brahmins, which had been available in theory but had been often ignored in social practice in the immediate precolonial era" (2007, 61). In the light of such a claim, one may wonder what impelled the imperialists to support the caste system. Was dividing Indian society along caste lines in fact their ultimate purpose? This was probably not exactly the case, at least in the eyes of certain prominent Indian scholars who, in the first place, do not subscribe to the theory that the British had at all supported the caste system. Desai, for instance, expresses an opinion that ran counter to that of Tharoor and Bose and Jalal. Though acknowledging the fact that it was the educated Indians themselves who launched an attack on casteism, he also highlighted the role played by the British in weakening and limiting the impact of this system on Indian society.[7] In Desai's view, it was thanks to the secular education the British introduced in the subcontinent that Indians became enlightened on the aberrant character of casteism. At this point, it is worth recalling that precolonial traditional education in India, in clear contrast with modern—secular—education, was controlled by the Brahmins, who filled the curricula with religious instruction. Obviously, the aim behind this was to condition ordinary Indians to accept the authority exercised by this class of priests over the rest of society through obscurantism. As Desai observes, "[s]ince the caste system was sanctified by the sanction of the Hindu religion, this education, saturated with the religious spirit of

[7] As an illustration, Desai states that the British, through the establishment of a uniform legal system in India, contributed to the curbing of the effects of casteism that sanctioned social inequalities. For instance, in accordance with this social system, offenders from different castes would not receive the same kind of punishment; nevertheless, with the new legal system, this practice was discontinued and all—namely colonial subjects—became equal before the law, regardless of their social status (2016, 157).

Hinduism, trained people in accepting the caste system and build up a caste conscience in the individual" (2016, 157). In agreement with Desai, Govind S. Ghurye ascribes the emergence of local anti-caste movements to the British, who brought with them notions of individual freedom and equality that challenged the basic principles of the caste system. Concurrently, this Indian scholar underscores the importance of British educational enterprise in the colony, which produced intelligent Indians, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Devendranath Tagore, Jotirao Phooley and many others, capable of rising above the social barriers set by the Brahmins and calling into question the many regressive religious-cum-cultural features inherent in casteism (Ghurye 1969, 285-86). These Western-style-educated Indians committed themselves to the cause of fighting against the caste system and bringing about social change. Jotirao Phooley (1827-1890) provides a good example of the embodiment of Indian activism aiming for social justice. Thanks to the education he had received from Christian missionaries, he was able to read and understand Western ideas and values regarding human rights, equality and individual freedom. Most notably, Phooley distinguished himself by openly and vigorously defying Brahmin privileges in society, and by 1869, his anti-Brahmanism found expression in the publication of a daring monograph, *Priestcraft Exposed*, the first work of its kind in British India (Ludden 2002, 188). Interestingly, Phooley's rebellious spirit and anti-Brahmin militantism went to the extent of exhorting other castes "not to engage any Brahmin priest to conduct their marriage ritual" (Ghurye 1969, 287). Broadly speaking, by educating Indians, the imperialists gave the Indian *intelligentsia* the necessary tools with which to engage in social reformism among their people.

On the subject of education, it is worth noting that this topic has received the lion's share of criticism from anti-imperialist scholars, mainly in regard to the real objective behind its introduction in India as well as its content. Regarding the former point, it was assumed that control was indeed the primary motive prompting the—limited—diffusion of modern education and the supposed transfer of British culture among a section of the indigenes. More precisely, the final goal behind transferring Western culture and education to a small group of colonial subjects was the creation of a class of natives who assumed the role of collaborators, and would ultimately facilitate the efficient control of the colony. This same notion can be inferred from Macaulay's historic "Minute on Education" (1835), in which he laid emphasis on the need to create a class of Western-educated natives who "may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (1835, 9). Hence, from a critical standpoint, the civilizing mission, a quintessential element in the rhetoric of cultural imperialism, has been presented as a means to justify and ensure the continuity of British rule through the precious—but also necessary—assistance of a collaborative middle-class who, having imbibed Western ideals and values and embraced a Western lifestyle, would be psychologically disposed to support, and even defend, the British presence in India. In a word, domination was the final aim, as summed up by John Aldred, who writes:

"Cultural imperialism was not a primary end in itself; it was merely a means to an end" (2004, 161). Lending support to this statement, Niall Ferguson, despite being a staunch apologist for the Empire, admits that the motivating reason for the spread of Western education was the creation of a class of Anglophiles (2002, 157).

