



DR. SHASHI THAROOR

BRITAIN MUST APOLOGISE

<https://youtu.be/g6EC6gY95fU>

One of the more insidious challenges of colonialism is the extent to which our minds are colonized as well. And that colonization of a mind takes some growing out of. For us, for some of us, we'll never really grow out of it. I mean, I do know that there are the many who can't help as it were the identification with things anglophone and anglophile, because that's really what they were schooled to appreciate. I have argued in the book for example, that my fondness for Wodehouse and cricket, which you mentioned, actually is despite, in many ways. The fact that they have English origins. Of course, I'm even more fond of cricket now that we regularly beat the English at it, but...

Famously, an Indian game accidentally discovered by the British, I think.

That's a great line by a sociologist called Ashish Nandy, that it's actually an Indian game accidentally discovered by the British. I mean clearly, our climate is far more suitable for cricket than theirs for one thing. But anyway, where were we? I've lost my train of thought.

That's okay, we...

Oh yes, P.G. Wodehouse for example, obviously the delights of Wodehouse are the delights that are imparted to you by your appreciation of the English language. What he does with stylistic humor, plotting and so on and so forth, but the interesting thing is precisely because of that, you don't actually have to have an allegiance to Britain as long as you know, but you don't need... The passport is English language, but you don't need a British visa to get there. You can sit in India, surrounded by a very different world from that which he describes, and enjoy the escapism that his writing represents. And so it goes. But I realize that this is self-interested pleading because obviously, I am a product of the system as you rightly point out.

And I suppose, one of the great problems with history is you can't establish the counterfactual. It's impossible to know what India might look like, had the British not been there. Can I take you to those more structural things? The fact that India speaks the World Language. The fact that India has a centralized unitary government, that it is a democracy. How much has India's way in the world being made easier by those legacies?

Highly contestant... No, there's no question that some of this has been useful to us and the English language certainly, but I want to stress, and I think you alluded to this in your introduction that all the

things that apologists for Empire like to claim credit for; the English language, parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, the railways, you know, all of the classic clichés and for that matter, even tea. Every single one of these things was brought in by the British to advance their control of India, to enhance their profits and serve their interests. Not one was intended principally to benefit Indians and the fact that when they left, they couldn't take this with them and we were able then to turn them around to purposes the original people who introduced them would never have intended, is something that I think is more to the credit of the Indian nationals than to the English.

I'm happy to go through the examples you mentioned. You take language for example, the British had no intention of imparting education to the masses of Indians. They made it very clear. They weren't going to spend the money doing that. And indeed as late as 1930, the American historian Will Durant observed that the entire budgets of the British for education in India, from the nursery level to the highest University levels, amounted to less than half the high school budget of the state of New York. And that was for the entire country of India with, at that point ten times as many people as the state of New York. The fact is that the British were not interested in investing in education and even the English language was brought in just to educate a narrow class, of interpreters between the governors and the governed. People who would help the British by constituting a buffer between them and the dirty masses on their rule. I mean, that was very much the actual... Macaulay actually said this in his notorious Minute on Education. And he said that we need to create a class of Indians; Indian in skin and color, but English in opinions and tastes and morals and in intellect. Those were his exact words and it was to serve their purposes. Now, of course, Indians then used English to open up on another world of ideas, often very radical and critical ideas, and ideas that eventually made English a language of Indian Nationalism. Our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote his classic *The Discovery of India* in English. So the Indian nationalist discovered India in English, as it were. But that was our, if you like, change of what the British had intended to do.

Democracy and you mentioned political unity. Well, political unity is the one that the British point to with pride, that they came into a bunch of warring principalities and they made a country out of it. Not so. For 2,000 years before the British ever set foot on India, there have been a very clear sense of a common civilizational unity, and an aspiration on the part of monarchs to consolidate that territorially. Now obviously, they couldn't, I mean, we had two people who came very close. There was the Mauryan Empire Ashoka and Chandragupta, who controlled about 90% of the sub-continent including Afghanistan. And then the Mughals, particularly Akbar and Aurangzeb, they controlled about 95% of the subcontinent. And that was the extent, but the fact that everyone tried to do it, aspired to do it and failed in trying, shows that if the British hadn't succeeded, somebody else around the same time, with the advantages of modern communications and so on would have. So political unity was not a British gift.

