

The Lion and the Tiger: The Rise and Fall of the British Raj

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“As long as we rule India we are the greatest power in the world,” said Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, in 1901. “If we lose India, we shall drop straightaway to a third-rate power.”

In 1583 English traders arrived in India; in 1947, Britain made her awkward exit. Given India’s immensity and her ethnic, religious, and cultural complexity, it is a daunting challenge to explain Britain’s rise to dominance, to present the rulers and the ruled’s experience of each other, and to map India’s road to independence. The author, professor of British Imperial and Commonwealth History at the London Metropolitan University, meets it. His concise account, in crystal-clear prose, skillfully analyzes core factors and key players in the 350 years of British presence. He evenhandedly details the pros and cons of early trade and limited penetration and pervasive later imperialism, tellingly quoting fortune-seekers, high-minded improvers, and tenacious administrators.

Administrators in particular trumpeted innate British superiority. Charles Grant dismissed Indians as “lamentably degenerate and base,” while Lord Macaulay advised that “We must ... do our best to form a class ... Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” Concurrently, the “doctrine of lapse” placed the provinces of rulers without legitimate heirs under British rule.

Throughout his incisive narrative, Judd subtly deflates the notion of Britain’s “civilizing mission” in India. Merchants sought wealth; military and civilian officials sought power and privilege. Having driven out the French by 1767, Britain turned to ensuring India’s continued weakness to benefit her control of politics and trade, although the Mutiny of 1857 persuaded some 5,000 British officers and men that their 200,000-man native army might not guarantee permanent control.

Judd demonstrates that Britain’s viceroys, who were seldom great statesmen, initially did comparatively little to meet or shape India’s quest for self-rule, preferring minor concessions to meaningful change. He highlights Gandhi’s potent role and, following Churchill’s fall from power in 1945, the Labour Government’s precipitate rush for an exit from India, left with the flawed “two nations” constitutional formula that was to cost more than a million lives.

In this sparkling, well-illustrated political history, Judd includes much that illuminates economic and legal issues, while vignettes of British and Indian leaders highlight competing social systems and perceptions. His distinguished Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present offers readers further reward.

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