

Economic Exploitation in Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*

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Abstract

Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* presents a powerful and meticulously researched account of the economic exploitation suffered by India under British colonial rule. This paper delves into the various dimensions of that exploitation, examining how the British systematically dismantled India's indigenous industries, drained its wealth, and manipulated economic policies to serve imperial interests. Tharoor highlights the deindustrialization of traditional crafts, the unjust tax systems, the deliberate destruction of Indian agriculture and the catastrophic famines exacerbated by colonial mismanagement. Through references to historical data and critical theories such as the Drain of wealth, the paper underscores the profound economic damage inflicted upon India, debunking myths of colonial benevolence. It also critiques the so-called infrastructural developments like the railways, exposing them as tools of extraction rather than empowerment. By analyzing Tharoor's arguments, this study contributes to postcolonial discourse, asserting that the legacy of British rule left India impoverished, economically stunted, and burdened with structural inequalities that persist even today.

Key Words: Drain of wealth, Deindustrialization, Economic Imperialism, Looting of resources, colonial taxation, Unequal trade, Destruction of Indian Industries, Revenue extraction, Famines under British rule.

Introduction:

Shashi Tharoor's "An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India" presents a scathing critique of colonialism, meticulously examining the profound economic damage inflicted upon India during the British Raj. Through rigorous research and fervent argumentation, Tharoor challenges the notion that British

colonial rule had a positive impact on India. Instead, he exposes the systematic exploitation of India's resources, the deliberate deindustrialization of its economy, and the devastating legacy of poverty and despair that Britain left in its wake, thereby debunking the myth that colonialism modernized and benefited India. Tharoor's work serves as a powerful rebuke to those who nostalgically glorify colonial rule, offering a nuanced understanding of the historical injustices perpetrated against India.

Shashi Tharoor's arguments in "An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India" are centered around the pivotal theme of economic exploitation, which serves as the foundational element of his critique of British colonial rule. Through the strategic deployment of statistical evidence, meticulous historical documentation, and incisive rhetoric, Tharoor compellingly illustrates the manner in which Britain's prosperity was inextricably linked to India's economic subjugation. This paper aims to conduct a thorough exploration of the multifaceted ways in which the British economically exploited India, delving into the specific methods and policies they utilized to achieve their objectives, as well as examining the profound and long-lasting consequences of their actions on the Indian economy. By scrutinizing the historical records and economic data, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of colonial exploitation and its enduring impact on India's economic development.

One of the most egregious forms of economic exploitation highlighted in Shashi Tharoor's "An Era of Darkness" is the systematic deindustrialization of India, which had a profound and devastating impact on the country's economy and artisans. Prior to the advent of British colonial rule, India was a global leader in the production of textiles, particularly cotton and muslin, which were highly prized and exported to destinations around the world. Indian artisans and weavers had spent generations perfecting their crafts, developing a rich tradition of textile production that was renowned for its quality and beauty. However, with the imposition of British colonial rule, this thriving industry was deliberately and ruthlessly dismantled. The British colonial authorities implemented a series of policies designed to eliminate competition from Indian textiles and promote the interests of British textile mills in Manchester and Lancashire. Indian textiles were subjected to heavy taxation when exported to Britain, while British textiles were allowed to enter Indian markets duty-free, making it impossible for Indian weavers to compete. Furthermore, Indian weavers were often forced into employment under exploitative conditions, their livelihoods were systematically destroyed, and some were even subjected to brutal physical mutilation, such as having their thumbs cut off, to prevent them from continuing to practice their craft. The British also pursued a policy of exporting raw materials from India and importing finished goods back into the country, effectively converting India into a captive market for British goods. This process of deindustrialization had a catastrophic impact on the Indian

economy, leading to massive unemployment, widespread poverty, and the collapse of traditional economic systems that had sustained Indian society for centuries. The consequences of this exploitation were far-reaching and devastating, and had a lasting impact on India's economic development.

Shashi Tharoor extensively references the Drain of Wealth theory, a concept originally proposed by Dadabhai Naoroji in the 19th century, to illustrate the systematic extraction of wealth from India by the British without any fair return or compensation. According to Tharoor, this exploitative economic system was characterized by the British failure to invest profits generated in India back into the local economy. Instead, British officers and civil servants earned substantial salaries in India, which were then remitted back to England, thereby depriving India of much-needed capital. Furthermore, profits derived from Indian resources and labor were repatriated to Britain, rather than being reinvested locally to foster economic development. This drain of wealth was further exacerbated by the so-called "home charges," which included payments for the maintenance of the British army, pensions for British civil servants, and other expenses that were debited to Indian revenues. According to estimates cited by Tharoor from economists like Utsa Patnaik, between the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and India's Independence in 1947, the British extracted an astonishing amount of wealth from India, valued at over \$45 trillion in today's currency.

