

THE CURIOUS CAREER OF LIBERALISM IN INDIA

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Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)

I

There is a long-standing myth that the history of modern India was foretold at the beginning of the nineteenth century by British liberals who predicted that the enlightened despotic rule of India's new conquerors would, by its beneficial effects, improve the native character and institutions sufficiently to prepare the people of that country one day to govern themselves. Lord William Bentinck, a disciple of Jeremy Bentham, while presenting as governor-general his case for the opening up of India to European settlers, speculated on the possibility of "a vast change to have occurred in the frame of society . . . which would imply that the time had arrived when it would be wise for England to leave India to govern itself", but added that such change "can scarcely be looked for in centuries to come".¹ The doctrinal basis within liberal theory for justifying a democratic country like Britain exercising despotic power in colonies such as Ireland and India was securely laid out by mid-century liberals such as John Stuart Mill.² The project of "improvement" was revived at the end of the nineteenth century by Gladstonian liberals who inducted elite Indians into new representative institutions based on

¹ Minute of the Governor-General, 30 May 1829, *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company 1832*, General Appendix V, 273, in *Parliamentary Papers*, House of Commons.

² The best treatment of this subject is U. S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999).

a very narrow franchise in preparation for some form of self-government. When power was ultimately transferred to the rulers of a partitioned subcontinent in 1947, the history of liberal progress in India was complete. The storyline was laid out, for instance, in Thompson and Garratt's *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India* or in Percival Spear's revised edition of the hugely successful textbook by Vincent Smith.³ Even nationalist Indian scholars adopted at least a part of this story, nowhere more so than in the histories of constitutional law which traced the foundations of the postcolonial Indian republic to the progressive expansion of liberal state institutions under British rule.⁴

Of course, there were always doubters who questioned this storyline. The so-called "old school" of British administrators, echoing Edmund Burke's invocation of an Indian "ancient constitution", believed that India could only be effectively governed by going along with rather than against the grain of its traditional institutions. Men like Thomas Munro and Mountstuart Elphinstone resolutely opposed, even within the power corridors of the East India Company, the reforming zeal of the utilitarians and evangelicals.⁵ The great Indian rebellion of 1857 brought the liberal project to a halt. Critics alleged that hasty and ill-advised interventions by an alien government bent on radically changing long-standing customary practices had provoked the violent opposition of large sections of the native population. From 1858, when the rule of the Company was abolished and India was administered directly as a crown colony, the liberal project receded for at least the next two decades as the emphasis shifted to a reliance on traditional landed elites and so-called martial races to serve as props for British dominance in India.⁶

The question is: what happened to the moral justification provided by liberals for the empire in the East? If British rule was only meant to preserve the status quo in native society, the empire could be justified by little more than the self-interested motives of profit-making and power. Was that sufficient for an age when struggles for democracy and nationalism were ascendant in Europe and electoral reform and franchise extensions were being carried out in Britain? Or were other moral justifications thought out?

³ E. J. Thompson and G. T. Garratt, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, revised edn (Allahabad, 1958; first published London, 1934); V. A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, 3rd edn, ed. Percival Spear (Oxford, 1958).

⁴ For instance, A. C. Banerjee, *Constitutional History of India*, 3 vols. (Delhi, 1977–78). An influential model for these post-independence constitutional histories was A. B. Keith, *Constitutional History of India, 1600–1935* (London, 1936).

⁵ The classic account of these policy debates is E. Stokes, *English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1959).

⁶ The classic history of this transition is T. R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India 1857–1870* (Princeton, 1964).

Karuna Mantena's book reopens this period from the age of high imperialism in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Focusing on Henry Sumner Maine (1822–88), law member of the viceroy's council in India, lecturer in jurisprudence at Oxford and an acknowledged founder of the modern discipline of anthropology, Mantena argues that indeed a new reason was found in this period for imperial rule in Asia and Africa. Contrary to the liberal vision of rapid enlightenment and progress, the new alibi of empire was the protection of people living in traditional society from the destructive consequences of modern commercial and property regimes. By providing a sophisticated comparative account of the evolution of ancient societies, Maine laid the theoretical ground for late imperial policies such as the protection of backward communities in India and indirect rule in Africa.