Democracy had to be prised from the reluctant grasp of the British. In fact, the history of the advent of democracy in India, as I demonstrate in the book, is actually littered with the broken promises of English rulers, who keep promising responsible self-government and then yanking it away just when the time came for them to redeem their pledge. And they example after example of this, until finally, a more or less democratic system; I say more or less cause the franchise was still limited by literacy and populations. It was not a majority of the people, but still a franchise, a vote was offered to Indians properly for the first time in 1937. Before that, there'd been elections but, for example in the 1920s, only one out of every 250 Indians had the vote. Hardly a training ground for democracy. And even then,

they did not allow people to vote for a national government. The national government was still the British headed by the Viceroy. It was only provincial governments that Indians were allowed to form up to the Second World War. So given all of that, it's very difficult to point and as I say, the British did a great deal to undermine Indian unity.

When the Indian National Congress was established in 1885, by well-meaning Scotsman with various Indian supporters, it was truly a body the British could have easily co-opted. It was a bunch of largely anglophile lawyers, who wrote decorous petitions and held very civilized meetings, in which they asked the English to give them the rights of Englishmen. But the British, so even this is a threat. So far from welcoming it as a first step towards responsible self-government for Indians, what the British did instead was try and undermine the Congress to the extent of helping encourage the setting up of a rival body 20 years later, the Muslim League, which was set up explicitly on sectarian lines. But the British prodding them to say, look, these people will only represent the interests of the Hindu majority. Now you look at the first 20 presidents, and they're Christians, Muslims, Parsis, as well as Hindus. And there's even an Irish woman, an Irish Catholic, Annie Besant, of the theosophist movement. So it was a very open, very inclusive body. But the British had no intention of cooperating with it, had no intention of taking a serious and these are not retrospective judgments. I've quoted for example, a Sunday Times journalist from London, who travelled in India in 1907-1908, Henry Levinson, who attended meetings of the Congress, met British officialdom and recorded this horror, at the way in which the British were denying due process and fair rights to Indians. So, all this was apparent at the time and yet the British dragged it out as long as they could. So it's a bit rich as I've said in Oxford, to, you know, arrest, maim, imprison, torture, deny rights to people for 200 years, and then celebrate the fact that they are democratic at the end of it.

Let's talk food. One of the great lines in the book is, "There's never been a famine in a democracy with a free press." One of the striking things that comes out of this book is the widespread starvation that occurs in India during the first half of the 20th century. Can you talk about the famines and...

Absolutely. It really was a horror show what the British did, and if there are any Irish people in the audience, it should resonate with them, because they did the same thing in Ireland. The British had a compound of attitudes at the time that they were ruling India. The first was that one must not give charity, because it encourages idleness. The second was the rather callous notion, but they justified it in Adam Smithian terms, that the free market was prevailed; so if there is a famine, and the British government buys the only grain available, to ship it off to London for the bread baskets of the East end, but the poor people left in India who are starving for food, can't afford to buy it because the Brits have driven the price up. Well, those are the rules of the free market, it's tough, but that's the way it's going to be. Third was the Malthusian principle that if the land cannot sustain the population that's trying to live off it, well people must die. So they did. And the final thing, of course, was Victorian Fiscal Prudence, thou shall not spend money thou is not budgeted for.

So, with all of this put together, they refused to help people in famines. Which is exactly the opposite of Indian experience in the past, where whenever there was a drought, whenever there was a failure of a harvest, the rich people, the aristocracy, the local Kings and Princes and so on, all came in to help people. And there are no recorded instances of people just dying of famines, until the British came along. In fact, there are actually accounts by British observers, in the late 18th century, during the first devastating British-made famine in Bengal, which wiped out a third of the entire population, saying that

in the nearby State still ruled by Indians; the Britain hadn't conquered all of India yet, people were being helped. And here in British India, they were not being helped as a matter of policy.

