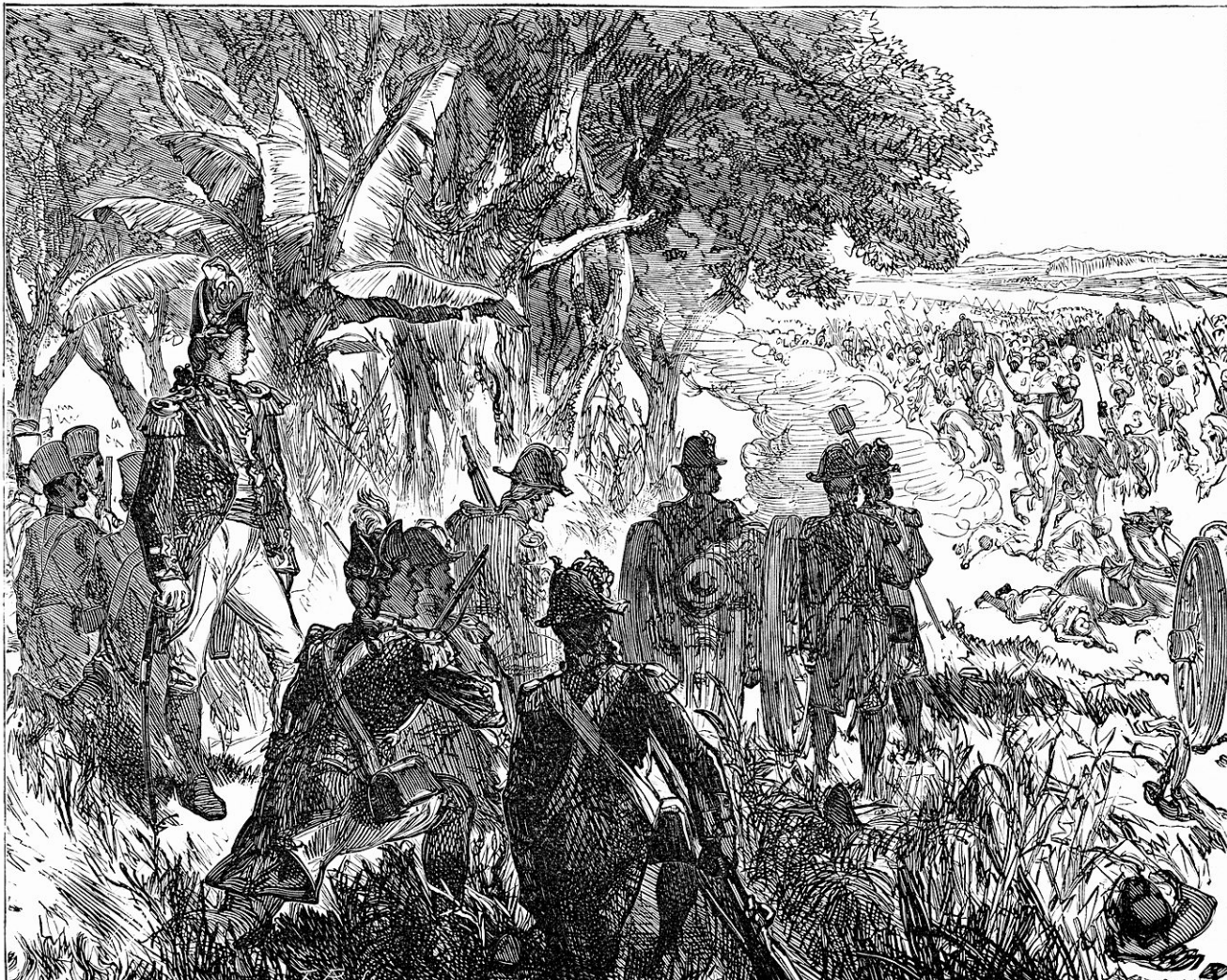


# Empire and extraction

Shashi Tharoor's history of the colonial era will reignite thinking on the nature of British rule in India, says Ajay Chhibber

ISTOCK



THE STARTING POINT: An artist's impression of the Battle of Plassey, 1757, which began Britain's exploitation of India

Meiji restoration that helped modernise and industrialise the country. It's possible, but it's equally possible that India with a weak Mughal emperor would have witnessed continued infighting among various kingdoms, with more raids like that of Nadir Shah who sacked Delhi and carried away the Peacock Throne, the Kohinoor diamond and enough loot to provide a three-year tax holiday to his citizens back home.

Because of a focus only on India and its colonisation, Tharoor misses other major global factors underway that could also explain some of the decline in GDP shares. For example, China that saw an even bigger decline in its share of global GDP over the same period from around 33 per cent in 1800 at the height of the Qing dynasty to 4 per cent in 1950 when Mao took power. China was not colonised, although it did have to forcibly sign some humiliating trade treaties.