The hardening of imperial attitudes in Britain is usually dated from the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865 in Jamaica. They led to a strong critique not only of liberal pretensions of improving native institutions to bring them up to the level of those of civilized nations, but also of the alleged sentimentality of the liberal pedagogical project of culture. Thus James Fitzjames Stephen, just returned from service in India, famously remarked in 1883 that British power in India

is essentially an absolute government, founded, not on consent, but conquest . . . It represents a belligerent civilization, and no anomaly can be more striking or so dangerous, as its administration by men, who being at the head of a Government founded on conquest, implying at every point the superiority of the conquering race . . . shrink from the open, uncompromising, straightforward assertion of it, seek to apologize for their own position, and refuse, from whatever cause, to uphold and support it.⁷

Maine, while sharing some of these sentiments, provided a more sophisticated theoretical critique of liberal imperialism.

Taking the universal evolutionary scheme of social formations away from the speculative realms of philosophical anthropology in which the Scottish Enlightenment writers like Hume, Smith and Ferguson had placed it, Maine grounded his studies in a new science of comparative jurisprudence. His key idea was that law in ancient society operated not through the legislative acts of sovereign lawmakers but through customary practices. For India, therefore, he criticized the reliance put by orientalist scholars and British judges on the canonical texts of Brahmanical law and looked instead at ethnographic records of the actual practices of social regulation at the level of villages, kinship groups and communities. His principal theoretical claim was that most ancient societies,

⁷ J. F. Stephen, "Foundations of the Government of India", *Nineteenth Century* 70 (Oct. 1883), 541–68, 548.

including those that were part of large tax-extracting empires, reproduced themselves within their local structures of customary institutions, with only slow incremental changes.

However, the evolution of social formations was a universal historical tendency. The Indian evidence persuaded Maine that even within the largely self-regulating village communities, there was a slow transition from relations based on customary status to those of contract, leading to the decay of kinship-based communal property and the gradual emergence of private property. A particularly interesting aspect of Maine's argument is his suggestion that this—admittedly slow—dynamic of the emergence of private property was immanent in the social formation and did not (as with Marx's Asiatic mode of production, for instance) need the violent intrusion of an external force such as a modern capitalist imperial power to dissolve it (Mantena, 137).

Based on this theoretical foundation of evolutionary anthropology, Maine proposed certain dicta of imperial policy that were directly opposed to those of liberal imperialism. In fact, throughout his career in India and later in his lectures at Oxford, Maine kept up a torrent of criticism of liberal and utilitarian prescriptions on the Indian empire. His principal charge was that by seeking to introduce progressive legislation to "civilize" native society, liberal utilitarianism had brought the traditional institutions of village India into a rapid and deep crisis. What might have emerged slowly over centuries of historical evolution was sought to be legislated into existence overnight. Most crucially, colonial officials, blinded by their utilitarian spectacles, failed to see that landed property in most of India was communal, based on complex collective rights defined by caste and kinship. Impelled by their dogma, they had legislated new titles to land based on absolute private property. The result was catastrophic. Traditional society, which was a complex whole consisting of the structurally balanced sum of its parts, faced imminent collapse.

Contrary to the much-vaunted mission of liberal imperialism to improve native society, Maine argued that the only legitimate reason for empire was to halt as far as possible the destruction of the traditional society of India. The idea must be not to artificially transform but rather to protect the character and integrity of native society. The wisest policy, therefore, was to bank on continuity and interfere as little as possible:

In the existing state of authority and opinion I can see no rule to follow, except to abide by actual arrangements, whether founded or not on an original misconception of native usage, I say let us stand even by our own mistakes. It is better than perpetual meddling. (cited in Mantena, 145)