Now, in Ireland, they did the same thing, which led to the Great Potato Blight of 1841 and the deaths of people. But the Irish at least had the option of jumping onto boats and sailing off to America. We didn't have that option. So we stayed in India and died. And the worst example that one can come to is, Winston Churchill on the Second World War. Winston Churchill personally took decisions to allow people to die, while his government acquired all the grain in Bengal that they could get, not to feed the war effort as was wrongly suggested, but to enhance buffer stocks, reserve stocks, in the event of a likely future invasion of Greece and Yugoslavia. And Australian ships were docking at the Port of Calcutta, laden with wheat, and Churchill was personally deciding, either he or his odious paymaster General Lord Cherwell acting on his instructions, to not allow those ships to disembark their cargo, but to continue to sail on to Europe. When officials in India wrote to him saying people are dying, they're literally dying on the streets. He said, well, I hate Indians. They are beastly people with a beastly religion. It's all their fault anyway for breeding like rabbits. These are all exact quotes verbatim. And when one particular memo reached the Prime Minister's desk, about the unconscionable number of deaths, it ended up being 4.3 million, all Churchill could bring himself to do, was to write in the margin, somewhat peevishly, why hasn't Gandhi died yet? Now this is the man the British expect us to hail as an apostle of freedom and democracy. He has as much blood on his hands as the worst genocidal dictators of the 20th century.

So then, remedy: we're here at the Antidote Festival. What is the antidote to a historical wrong as you've laid out here? The Oxford Union debate was on the subject of reparations. Is it fiscal? Is it political? Is it an apology? Where do we go from here?

Well, you know, I got saddled with this reparations thing, as that was a topic the Oxford Union students chose, Ben, and the fact is that even in that debate, I said that you can't really quantify the value of the damage done by the British. How do you put a price on these 35 million Indians who died totally unnecessary deaths in those famines? How do you measure the lives and livelihoods of the weavers, whose thumbs were chopped off so they couldn't weave again, when their looms were smashed, in case the looms are rebuilt, they no longer could ply their craft. How could you measure all of this? I mean, the financial drainage has been calculated. In fact, an Englishman called William Digby, in 1901 published a 900-page book, which I have on my laptop, in which he worked out down to the last penny and shilling, how much the British had each year repatriated to England from India. But I mean, it was after that, that India spent the equivalent of 80 billion pounds sterling in supporting the First World War. And so those numbers have long since been overtaken. So I don't want to go the financial route.

In that debate, I said, even a symbolic one pound a year for the next 200 years will do it, because the larger point is not finance, but reparations, but atonement, I beg your pardon, is not reparations, but atonement. Why do I say that? Because reparations, any sum of money that would be payable, would not be credible. And any sum that would be credible, that would take into account all this damage, would not be payable. So why go down that route? Atonement, however, is necessary. I think all sinners need to atone. And Mahatma Gandhi, in fact, is the one who wrote to a Viceroy, that he considers British rule in India to be a sin, and for him, that was a very strong word, a sin. But at the same time, he had the very Hindu notion, that you must hate the sin and not the sinner. So once the sin was over, once

the Union Jack had come down, there was no war in your anchor towards the sinner, because he was no longer a sinner. However, what about the past sins?

And my answer is, first of all, well the three things I'd like to suggest to the British, and indeed, have been suggesting to the British. The first is, I think they should teach unvarnished Colonial history in their schools. There's this very convenient historical amnesia in Britain today. As a result of which, what's happening is that you can do an A-level in history in Britain today without learning a line of colonial history. Most people don't know what the British did, to the extent that YouGov which is a poll, that often looks at young people's views in Britain, every year for the last few years, I've quoted one, but there's another poll, which is even worse showing that a significant proportion of young English people actually are proud of the Empire and would love to have it back. They have no idea what they are proud of, so they've got to be taught. That's one thing.