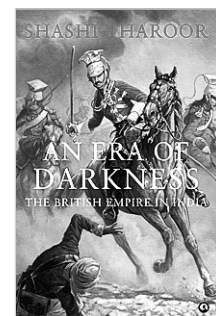
So something else must have been going on to explain the trends in global GDP. What Tharoor does not cover is the industrial revolution that originated in Britain around 1750 and followed quickly in major European countries, but was missed for various reasons by much of Asia. As a result, western Europe's share in global GDP jumped from around 20 per cent in 1700 to 35 per cent by 1900. No doubt some of this came through colonial loot, but much of it was generated by domestic industrial development and technological change. The USA, not a major colonial power, industrialised rapidly and increased its share of global GDP from under 1 per cent in 1776 at its independence to about 25 per cent

of GDP by 1950. These factors help explain some of the trends in global GDP shares and cannot only be attributed to colonialism.

What is striking is how few Britons were able to run an empire of over 200 million for almost 200 years. Tharoor attributes this to *Divide Et Impera* — divide and rule — and documents the many ways in which this stratagem was used throughout the colonial period. It took a Jallianwalla Bagh massacre to raise a nationalist consciousness in India for the first time, but even that did not last long and the British were able to divide us into religion, region, and caste so easily and finally leave a divided India in a bloody partition, the legacy of which we still live with. Gandhiji, as always, said it best "when we are divided, they rule."

For the first time after almost a millennium, a united India has control over its own destiny and within 70 years has emerged as a leading economic power with a rising share of global GDP, albeit with still many shortcomings. As we address our economic and social challenges and deal with our differences in a rambunctious democracy, history teaches us that the cost of not being united could be catastrophic as Tharoor so ably documents.

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**AN ERA OF DARKNESS**  
THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN INDIA  
**Author:** Shashi Tharoor  
**Publisher:** Aleph  
**Pages:** 333  
**Price:** ₹699

British Indian history has been well documented by great writers like Dadabhai Naoroji, Romesh Chander Dutt, Jawaharlal Nehru and others. Shashi Tharoor has turned the same material into a gripping page turner. With his characteristic wit, biting sarcasm and gifted writing, he has produced a bestseller that will re-ignite thinking and debate and open the eyes of the younger generation in India and hopefully in Britain on this "era of darkness".

Tharoor has authoritatively debunked the work of colonial apologists like Niall Ferguson and Nirad Chaudhri, and meticulously documented the systematic loot and plunder of India. The section on famine relief is probably the most damaging example of heartless colonial policy, allowing 35 million to die — more than the numbers that were killed by Stalin's collectivisation and Mao's Cultural Revolution — while food was being exported out of the country to help the British war effort. The great Winston Churchill emerges from the quotes in the book as horribly racist and perhaps even criminally negligent.

Tharoor documents how British colonialism was a commercial project to extract revenue and serve as a market for British goods. How India was systematically de-industrialised using examples of textiles, steel and ship-building. And how various land settlement systems were gradually modified to extract more and more

revenue and reduced the peasantry into penury. But Tharoor's argument that, as a result, landlessness was first witnessed during British rule is not backed by evidence. The famous economic historian Dharma Kumar showed that landlessness existed before the British arrived. But it probably increased hugely during British rule.

Tharoor's new contribution is that he even takes apart the commonly accepted argument — such as that made by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh — that the British Empire left quite a bit of good in India, from democracy, rule of law, free press to the railways, civil service and the army. Tharoor systematically tries to debunk these arguments and grudgingly admits to only three benefits of British rule — the English language, cricket, and tea but even these, in a hilarious chapter, he regards as unintended benefits. Any of these benefits could have been brought to India without, as

he says, "the exploitation, distortions and deracination that accompanied its acquisition by the colonized." Tharoor, a sitting MP, would even prefer a Presidential system over Westminster-style parliamentary democracy.

Where Tharoor's argument is weak is in his major point that British rule helped reduce India's share of global GDP from 23 per cent when they entered India to only 4 per cent by the time they left. But as Angus Maddison's figures show, India's GDP share was declining before the British came to India — except for a brief period of about 100 years during the Mughal period — and continued to decline some 30

years after they left India, when the economy grew much faster than during British rule but yet at 3.5 per cent per year, dubbed the Hindu growth rate by Prof Raj Krishna — slower than the rest of the world. All one can say is that British colonial rule, often portrayed as able administration, did not arrest the decline and probably perpetuated it for another 200-odd years.

Tharoor thinks India could have emulated Japan, which resisted colonisation and then underwent a