Maine's anti-liberal analysis of the ends of empire supplied, Mantena argues, the ground for the theories of indirect rule that would dominate imperial policy

in India in the latter half of the nineteenth century and especially in Africa in the twentieth. In India, indirect rule, involving the preservation, as far as possible, of local customary institutions and traditional authorities, was remedial, trying to minimize the damage already done to native society. But in the frontier regions outside the borders of traditional agrarian society, such as the forest areas of central India or the hill regions of the north-east and the north-west, inhabited by “tribal peoples”, the British colonial power came to see itself in the special role of protector of the local tribal communities against planters and traders, both European and Indian, seeking to entangle the child-like tribal into the vicious webs of commerce, credit and marketable property.⁸ Similarly in Africa: indirect rule, involving the decentralization of power to tribal chiefs who would administer their local societies according to customary law, was thought of as pre-emptive, aiming to forestall the destruction of traditional native society besieged by the forces of modernity (173). The preservation of native society from collapse became, as Mantena puts it, the new alibi of empire.

What was the difference between this late anti-liberal view of empire and the earlier liberal or utilitarian one? It lies in the structures of justification, which in turn is based on different comparative theories of social formations and different assessments of the efficacy of state policy in changing institutions. The liberal and anti-liberal views gave rise to different ideologies of empire. But they shared a common universalist framework within which all social formations everywhere in the world could be compared and evaluated, albeit within complex processes of historical evolution. Thus Maine’s portrayal of traditional Indian society insisted that its functionality and coherence were entirely related to its specific place in the evolution of ancient societies, and that in the universal comparative scheme, the institutions of the modern West were, without doubt, normatively superior (Mantena, 159). The anti-liberal ideology of empire fully endorsed the normalized comparative scheme of social formations and governments, upheld the normative superiority of modern Western institutional practices and, like all modern imperial forms of power, justified the suspension of those normative standards and declared the colonial exception. Where it was different was that instead of rushing to close the deviation of the colonial society from the superior norm, it advocated a gradual and balanced process of change in which the imperial power had to hold the balance and make the decisions, because otherwise native society would collapse.

Despite the rise of anti-liberal imperial ideologies in the late nineteenth century, liberal imperialism did not die out. Gladstonian liberals fought against the hard-headed conservatives and tried whenever they could to further the liberal

⁸ For a review of these colonial debates see R. Guha, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (Chicago, 1999).

agenda by extending representative institutions to sections of the Indian elite and introducing progressive laws, such as those against child marriage. Mantena speaks of these two opposed tendencies as “oscillations *internal* to the structure of imperial ideology”, brought about not by doctrinal necessity but by “a relation of political entailment” (185, italics in original). What this means, it seems to me, is that different techniques of imperial governance were proposed and adopted according to changing assessments of the political situation, all such techniques being available within the range of practices invented and authorized by the exercise of modern imperial power. Each of these techniques could be adopted, with appropriate ideological justifications, to fit the specific requirements of the exercise of imperial power.

Further, as is clear from the dramatic impact of the mid-century revolts in India and Jamaica, the choice of imperial techniques was crucially shaped by the assessment of indigenous tendencies of collaboration and resistance. In other words, the politics of empire operated within a relation of forces consisting of imperial as well as indigenous elements. In an influential argument, Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher once argued that there was no “grand design” behind late Victorian imperialism; both expansion and consolidation in the decades leading up to the First World War were prompted by the need to protect existing strategic possessions, pre-empt rival imperial powers and respond to the developing political situations in the colonies. Decisions were ad hoc, and justifications in terms of economic or political reasons were supplied after the fact.⁹ David Fieldhouse supplemented the argument by claiming that the economic needs of the metropolis had very little to do with the expansion of empire in the late nineteenth century and that it was the political situation in the peripheries that determined imperial policy.¹⁰ Following these interventions, there has been a major tendency among historians to treat imperialism from the late nineteenth century as driven by an “official mind” that is pragmatic, seeking immediate solutions to practical problems and wholly devoid of ideology. This “reluctance to discover a concerted imperial agenda,” Charles Maier has pointed out, “is one of the attributes of liberal and sometimes apologetic history”.¹¹ Mantena’s discussion of Maine and indirect rule suggests that this apparently non-ideological strategy was one that was available, along with various ideologically loaded ones, *within* the range of techniques of imperial practice developed in the nineteenth century. The specific choice was often the function of the particular

⁹ R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London, 1961).

¹⁰ D. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire, 1830–1914* (Ithaca, 1973).

