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SHASHI THAROOR

BRITAIN OWES REPARATIONS TO INDIA

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_S955fkSZd8&t

Madam President and gentlemen, ladies of the house.

I standing here with eight minutes in my hands in this venerable and rather magnificent institution, I was going to assure you that I belong to the Henry VIII School of public speaking - that as Henry VIII said to his wives 'I shall not keep you long'. But now finding myself the seventh speaker out of eight in what must already seem a rather long evening to you I rather feel like Henry VIII's the last wife. I know more or less of what expected of me but I am not sure how to do it any differently.

Perhaps what I should do is really try and pay attention to the arguments that have advanced by the Opposition today. We had for example Sir Richard Ottaway suggesting - challenging the very idea that it could be argued that the economic situation of the colonies was actually worsened by the experience of British colonialism.

Well I stand to offer you the Indian example, Sir Richard. India share of the world economy when Britain arrived on it's shores was 23 per cent, by the time the British left it was down to below 4 per cent. Why? Simply because India had been governed for the benefit of Britain.

Britain's rise for 200 years was financed by it's depredations in India. In fact Britain's industrial revolution was actually premised upon the de-industrialisation of India.

The handloom weaver's for example famed across the world whose products were exported around the world, Britain came right in. There were actually these weaver's making fine muslin as light as woven wear, it was said, and Britain came right in, smashed their thumbs, broke their looms, imposed tariffs and duties on their cloth and products and started, of course, taking their raw material from India and shipping back manufactured cloth flooding the world's markets with what became the products of the dark and satanic mills of the Victoria in England.



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That meant that the weavers in India became beggars and India went from being a world famous exporter of finished cloth into an importer when from having 27 per cent of the world trade to less than 2 per cent. Meanwhile, colonialists like Robert Clive brought their rotten boroughs in England on the proceeds of their loot in India while taking the Hindi word loot into their dictionary as well as their habits.

And the British had the gall to call him Clive of India as if he belonged to the country, when all he really did was to ensure that much of the country belonged to him.

By the end of 19th century, the fact is that India was already Britain's biggest cash cow, the world's biggest purchaser of British goods and exports and the source for highly paid employment for British civil servants. We literally paid for our own oppression. And as has been pointed out, the worthy British Victorian families that made their money out of the slave economy, one fifth of the elites of the wealthy class in Britain in 19th century owed their money to transporting 3 million Africans across the waters. And in fact in 1833 when slavery was abolished and what happened was a compensation of 20 million pounds was paid not as reparations to those who had lost their lives or who had suffered or been oppressed by slavery but to those who had lost their property.

I was struck by the fact that your Wi-Fi password at this Union commemorates the name of Mr Gladstone - the great liberal hero. Well, I am very sorry his family was one of those who benefited from this compensation.

Staying with India between 15-29 million Indians died of starvation in British induced famines. The most famous example was, of course, was the great Bengal famine during the World War II when 4 million people died because Winston Churchill deliberately as a matter of written policy proceeded to divert essential supplies from civilians in Bengal to sturdy tummies and Europeans as reserve stockpiles.

He said that the starvation of anyway underfed Bengalis mattered much less than that of sturdy Greeks' - Churchill's actual quote. And when conscious stricken British officials wrote to him pointing out that people were dying because of this decision, he peevishly wrote in the margins of file, "Why hasn't Gandhi died yet?" So, all notions that the British were trying to do their colonial enterprise out of enlightened despotism to try and bring the benefits of colonialism and civilisation to the benighted. Even I am sorry - Churchill's conduct in 1943 is simply one example of many that gave light to this myth.

As others have said on the proposition - violence and racism were the reality of the colonial experience. And no wonder that the sun never set on the British empire because even god couldn't trust the English in the dark.



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Let me take the World War I as a very concrete example since the first speaker Mr. Lee suggested these couldn't be quantified. Let me quantify World War I for you. Again I am sorry from an Indian perspective as others have spoken about the countries. One-sixth of all the British forces that fought in the war were Indian - 54 000 Indians actually lost their lives in that war, 65 000 were wounded and another 4000 remained missing or in prison.

Indian taxpayers had to cough up a 100 million pounds in that time's money. India supplied 17 million rounds of ammunition, 6,00,000 rifles and machine guns, 42 million garments were stitched and sent out of India and 1.3 million Indian personnel served in this war. I know all this because the commemoration of the centenary has just taken place.

But not just that, India had to supply 173,000 animals 370 million tonnes of supplies and in the end the total value of everything that was taken out of India and India by the way was suffering from recession at that time and poverty and hunger, was in today's money 8 billion pounds. You want quantification, it's available. World War II, it was even worse - 2.5 million Indians in uniform. I won't believe it to the point but Britain's total war debt of 3 billion pounds in 1945 money, 1.25 billion was owed to India and never actually paid.

