



The colonial question: Ego as the first coloniser



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A man reaches a mountain pass at first light. The valley below has not yet been touched by the sun. Then the phone comes out, the shot is framed, and a few words are spoken about how places like this must be protected. By the time he resumes walking, the pass has quietly changed hands. It has become scenery for his morning; by evening, it will be material for his page. No stone has moved, no tree has been cut, and the acquisition is complete.

I begin with him because the world has spent recent days arguing about acquisition on a much larger scale. Elon Musk endorsed a post claiming that colonialism cannot explain poverty: Ethiopia was never colonised and stayed poor, Vietnam was colonised and bombed and now grows fast, so retire the excuse. The opposing camp produced its own ledger: the drain of wealth, the famines, the deindustrialisation of Bengal.

One counts what he took, the other counts what he spent, and the audit never closes because the principal actor appears in neither set of books. Colonisation, at its root, is less an event in economic history than an operation of the human ego; the man at the pass was running the empire's software on an ordinary morning. The debate about empires will remain what it has been for a century: two ledgers shouting across a question neither can answer, which is how a trading company's warehouse guards came to rule two hundred million people.

The East India Company received its royal charter in 1600 as a commercial venture, and a company, by definition, keeps no army. What it kept in India were factories, and the word in that era's vocabulary meant not production but storage. Warehouses need watchmen, and watchmen were the whole of the Company's armed presence for a century. Then Aurangzeb died in 1707, the imperial structure cracked into fragments, and the Company quietly joined the queue. At Plassey in June 1757, it fielded around three thousand men against the Nawab of Bengal's force of roughly fifty thousand. Bengal, then among the wealthiest provinces on earth, changed hands in a day.

The favourite explanation is treachery: Mir Jafar was purchased, the English were cunning. Bribery can decide an afternoon; it cannot administer a subcontinent for two centuries against the will of its inhabitants unless the will itself has gone missing, and the economic record says it went missing long before any Company ship dropped anchor. The coloniser impoverished India brutally, and the weakness that admitted him predated him by half a millennium. A subcontinent cannot be conquered at those odds; it can only be acquired, and an acquisition, unlike a conquest, requires somewhere in the transaction a seller, who is never a nation, because nations sign nothing and the signing is always done by egos.

The ego is the sense of being a separate, bounded something, and separation is its founding condition: inside the skin, me; outside the skin, the world. Speaking on the Isha Upanishad at Oxford earlier this month, I described the ego as a coloniser whose first colony is the body itself, kept alive not out of love but out of self-interest. Whatever stands outside the boundary is encountered as an object; the object is assessed as material; the material is assigned a use. To call a river a water resource is to declare that the river's existence is justified by its utility to the one speaking.

Scale the operation and an empire appears. But appetite explains only the predator, never the catch. The ego converts the outer world into material, and when its



own centre grows too heavy to carry, it performs the same conversion on itself, handing itself over as material to whatever promises to manage it. Out of the first direction come the world's colonisers; out of the second come its colonised.

India's case is the second direction. India's hub was its wisdom tradition, and just before the tenth century, Acharya Shankar had clarified what the tradition at its source actually says. The final authority a human being seeks is not stationed elsewhere; one's own centre is the seat of it. Within a few centuries, the teaching had been recaptured by the intermediaries it threatened and inverted into its opposite. Fatalism was never imposed on the ego; the ego purchased it, because carrying one's own authority is the heaviest load a human being is ever offered.

By the time the first sails appeared, the operation was complete. The Company never installed the colonised condition in India; it found the condition already installed and did little more than change the name on the lease. The fifty thousand at Plassey did not lose to three thousand; the losing had been done one interior at a time, generations earlier, and the field merely published the result.

In August 1947, the administration was transferred, and the transfer was real. The arrangement, though, was never territorial, and so no ceremony could reach it. The coloniser, in whichever century he arrives and whatever uniform he wears, never breaks the gates; he is received at gates opened from inside, by a gatekeeper grateful for the visit.

Seeing the mechanism changes nothing by itself. What operates is seeing joined to intent: the deliberate withdrawal of consent, repeated at the exact points where consent is given.

The man at the pass, meanwhile, has begun his descent. Somewhere on the phone in his pocket, the debate about empire is still running, ledger against ledger; the nearest coloniser, the only one within his actual reach, is the one holding the phone. Somewhere on the way down, he may notice that the valley is being converted again, and the noticing will not stop the conversion, but it will break its automaticity. For a moment too brief to measure, the valley will simply be there, assigned to nothing. No treaty ever delivered that to anything, and no flag has either. The valley never needed his protection. It needed him to see what he does to it by the mere act of perceiving it. The seeing will rescue nothing and settle nothing, and it is still the only beginning that does not turn into one more form of the problem.

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