

## The Role of Indians in Imperialistic India as portrayed in Amitav Ghosh's The Ibis Trilogy

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### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy is a saga of the Opium War and the imperialistic monopoly of Great Britain over almost half the world. The British conquered India and ruled over the sub-continent with an iron hand, but at the same time being flexible with certain practices of the Indians. The Indians on the other hand, apart from sporadic outbursts, supported the British in their rule, with money and men. The symbiotic relationship of the British rulers and the Indian subjects was complex and incomprehensible to outsiders. The British through careful manipulation made the Indians do their bidding and this is reflected by Ghosh in his trilogy.

Keywords: Imperialism, Opium, Trade, Poppy, British.

Abbreviations Used:

SP – Sea of Poppies

FF- Flood of Fire

GP- The Glass Palace

King Thebaw is the voice of the author as he watches his retinue leaving the palace, “What vast, what incomprehensible power, to move people in such huge numbers from one place to another – emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen” (GP 50). Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* forcefully and strikingly brings about the massive and

long-lasting impact of Imperialism. He takes this theme further in the Ibis Trilogy where through the span of three novels, three major countries and many unforgettable characters create a saga of Imperialism and 'Free Trade' which has very little presence in recorded history. Imperialism is when a nation by lieu of force occupies another country and enforces its authority on it, implementing its policies and rules. The conquering country not only imposes its political and economic policies but also asserts its cultural hegemony thereby creating an imbalance of power for decades to come.

Ghosh talks about colonialism, "It arrived in the form of trade, and the trade was a beachhead for land-acquisition, first peacefully obtained by grants, and then by force"(Ghosh 10). This leads to the occupied country suffering in an incomprehensible manner. The drain of wealth is a major theory propounded by Dadabhai Naoroji whereby he put forth the idea that the British were draining the wealth from India since all their military, civilian and expansionist expenses were paid from the Indian treasury.

One of the lesser-known facts about the colonial rule in India was the impact of the growth of poppy seeds, its manufacture into opium and subsequent export to countries like China where there was a great demand for opium. India reeled under the onslaught of the British greed as they targeted the very heart of the Indian economy- agriculture. Conniving with the British in this endeavour were the local zamindars, rajas and landlords. The British were so thorough in their control over the gullible rulers of India- national as well as local, that it was just a matter of time that the British rule spread through India. They slowly took control over all the aspects of Indian life even dictating what the poor farmers could grow in their fields. The Ibis Trilogy portrays this aspect of the British rule and the concept of Free Trade which they used, to justify their imperialistic monopoly on the other countries of the world.

*Sea of Poppies* tells the story of the poppy seeds starting from its cultivation in the Gangetic rich fields of Bihar to its conversion to opium in the factories of Bengal, its transport in packed form to traders in ports like Bombay and its export thereon to countries like China. The British completely overruled the cultivation practices of the farmers and concentrated on their economic benefit. Deeti, at the beginning of the novel looks at her fields full of the poppy flowers and the sap from the plants making even the buzzing insects dizzy and opiated. The thatch for their huts, which would have been available abundantly in the previous years, is scant at present. The straw from the wheat crop would be used to repair the roofs, but the farmers under the stifling British rule are forced to buy the straw from the market and many times they would put off the repairs because of lack of money. Poppies which had been a luxury previously, grown in small quantities have become the main crop to the detriment of vegetables, masoor dal and wheat. The poppies are grown mainly in winter:

...now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asami* contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn't accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. (SP 30)

The reign of the British Empire would have been impossible without the help of the Indians. Lure of money and power compelled the Indians to take sides with the British against their own countrymen. Local zamindars like the Rajas of Raskhali proved their loyalty to the crown and for that received the honorary title of Raja. Neel Rattan Halder's ancestors lived in grand luxury, keeping many mistresses, providing for them and their

retinue and philandering away their wealth. They did not take care of their lands or the subjects. The Halder's had carried themselves where the wind had blown. When the British were at war with the Muslim rulers, the Halder's had lent sepoy to one side and money to the other, waiting for the victor to emerge. They had always played their moves warily and ingratiating themselves with whoever was in power. "After the British proved victorious, they had proved as adept at the learning of English as they had previously been in the acquisition of Persian and Urdu" (SP 84).

The English were allowed to do as they pleased, going so far as to dictate terms to the common people on what crops to grow and also grabbing their lands. Neel's father, the old Raja was a man of princely tastes. He enters into a partnership with the British, more specifically with Mr Burnham. The opium business promises vast and profitable results and the old Raja agrees to become a minor partner in the Burnham firm. He puts his complete faith in Mr Burnham with regard to his business dealings.