Somebody mentioned Scotland, well the fact is that colonialism actually cemented your union with Scotland. The Scots had actually tried to send colonies out before 1707, they had all failed, I am sorry to say. But, then of course, came union and India was available and there you had a disproportionate employment of Scots, I am sorry but Mr Mckinsey had to speak after me, engaged in this colonial enterprise as soldiers, as merchants, as agents, as employees and their earnings from India is what brought prosperity to Scotland, even pulled Scotland out of poverty.

Now that India is no longer there, no wonder the bonds are loosening. Now we have heard other arguments on this side and there has been a mention of railways. Well let me tell you first of all as my colleague the Jamaican High Commissioner has pointed out, the railways and roads were really built to serve British interests and not those of the local people but I might add that many countries have built railways and roads without having had to be colonised in order to do so.

They were designed to carry raw materials from the hinterland into the ports to be shipped to Britain. And the fact is that the Indian or Jamaican or other colonial public - their needs were incidental. Transportation - there was no attempt made to match supply from demand from as transports, none what so ever.

Instead in fact the Indian railways were built with massive incentives offered by Britain to British investors, guaranteed out of Indian taxes paid by Indians with the result that you actually had one mile of Indian



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railway costing twice what it cost to built the same mile in Canada or Australia because there was so much money being paid in extravagant returns.

Britain made all the profits, controlled the technology, supplied all the equipment and absolutely all these benefits came as British private enterprise at Indian public risk. That was the railways as an accomplishment. We are hearing about aid, I think it was Sir Richard Ottaway mentioned British aid to India. Well let me just point out that the British aid to India is about 0.4 per cent of India's GDP. The government of India actually spends more on fertiliser subsidies which might be an appropriate metaphor for that argument.

If I may point out as well that as my fellow speakers from the proposition have pointed out there have been incidents of racial violence, of loot, of massacres, of blood shed, of transportation and in India's case even one of our last Mughal emperors. Yes, may be today's Britains are not responsible for some of these reparations but the same speakers have pointed with pride to their foreign aid - you are not responsible for the people starving in Somalia but you give them aid surely the principle of reparation for what is the wrongs that have done cannot be denied.

It's been pointed out that for the example dehumanisation of Africans in the Caribbean, the massive psychological damage that has been done, the undermining of social traditions, of the property rights, of the authority structures of the societies - all in the interest of British colonialism and the fact remains that many of today's problems in these countries including the persistence and in some cases the creation of racial, of ethnic, of religious tensions were the direct result of colonialism. So there is a moral debt that needs to be paid.

Someone challenged reparations elsewhere. Well I am sorry Germany doesn't just give reparations to Israel, it also gives reparations to Poland perhaps some of the speakers here are too young to remember the dramatic picture of Charles William Brunt on his knees in the Walter Gaiter in 1970.

There are other examples, there is Italy's reparations to Libya, there is Japan's to Korea even Britain has paid reparations to the New Zealand Maoris. So it is not as if this is something that is unprecedented or unheard of that somehow opens some sort of nasty Pandora box.

No wonder professor Louis reminded us that he is from Texas. There is a wonderful expression in Texas that summarises the arguments of the opposition 'All hat and no cattle'.

Now, If I can just quickly look through the other notes that I was scribbling while they were speaking, there was a reference to democracy and rule of law. Let me say with the greatest possible respect, you cannot to be rich to oppress, enslave, kill, maim, torture people for 200 years and then celebrate the fact that they are



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democratic at the end of it.

We were denied democracy so we had to snatch it, seize it from you with the greatest of reluctance it was considered in India's case after 150 years of British rule and that too with limited franchise.

If I may just point out the arguments made by a couple of speakers. The first speaker Mr. Lee in particular conceded all the evil atrocities of the colonialism but essentially suggested that reparations won't really help, they won't help the right people, they would be use of propaganda tools, they will embolden people like Mr Mugabe. So, it's nice how in the old days, I am sorry to say that either people of the Caribbean used to frighten their children into behaving and sleeping by saying some Francis Drake would come up after them that was the legacy, now Mugabe will be there - the new sort of Francis Drake of our time.

The fact is very simply said, that we are not talking about reparations as a tool to empower anybody, they are a tool for you to atone, for the wrongs that have been done and I am quite prepared to accept the proposition that you can't evaluate, put a monetary sum to the kinds of horrors people have suffered. Certainly no amount of money can expedite the loss of a loved one as somebody pointed out there. You are not going to figure out the exact amount but the principle is what matters.

The fact is that to speak blithely of sacrifices on both sides as an analogy was used here - a burglar comes into your house and sacks the place but stubs his toe and you say that there was sacrifice on both sides that I am sorry to say is not an acceptable argument. The truth is that we are not arguing specifically that vast some of money needs to be paid. The proposition before this house is the principle of owing reparations, not the fine points of how much is owed, to whom it should be paid. The question is, is there a debt, does Britain owe reparations?

As far as I am concerned, the ability to acknowledge your wrong that has been done, to simply say sorry will go a far far far longer way than some percentage of GDP in the form of aid.

What is required it seems to me is accepting the principle that reparations are owed. Personally, I will be quiet happy if it was one pound a year for the next 200 years after the last 200 years of Britain in India. Thank you very much madam President.