¹¹ C. S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 48.

configuration of relations between imperial and indigenous forces in a particular colony.

II

Turning to the career of liberalism among Indians, the story usually begins with Rammohan Roy (1772–1833). Religious reformer, publicist and pioneer of the Indian press, Rammohan was a vocal supporter of contemporary liberal causes such as the Bolivarian revolutions in South America, the July revolution in France and the Reform Acts in Britain. Part of the puzzle posed by Rammohan is that much of his rationalism was the product of his engagement in Islamic and Brahmanical theological debates well before he became familiar with European Enlightenment thinking. But in the last years of his life, he actively participated in something like a global liberal circuit of discussion and campaign on the freedom of thought, representative government and free trade.¹² The mainstream of Indian nationalist historiography has always claimed Rammohan as the father of Indian modernity and liberal constitutional government, and, by implication, of Indian nationalism.

Andrew Sartori's book, by insisting that modern intellectual movements in India be seen as part of global currents emerging simultaneously at many places and flowing in unexpected directions, points to the rupture between the early liberalism of Rammohan's time in the first half of the nineteenth century and the rise of cultural nationalism in the second. Sartori's method is "concept history", which, unlike *Begriffsgeschichte* as practised by Reinhart Koselleck, strongly connects political and cultural concepts to the categories of abstract labour (as in Marx) and the abstract subject (as in Hegel). In this, he follows the interpretation of Hegel and Marx offered by his teacher Moishe Postone in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1993). Sartori's claim is that as the economy of Bengal became deeply entangled with global spheres of capitalist production and exchange in the early nineteenth century, the abstract subject of modernity made its appearance in the form of the rights-bearing citizen. Men like Rammohan Roy and his disciple Dwarakanath Tagore engaged in business partnerships with Europeans, just as they collaborated with European traders and publicists in demanding from the Company administration a climate of free trade and free public debate. The abstract subject was unmarked by race or nationality. In the later nineteenth century, however, when the very exposure to the global market accentuated indebtedness and mass poverty among Indian peasants, the abstract

¹² An aspect recently highlighted by C. A. Bayly, 'Rammohan Roy and the Advent of Constitutional Liberalism in India, 1800–30', *Modern Intellectual History* 4/1 (2007), 25–41.

liberal subject became the target of severe criticism from Bengal's intellectuals. Like many similar idealist invocations of national culture in Germany, Russia and Japan at this time, Bengali writers argued for a regenerated Hindu national culture defined by a neo-Vedantic idealism. This became the ground of nationalist economic thinking during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905–11) and of militant nationalist politics until independence and after. According to Sartori, cultural nationalism in Bengal, like idealist critiques everywhere of the abstract subject, sprang from the “misrecognition” of the true material foundation of the abstract subject in the category of abstract labour in capitalist production.

I strongly endorse Sartori's characterization of the emergent anti-absolutist public sphere in Bengal, marked by collaboration between non-official Europeans, Eurasians and some elite Indians. This was indeed a new public, infused by the republican spirit of the American revolutions, which campaigned spiritedly for a free press, free trade and the settlement of Europeans in India. Most remarkably, these campaigns included among their most active participants distinguished Indians such as Rammohan and Dwarkanath. This has caused not a few ticklish issues to crop up in Indian nationalist history. What were patriotic and knowledgeable Indians like them thinking when they joined up with predatory indigo planters and unscrupulous bankers to demand European settlement in India? Couldn't they see that the import of Lancashire cloth was destroying the once flourishing indigenous textile craft in Bengal? What could free trade mean for the colony of a rising industrial power except deindustrialization and agrarian poverty?

Nationalist historians, keen to claim Rammohan Roy as the father figure of liberal nationalism, were necessarily defensive on these issues. In the 1970s, historians such as Asok Sen, Sumit Sarkar and Amiya Bagchi launched a critique from the left of the early liberals, accusing them of being naive visionaries at best or willing collaborators at worst.¹³ Even as Indian historians subsequently got entangled in new debates over rising Hindu nationalism and the fate of the secular state, there appeared to be no easy way of reclaiming the heritage of early liberalism.