Tharoor metaphorically describes the British colonial state as an "economic vampire state" that sucked India dry, leaving the country impoverished and economically drained, while simultaneously funding Britain's industrial revolution and contributing to its economic prosperity. This profound and sustained drain of wealth had a devastating impact on India's economic development, perpetuating poverty and underdevelopment, and leaving a lasting legacy of economic inequality and structural imbalances. The British implemented harsh taxation policies that burdened the Indian peasantry. The Permanent Settlement of Bengal (1793) ensured that landlords/ Zamindars collected revenue from peasants and paid fixed amounts to the British. This led to over taxation, land alienation and poverty. Peasants were often forced to borrow money at high interest to pay taxes, leading to a cycle of debt and land loss. The British collected taxes in cash rather than kind, which was difficult for subsistence farmers. Revenue from land taxes was used not to improve Indian agriculture but to fund British administration and wars elsewhere. Tharoor emphasizes that the British taxation system prioritized imperial profit over Indian welfare, leading to famine, malnutrition and suffering among millions.

Tharoor devotes a significant portion of the book to the famine that occurred under British rule, portraying them as man-made disasters caused by economic mismanagement and colonial indifference. Between 1770 and 1943, at least 35 million Indians died in famines. The Bengal Famine of 1943, which killed

over 3 million people occurred even as Britain continued to export grain from India to feed its soldiers and citizens. Tharoor argues that these famines were not natural, but consequences of colonial economic policies, including price controls, export priorities and lack of investment in agriculture.

In addition of textiles, other Indian industries such as metalwork, shipbuilding and carpentry also suffered under British policies. Indian craftsmen were replaced by cheap British factory goods. British laws and practices favored British business interests, even banning some Indian exports at times. Traditional guilds, markets and systems of production were disrupted and skilled workers were left jobless. Tharoor makes the case that this was not accidental but a deliberate economic strategy to ensure that India remained dependent on Britain.

British apologists often claim that the British gave India railways and infrastructure. Tharoor challenges this notion by demonstrating how railways were built for exploitation, not development. The railways were designed to move goods and raw materials to ports for British benefits, not to connect Indian towns for Indian trade. Indian tax payers bore the costs of construction, but the profits were reaped by British investors. British engineers, material and workers were prioritized leading to little skill development or local benefit. Thus, the railways, while beneficial in the long term, were primarily tools of economic extraction during the colonial era.

Another significant aspect of economic exploitation under British colonial rule, as highlighted by Tharoor, was the manipulation of currency, which further exacerbated India's economic subjugation. The British converted Indian rupees into British pounds at unfavorable exchange rates, which effectively drained India's wealth and resources. This meant that India's earnings from its labor and raw materials were not only exploited but also converted into British pounds, which were then banked in Britain, thereby depriving India of its own financial resources. Meanwhile, India was burdened with debts incurred from British loans, which further entrenched its economic dependency on Britain. Moreover, the British imposed unequal trade treaties on India that disproportionately benefited British exporters, allowing them to dominate Indian markets and stifle local industries. India's financial systems, including its banking and revenue structures, were deliberately subordinated to serve the interests of the British economy, perpetuating a relationship of economic dependency and exploitation. This subordination ensured that India's economic policies and resources were tailored to meet Britain's needs, rather than India's own development goals, thereby keeping India in a state of perpetual economic subservience. The legacy of this economic exploitation continues to have a profound impact on India's economic development, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of the historical roots of India's economic challenges.

Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness* serves as a vital reminder that the British Empire was not a benign or civilizing force, but rather an economic machine that extracted wealth and left India impoverished. By the time the British left in 1947 India's share of the world economy had fallen from 23% in 1700 to less than 4%. Literacy was below 20%, infrastructure was underdeveloped and industries were hollowed out. The newly independent nation inherited poverty, inequality and economic backwardness the direct results of two centuries of economic exploitation. Tharoor's narrative not only provided historical evidence but also urges a rethinking of how empire is remembered and taught. His work contributes powerfully to the postcolonial discourse, ensuring that colonialism's economic crimes are neither forgotten nor forgiven.

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