Linked to that, I would say is, there needs to be more by way of memorials and museums. London is just absolutely colored with museums of various sorts, many of which are full of the products of theft from colonies. They're sort of chorbazaars for the Indians in the audience there. Masquerading as museums. But having said that, you can even find an Imperial War Museum in Britain, but you can't find an Imperial Museum, a Colonialism Museum. There's no place for children, tourists, visitors to go to and see for themselves, the whole picture what was done by the British and their foreign rule. And the third thing, oh, by the way, there's even a statue to the animals that aided the war effort in Britain, right in the heart of London, I've driven past it. And there is no statue to the 1.3 million Indians, who gave, of their own and won, an important number of Victoria crosses and so on in the First World War. And the 1.7 million Indians who fought in the Second World War, no statue to them. The animals, however, are commemorated. The British really have to recognize the debt that they owe.

Finally, you mentioned an apology. To me, that is important. And I've got the perfect opportunity for it looming right now. On the 13th of April 2019, will be the centenary of what I consider the single worst atrocity of the British Empire, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Amritsar Massacre some people call it. Not because of the numbers of people killed, the British actually killed a 100,000 people in Delhi alone, in putting down the Revolt of 1857, but rather because of everything that accompanied it. Give me two minutes to explain. It came at the end of the First World War, which even Mahatma Gandhi had supported the Indian war effort and Indians had sent money, treasure, taxes which they could not afford, pack animals, rations, clothing, uniforms, carts, even rail lines ripped out of the ground to aid the war effort, in the hope that at the end of all of this, there would be the grant of what the British had promised to the white Commonwealth; responsible self-government. It never came, they betrayed the promise. And not only betrayed, they actually re-imposed wartime era prohibitions on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and so on. Immediately, protests broke out, saying this is simply not what we were promised and the British, in effect declared martial law. They didn't use the phrase but they sent Generals out to the various provinces to put down the unrest.

In Amritsar, the second largest town in Punjab, we had the arrival of brigadier-general Reginald Dyer, and he got there and he proclaimed that people couldn't gather in groups of more than five and so on and so forth; but he'd completely failed to notice that this was the Punjabi spring festival of Baisakhi, and in a walled garden called Jallianwala Bagh, a large number of men, women and children had gathered to commemorate the festival, completely unarmed. He arrives there with a bunch of soldiers. He doesn't ask them what they're doing there and why they're there. He doesn't even take a look at

who they are. He doesn't fire a warning shot. He just orders his soldiers to shoot into the bodies of the unarmed, wailing, soon stampeding men, women and children. And as they tried to flee this garden, this walled garden, there's only one gate, one exit, and he stations his soldiers right there, as he himself explains later, because that makes these people easier targets. Sixteen hundred and fifty rounds were fired and he boasted proudly, not one bullet was wasted. The British admitted to 379 killed and the rest injured. The Indians claim the figures are much higher, whatever the truth was, it was a horrendous, horrendous massacre. At the end of it, he bars the gate shut and doesn't allow even the relatives of the dead, the dying and the wounded to tend to their dear ones. They are forced to lie for 24 hours in the hot April sun, many of whom die because of that. On top of that, he forces Indians to crawl on their bellies on a narrow lane nearby, and if they so much as lift their heads, their heads are bashed in by British staves.

At the end of all of this, of course, there is outrage. The House of Commons condemns him, the House of Lords promptly passes a resolution praising him for what he had done and the British take out the collection to reward him. And there is the equivalent of a quarter of a million pounds sterling in today's money, which is presented to him with a bejewelled sword, and that flatulent voice of Victorian Imperialism, Rudyard Kipling, hails him as the man who saved India. And this, that entire package, the betrayal at the beginning, the cruelty of the massacre, the racism and indifference to Indian suffering, the followed, the justification and reward, you take the whole thing together, and to me, it makes it the single most fitting act that is worthy of an apology. And if somebody, on the centenary of that event, somebody from the Royal Family, because everything was done on the name of the crown, were to come to Amritsar, and go down on their knees at Jallianwala Bagh and beg forgiveness or express remorse, apologize for this sin, I think it would have a remarkably cleansing effect and perhaps wash away much of the wrongs that were done in the preceding 200 years.

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