Sartori's formulation of a rupture between the first and second halves of the nineteenth century can be seen as a move that parallels in the domain of Indian intellectual history the shift discussed by Mantena in imperial history. The later nineteenth century in Bengal is dominated by intellectuals such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94). Bankim shed his early liberal views to launch a searing critique of Kantian ethics and utilitarian policy (which he called

¹³ See, in particular, the collection V. C. Joshi, ed., *Rammohan Roy and the Process of Modernization in India* (New Delhi, 1975); and A. K. Bagchi, *The Evolution of the State Bank of India: The Roots, 1806–1876*, 2 vols. (Bombay, 1986).

“the philosophy of the belly”). The assertion of the moral superiority of Indian tradition now came to form the intellectual core of a new cultural nationalism that would prevail until the violent and chaotic decade of the 1940s. This is in fact the story of nationalist modernity in Bengal: it began in the 1870s as a self-conscious and idealist critique of the universal abstract subject of Western modernity and became a project for constructing a modern subject that was specifically Indian in its cultural practices and moral values. Nationalist modernity, in other words, was premised on a necessary rejection of the early liberalism of men like Rammohan.

I agree with Sartori’s periodization. It clears away the uneasy ambiguities of nationalist genealogies and establishes the anti-absolutist republicanism of the early nineteenth century as a period and a movement in its own right. What I find unpersuasive is his characterization of the later cultural nationalism as founded on the “misrecognition” of the abstract subject of real history. Whatever its validity in the theoretical disciplines of political philosophy or political economy, the abstract subject, unmarked by race or nationality, is hardly a credible figure in historical scholarship. The reason why the republican dreams of Rammohan Roy or Dwarkanath Tagore met with crushing disappointment was that their liberal European collaborators in the world of colonial agricultural and financial enterprise were unwilling to accept racial equality—not even in the world of capital, let alone that of citizenship. Republicanism in the Americas may have endorsed the coming together of *creole* with *mestizo*, but had provided no precedent for the inclusion of blacks into the civic domain. It was not going to happen in colonial India.

It is hard for a historian to argue that cultural nationalists misrecognized the abstract liberal subject in their dealings with the British colonial order. Even in the early nineteenth century, British Indian law and the judicial process did not apply equally to Europeans and Indians. Macaulay in 1836, trying to bring only a modest degree of uniformity, provoked violent opposition from Europeans in India. The liberal Ilbert fared no better in 1882. As recently documented by Elizabeth Kolsky, the everyday violence and relative impunity of European officials and employers in relation to Indian subordinates was plain to see. It reached odious levels in frontier regions such as Assam where white planters claimed not to have the protective presence of the colonial state.¹⁴ Cultural nationalists in India, well versed in the history of anti-colonial nationalist struggles around the world, thought they were drawing the right lessons by first creating their own national institutions in the cultural domain of language, literature, education, religion, family and community life and then launching, from the early twentieth century, a contest for sovereignty with the colonial state. Judging by the results, it is hard

¹⁴ E. Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 2010).

to argue that they were wrong in refusing the dubious invitation to abstract universal subjectivity.

Sartori's analysis of various aspects of cultural nationalism in Bengal, however, deserves high praise. His reading of Bankim is outstanding, as is his elucidation of the economic thinking of the Swadeshi movement as an "ethical political economy" that rejected industrial capitalism. Sartori concludes with a reflection on the category of "culture" in the modern intellectual history of Bengal from Bankim to Rabindranath Tagore (1860–1941). A reified ideal of national culture, embodying a Vedantic idealism that claimed to reject materialist or utilitarian pursuits, provided for the Hindu upper-caste nationalist elite a core of ethical values that marked its difference from the muscular imperialism of the British and the greedy commercialism of the rising Indian capitalists, as well as the elemental struggles for survival of the predominantly Muslim peasantry. Once again, Sartori rather gives it all away by insisting that this is merely a particular moment in the global history of the misrecognition of abstract labour and the universal abstract subject. After all, had Bengal's intellectuals plumped for devotional Vaishnavism instead of Hegelian Vedanta, for Sartori it would still have been a particular moment in the global history of misrecognition. For the rest of us, however, it would have been a very different history.