This proves to be a convenient arrangement until Neel takes charge after his father's death. Mr Burnham does not like Neel's questioning and curious attitude. His father before him had maintained a distance from the British, which they prefer. Neel on the other hand is well read and is conversant in English. He questions the policies of the British while hosting a dinner for Mr Burnham. The British feel comfortable when a native maintains his distance through the use of his rigid, unbending social customs and practices. But when the same native begins to question the intention of the British, it puts them ill at ease. The confiscation of Neel's properties by the Burnham firm is proof of the ruthlessness of the British. They intrude into the lives of the people, create a safe space in order to lure the unsuspecting and then grab their property and belongings.

This method is reflected in the other businesses of the British. Due to the ban on the slave trade from Africa, the British turn to another form of slavery - indentured labour. Due

to the rampant poverty induced by the British rule, the poverty-stricken people are forced to sign themselves up to be shipped off to countries such as Mauritius, Singapore and West Indies as coolies. The helpers to the British in this endeavour are the Indians themselves. The British supervisors and officers appoint men like Bhyro Singh who recruit the labourers and bring them aboard the ships to be transported across the Black Waters or *kaala paani*. The recruiters go from village to village and herd in the poor, unwitting farmers who have lost their land to the local landlords. These men and women have no hope left in their villages and decide to take themselves where their fate allows them. Many atime the eldest son in the family has to bear the responsibilities and he is shipped off. Deeti watches the coolies moving on foot on the dusty road and shrouded in abject desperation and desolation.

The men recruiting the coolies are Indians who help the British send the destitute to distant British colonies, so that they might work as bonded labour till the end of their lives or till freedom comes knocking at their doors. The illiterate villagers do not have an inkling of where they are to go and build up an imaginary land in their minds, filled with unholy beings and questionable practices.

Bhyro Singh was a Subedar in the army before his retirement and later transports the coolies on ships. Ghosh says that the subedars in the army would be constantly beating other people. Bhyro Singh is an epitome of this ruthless, vicious man who bullies the younger Indian recruits constantly and brutally. While in the army too, he would go from village to village inducing young men to join the English army. He meets Kesri Singh's father and tries to convince him to send Kesri with him to the English army. He lists the many perks and incentives given by the British and the honour it would be to fight for them. He boasts about the mighty ammunition of the British and their superior military tactics. He compares it with the substandard method of warfare of the local Kings. He puts forth a very convincing

argument in the end when he says that if his father wants Kesri to be on the winning side in the battle field and wants him to come home alive, he would send him with the British.

Joining the English army later proves beneficial to Kesri when he wins a land dispute in his village. At the sight of Kesri in his English uniform, standing inside the courtroom, the English magistrate immediately rules in favour of Kesri's family. Even the courts and local legal cases are taken over by the British as they decide the fate of millions, sitting in their high chair. Subedar Bhyro Singh does not sit idle after his retirement from the army. He is in charge of taking the coolies across the sea to the new land, along with his group of silahdars or henchmen and maistries or overseers. "What was striking about them, maistries and silahdars alike, was the swagger with which they came aboard: it was as if they were a conquering force, that had been deputed to take possession of a captured vessel" (SP 128). They are responsible for driving fear in the minds of the poor coolies and indulging in violence to prove their point.

It is always a possibility that the coolies will jump ship when they cross over from the familiar river to the uncomprehensive and vast sea. The prospect of going to a foreign land hits them hard when they see the immense waters in front of them. The silahdars on the orders of the English Captain, bully the men and women into submission. They shout curses and hit the coolies in order to instill fear and submissiveness in them. In spite of all these violent acts, two men manage to jump from the ship in a bid to escape but unfortunately are sucked into the tumultuous waters and lose their lives in the most pathetic manner.

Desertions are not only common among the coolies but also among the sepoy. The senior Indians are responsible for keeping an eye on the young sepoy as the prospect of military duty in a foreign country puts them at flight risk. Once caught the sepoy are put in front of a firing squad. All these acts are carried out by the Indians at the behest of the English. The Indians follow the orders of their superiors unquestioningly. They forget that

their duty lies towards their country and not the British officers. Ghosh talks about the conquests the Indian sepoys have made for their British masters, going from country to country and advocating the British cause. When it comes to salaries and other allowances, they are paid in peanuts compared to their English counterparts.