This subject has been dealt with in depth by some twentieth-century thinkers with Marxist leanings, who were concerned with issues related to human nature. Intellectuals like Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault propounded the idea that recourse to force is not always the best way to subjugate a population, and that very often, domination could be perfectly achieved through other non-coercive methods. Such methods, soft and subtle in nature, are efficient enough to bring populations under the authority of the rulers without undue resistance. This involves a process whereby subjects are brainwashed through the use of religion and education laden with a particular ideology that becomes ingrained in the minds of the recipients. The outcome is that this inculcated ideology becomes hegemonic and pervades every aspect of society, displacing rival views in the process and becoming mainstream and conventional (Heywood 2003, 8). Hence, in accordance with this line of thought, education is considered as an instrument for "making the individual accept and conform to the hierarchic structure of society and completely subordinate his [*sic*] individuality to it" (Desai 2016, 89).

The Brahmins, it is worth remembering, had indeed resorted to this strategy for centuries. In order to maintain their monopoly over Indian society, they made use of education fraught with religious instruction through which they instilled certain norms and modes of thinking in the minds of the other caste Hindus, conditioning them to accept Brahmin authority. The case of the British in India was not much different. The latter used their educational enterprise as a means to serve the same purpose, namely domination. According to Pramod K. Nayar, the power structure in a colonial context may be reinforced when colonial subjects assimilate the norms and systems of thought transmitted through modern education. In Nayar's words, "power works best when the subordinate classes or groups *readily accept* the structures of power unquestioningly by accepting the ideology-laden cultural practices" (2010, 48; italics in the original).

In other words, state-sponsored education in British India has been recognized as a subtle agency which the colonizers instrumentalized in order to achieve invisible power. By extension, even the spread of the English language has been interpreted as a deliberate move on the part of the imperialists to impose political domination. In this respect, it is safe to argue that thanks to this education, which used English as a medium of instruction, it was possible to produce a considerable number of what Denis Judd terms "Occidentalists" (1996, 229), that is, colonial subjects able to speak English and who, importantly, admired Western culture and considered Britain to be the birthplace of modern civilization.

This condition resulted from the fact that these Occidentalists were constantly exposed to one major theme, which focused entirely on the dichotomy between a superior Occident and an inferior Orient. It was conducted through the dissemination

of "particular modes of thinking" representing the British as "strong, competent, 'modern' and protector", as opposed to the Indians, who were seen as "vulnerable, needing protection, incompetent and primitive" (Nayar 2010, 49). This contention implied that the colonized were incapable of assuming the responsibility of running their own country and thus it fell on the colonizers to decide on their behalf and to determine what was good for them. John Darwin expresses it concisely and clearly: "In a vast work of imaginative re-creation, they (the imperialists) constructed an image of stagnant or regressive communities, saved from disaster by imperial intervention, but too unprogressive to be released into freedom for an indefinite time" (Darwin 2012, 5). Put simply, critics of Empire hold the view that modern education was introduced in the colonies ostensibly to train natives in Western knowledge and, eventually, help them break their shackles of superstition and ignorance; but in reality, it was part of a hegemonic project aimed at predisposing indigenous peoples mentally to accepting their inferior status, and by implication, British supremacy. As such, the aim of this Westernization campaign was to "guarantee the loyalties" of Western-educated Indians (Levine 2013, 80), as reflected in a straightforward statement by Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859), a British official in India: "The enlightenment due to education would reconcile the people to British rule and even engender a sense of attachment to it" (quoted in Desai 2016, 90).

Therefore, far from the altruism that was essentially associated with the civilizing mission, the intention of the colonial enterprise in India was not what has been claimed by imperial apologists. Ian Copland corroborates this viewpoint by stating that in addition to imparting knowledge, the imperial educational project was also utilized "to inculcate obedience to authority" (2001, 5). Furthermore, the introduction of modern education has been interpreted as a matter of expediency. In fact, as British possessions in India were growing in size, it became costly and burdensome to staff the huge administrative machinery solely with people from Britain, especially around the mid-nineteenth century, when almost the whole subcontinent came under the Company's suzerainty. On this point, Desai remarks that it was not "a mere accident that [...] important beginnings of the inauguration of modern education in India were made" by the time "Britain brought under its rule a substantial portion of the Indian territory" (2016, 90). Thus, against this backdrop, the colonial authorities deemed it more practical and cost-effective to recruit from the natives a class of English language-loving people to fill the gap. This was an important argument in support of the assertion that the civilizing mission was but a smokescreen and that the whole endeavor was a self-serving strategy. In particular, the spread of modern education in India was not undertaken specifically out of concern for the natives' moral and material uplifting, but, rather, was primarily driven by the needs of the colonizers to, as Judith M. Brown puts it, "reduce administrative costs" (1991, 76).

In another respect, besides discrediting the presumed benevolent intention of colonial education, scholars critical of British imperialism also sought to demonstrate

the limitations of the pedagogy and programs taught to the natives. It was believed that the content dispensed in state-sponsored schools in India was not at all similar to that taught in Britain. In fact, whereas in Britain students were instructed on how to think analytically and independently, as well as develop a critical mindset, none of this occurred in British schools in India, which "heavily emphasized rote learning, the regurgitation of which was what the examinations tested" (Tharoor 2017, 190).

