

The Pros and Cons of British Rule

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78 ▼ Dadabhai Naoroji, 1871 LONDON SPEECH

The man who best symbolized India's growing ambivalence about British rule was Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917). Born into a prosperous Bombay family, he abandoned a promising career as a mathematician at the age of thirty and moved to London, where he believed he could work effectively for improved conditions in India. In 1892, running as a Liberal, he became the first Indian elected to the British Parliament. During one of his many return visits to India he was instrumental in 1885 in the founding of the Indian National Congress, an organization of moderate and middle-class Indians who appreciated the English but sought more governmental responsibility and more say in making policy.

Naoroji made the following evaluation of Great Britain's impact on India in response to a question following a speech he delivered to a learned society in London in 1871. It later was published in a collection of his works that appeared in 1887. He begins by discussing the "credit," or benefit, of British rule.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What does Naoroji regard as Britain's most important contributions to India's development?
2. In what areas have the British failed, according to Naoroji?
3. In Naoroji's view, to what extent can India's problems be solved, short of independence?

Credit — *In the Cause of Humanity*: Abolition of sati and infanticide.

Destruction of Dacoits, Thugs, Pindares,¹ and other such pests of Indian society.

Remarriage of Hindu widows,² and charitable aid in time of famine.

Glorious work all this, of which any nation may well be proud, and such as has not fallen to the lot of any people in the history of mankind.

In the Cause of Civilization: Education, both male and female. Though yet only partial, an inestimable blessing as far as it has gone, and leading gradually to the destruction of superstition, and many moral and social evils. Resuscitation of India's own noble literature, modified and refined by the enlightenment of the West.

Politically: Peace and order. Freedom of speech and liberty of the press. Higher political knowledge and aspirations. Improvement of government in the native States.³ Security of life and property. Freedom from oppression caused by the caprice or avarice of despotic rulers, and from devastation by war. Equal justice between man and man (sometimes vitiated by partiality to Europeans). Services of highly educated administrators, who have achieved the above-mentioned good results.

Materially: Loans for railways and irrigation. . . . The development of a few valuable products, such as indigo, tea, coffee, silk, etc. Increase of exports. Telegraphs.

Generally: A slowly growing desire of late to treat India equitably, and as a country held in trust. Good intentions.

No nation on the face of the earth has ever had the opportunity of achieving such a glorious work as this. I hope in this credit side of the account I have done no injustice, and if I have omitted any item which anyone may think of importance, I shall have the greatest pleasure in inserting it. I appreciate, and so do my countrymen, what England has done for India, and I know that it is only in British hands that her regeneration can be accomplished. Now for the debit side.

Debit — *In the Cause of Humanity*: Nothing. Everything, therefore, is in your favor under this head.

In the Cause of Civilization: As I have said already, there has been a failure to do as much as might have been done, but I put nothing to the debit. Much has been done, or I should not be standing here this evening.

Politically: Repeated breach of pledges to give the natives a fair and reasonable share in the higher administration of their own country, which has much shaken confidence in the good faith of the British word. Political aspirations and the legitimate claim to have a reasonable voice in the legislation and the imposition and disbursement of taxes, met to a very slight degree, thus treating the natives of India not as British subjects, in whom representation is a birthright. . . .

¹Indian words for thieves, highway murderers, and robber bands.

²According to Hindu practice, many castes did not permit women to remarry after their husbands' deaths.

Consequent on the above, an utter disregard of the feelings and views of the natives. The great moral evil of the drain of wisdom and practical administration and statesmanship, leaving none to guide the rising generation.

Financially: All attention is engrossed in devising new modes of taxation, without any adequate effort to increase the means of the people to pay, and the consequent vexation and oppressiveness of the taxes imposed, imperial and local. Inequitable financial relations between England and India, i.e. the political debt of £100,000,000 clapped on India's shoulders, and all home charges also, though the British exchequer contributes nearly £3,000,000 to the expenses of the colonies. . . .

Materially: The political drain,⁴ up to this time, from India to England, of above £500,000,000, at the lowest computation, in principal alone, which with interest would be some thousands of millions. The further continuation of this drain at the rate, at present, of above £12,000,000, with a tendency to increase. . . .

The consequent continuous impoverishment and exhaustion of the country, except so far as it has been very partially relieved and replenished by the railway and irrigation loans, and the wind-fall of the consequences of the American war,⁵ since 1850. Even with this relief, the material condition of India is such that the great mass of the poor people have hardly 2d⁶ a day and a few rags, or a scanty subsistence.

The famines⁷ that were in their power to prevent, if they had done their duty, as a good and intelligent government. The policy adopted during the last fifteen years of building railways, irrigation works, etc., is hopeful, has already resulted in much good to your credit, and if perse-

vered in, gratitude and contentment will follow. An increase of exports without adequate compensation; loss of manufacturing industry and skill. Here I end the debit side. . . .

To sum up the whole, the British rule has been — morally, a great blessing; politically peace and order on one hand, blunders on the other, materially, impoverishment (relieved as far as the railway and other loans go). The natives call the British system "Sakar ki Churi," the knife of sugar. That is to say there is no oppression, it is all smooth and sweet, but it is the knife, notwithstanding. I mention this that you should know these feelings. Our great misfortune is that you do not know our wants. When you will know our real wishes, I have not the least doubt that you would do justice. The genius and spirit of the British people is fair play and justice.

⁵Also known as Indian Princely States, these were territories in which native princes continue to reign but accepted after 1858 their subordination to the British crown.

⁴Naoroji is referring to the taxes Indians pay to support the British administration in India.