During the Second World War and after the inclusion of educated Indians, the questioning began in the Indo-British army. Till then they just transferred their loyalties from one master to another. Neel's Chinese friend questions him on this aspect and asks how the Indian sepoys are unlike mercenaries, who do not fight for a cause or country but for money. This question is raised by Ghosh through his characters in both the Ibis trilogy and *The Glass Palace*. Neel is asked why the Indians do not rebel against the English rule. Neel is unsure how to answer this and says that many are unhappy with the foreign rule. "But it is also true that many people have become rich by helping the British: they will go to great lengths to help them stay in power. And there are others who are happy to have them stay in power" (FF 82). The Chinese are astounded at how the sepoys fight for a foreign power for less pay and in straitened circumstances. They have a pertinent question. What enmity do the Indians have with the Chinese that they are attacking them? Kesri is deeply disturbed and in an ethical and emotional turmoil on the battlefield, when he watches the common Chinese man fighting to defend his village. He feels like a hired murderer killing, "... a people who had neither attacked nor harmed the men who were so intent on engulfing them in this flood of fire" (FF 505).

The Burmese too like the Indians are lax in their responsibilities towards their country. When the British are fighting the Burmese armies at the borders, the King receives news that the Burmese army is winning the war. In truth the British rout the Burmese army, and occupy the country, sending the King and his family into exile to an obscure Indian

village. The betrayal of ministers and people close to the Kings of both the countries is a major reason for this complete annihilation by the British.

Baboo Nob Kissin, the gomusta for the Burnham firm believes in personal sanctity and takes a bath immediately, when any part of his body comes in contact with an English man. When Mr Burnham throws his shoe at him, he ducks expertly and even revels in the epithet of ‘baboon’, since it refers to Lord Hanuman himself. In spite of coming from a long line of priests, he prefers to be a gomusta in an English firm as it pays better. The English lure the Indians by better offers, whereas slowly and steadily stealing from the Indian coffers. Their tact lies in their ability to show themselves as good masters and always keeping the Indians under their yoke, by offering them slight allowances. Bahram Moddie and other opium traders like him further the British cause by helping them sell the opium in China.

The British cement their hold over the Indians by not interfering in their social and religious affairs. They provide them full freedom in respect of customs and practices of caste and creed. In the army, the sepoy are allowed to cook separately so that they do not sully their castes. The soldiers show deep loyalty to the *paltan* as it is also made of members belonging to the same clans. The attachment comes more to the *paltan* leader who commands the undisputed loyalty of his sepoy as they belong to the same caste. Bhyro Singh praises the Englishmen as the custodian of the rigid Indian caste system. People had become degenerate for hundreds of years but the Angrezi company is putting everything right. Only the high castes are allowed to join the army and the sepoy are also given leeway to conduct their own enquiries regarding personal disputes. “They are making everything pure again, just like it was in the days of the earliest sages and rishis. Under the sahibs’ guidance every caste will once again become like an iron cage – no one will be allowed to move one finger’s breadth, this way or that” (FF 69). The British though inwardly contemptuous of the Indians and their practices, supported them outwardly. They realized the necessity to emphasize the differences

among the Indians in order to prevent them from presenting a united front against the British rule.

Amitav Ghosh provides two contrasting pictures of China and India when he shows the Chinese Emperor as allowing the British to visit only two Chinese towns of Canton and Macau. The interiors of China are barred to the English, whereas they roam freely in India. The British entered India on the pretext of trade and slowly took over every aspect of the Indian life, dictating their own terms and draining the immense wealth of India and its natural resources. None of this would have been possible without the help of the Indians. The British slowly convinced the Indians that their policies were better than the Indian Kings and made them believe in the might of their Empire.

It took more than centuries of British rule to make the Indians realize their abject dependency and slavery to a foreign power. Even though sporadic outbursts of defiance did exist, there was no organized effort to send the British away. The sepoys, especially were in near-constant rebellion against the British but it was constrained to foreign travel or relating to their caste or religion. It took almost a little less than three centuries to send away a handful of British by a million Indians, but eventually it did happen.

Ghosh is of the view that imperialism is not dead and it was the Opium War that inaugurated the era of free-trade imperialism which is not yet over. In an interview to Amrita Dutta of the *The Indian Express* he says:

The baton has been handed over from England to the United States. And it is the same project. The rhetoric that accompanied the first Opium War was eerily reminiscent of that of the Iraq War: that this was a fight for freedom, that the Chinese would welcome the British with open arms when they overthrew the tyranny of the Manchu despots.(Ghosh)

The age of Imperialism is not yet over. It has manifested itself in many different facets which threatens to slowly destroy the very fabric of life.

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