This pedagogic shortcoming was based on "surface approach" learning, which involved committing facts to memory without engaging critically with the subject-matter, as opposed to "deep approach" learning, which laid emphasis on the students' creative thinking and active interaction with the texts (Bellenoit 2015, 97). Hayden J. A. Bellenoit contends that despite the fact that attendees were made to read works by great Western thinkers, they could barely "digest" the content. Roper Lethbridge, a missionary instructor in British India feels the same: "Students [...] learnt passages *en bloc*, and were usually unable to say much else about what they had read" (2015, 97).

Such was the main weakness that characterized Western education in India, which critics of Empire see as a convincing argument to cast doubt on the genuineness of Britain's altruistic endeavor to bring the benefits of modernity to their colonial subjects. Tharoor comments that all that colonial educational efforts could achieve in India was the making of "a group of graduates with a better-than-basic knowledge of English, inadequate in ninety per cent of the cases to hold one's own with an Englishman, but adequate to get a clerical position in the lower rungs of government service or a teaching position in a government school" (2017, 190). Nevertheless, from an objective standpoint, it would be unfair to trivialize the role played by modern education in effecting positive changes in Indian society. Indeed, in spite of its defects, and whatever the reasons for its introduction in India were, it would be no exaggeration to state that this education was a vital component that had a long-term impact that changed the course of events in British India. After all, without this instruction, there would have been no local reform-minded and forward-looking intellectuals, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who, though in many instances pledged allegiance to the colonizers, sought to purge their community of the evil practices that had kept them on the side-lines of modern civilization. It must be acknowledged that Britain, Desai observes with impartiality, "by spreading modern education in India, even due to its own needs, objectively played a progressive role" (2016, 90).

Indeed, without modern education, perhaps India would not have won independence for yet another fifty years or more. It was this education that opened the eyes of the Indian *intelligentsia* to the outside world and taught them how to set up organizations and political parties in order to claim their civil-cum-political rights and, ultimately, aspire to self-governance. Interestingly, there is general consensus that by educating their colonial subjects, the British sowed the seeds of the end of their Empire. After all, it was those indigenes who had attended colonial schools who rose up against the British Raj, a reality that made some imperial officials in late British India "bitterly regret what their predecessors had set in motion" (Brown 1991, 76).

And yet, notwithstanding this positive impact, it would be wrong to take for granted the assertion that British involvement in India was principally motivated by goodwill. It is, needless to say, admittedly true that a section of the imperialists, especially the missionaries, went to Africa and Asia with a strong religious conviction in that they saw themselves as agents fulfilling a mission ordained by God, as confirmed by Ronald Hyam, who quotes David Livingstone (1813-1873), a missionary and explorer, referring to the British as "co-operators with God in the renovation of the world" (quoted in Hyam 2010, 24). However, from the vantage point of politicians and businesspeople, the overall imperial project was in many ways the fulfilment of a desire to acquire colonies to be exploited for the benefit of the mother country. Therefore, the notion of civilizing the world was but a means to justify the subjugation of other peoples. Agreeing with this view, George M. Fredrickson notes that imperialism was triggered by the urge to lay hands on the riches available in far off places and that the very idea of "the superiority of 'civilized' whites over 'barbarous' or 'savage' peoples was an essential rationale" (2002, 108).

Ultimately, what civilizing mission could the imperialists claim while their troops were engaged in a series of wars with neighboring China, with the objective of imposing on the latter the reopening of its domestic market to opium grown by the Company in Bengal?[8] Strangely enough, this historical fact, paradoxical as it seems, was something of a commonplace practice among the colonizers at the time. While engaged in a war to forcefully spread opiate addiction among the Chinese, the imperialists were still perceiving the act as part of their civilizing mission in Asia, as reflected in the following passage from Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* (2015), where Mr Burnham, a wealthy British businessman and opium dealer, addresses the younger British soldiers amidst the conflict:

> It is you, gentlemen, who will give to the Chinese the gifts that Britain has granted to the countless millions who glory in the rule of our gracious monarch, secure in the knowledge that there is no greater freedom, no greater cause for pride, than to be subjects of the British Empire. This is the divine mission that the Almighty Himself has entrusted to our race and our nation (2015, 436).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Algerian Directorate General for Scientific Research and Technological Development (DGRSDT) for having funded my research.

[8] These wars are historically known as the Opium Wars. They were fought in two phases, 1839 to 1842 and 1856 to 1860. Besides forcing China to accept the flow of opium into the country, the other major outcome of these armed confrontations was the British acquisition of Hong Kong (Steinbach 2017, 75).

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Received 17 November 2022 Revised version accepted 25 March 2023

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