The European empires of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries elicited a variety of responses from their colonial subjects—acceptance and even gratitude, disappointment with unfulfilled promises, active resistance, and sharp criticism. The documents that follow present a range of Indian commentary on British rule during this time.

India was Britain’s “jewel in the crown,” the centerpiece of its expanding empire in Asia and Africa (see Map 18.1, p. 886). Until the late 1830s, Britain’s growing involvement with South Asia was organized and led by the British East India Company, a private trading firm that had acquired a charter from the Crown allowing it to exercise military, political, and administrative functions in India as well as its own commercial operations (see pp. 676–77). But after the explosive upheaval of the Indian Rebellion of 1857–1858, the British government itself assumed control of the region. Throughout the colonial era, the British relied heavily on an alliance with traditional elite groups in Indian society—landowners; the “princes” who governed large parts of the region; and the Brahmins, the highest-ranking segment of India’s caste-based society.

**Document 18.1**

**Seeking Western Education**

Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), born and highly educated within a Brahmin Hindu family, subsequently studied both Arabic and Persian, learned English, came into contact with British Christian missionaries, and found employment with the British East India Company. He emerged in the early nineteenth century as a leading advocate for religious and social reform within India, with a particular interest in ending *sati*, the practice in which widows burned themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres. In 1823, he learned about a British plan to establish a school in Calcutta that was to focus on Sanskrit texts and traditional Hindu learning. Document 18.1 records his response to that school, and to British colonial rule, in a letter to the British governor-general of India.
Why was Roy opposed to the creation of this school?

What does this letter reveal about Roy’s attitude toward Indian and European cultures?

What future did Roy imagine for India?

How would you describe Roy’s attitude toward British colonial rule in India?

**Ram Mohan Roy**

**Letter to Lord Amherst**

1823

The establishment of a new Sanskrit School in Calcutta evinces the laudable desire of Government to improve the natives of India by education, a blessing for which they must ever be grateful. When this seminary of learning was proposed... we were filled with sanguine hopes that it would employ European gentlemen of talent and education to instruct the natives of India in Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy, and other useful sciences, which the natives of Europe have carried to a degree of perfection that has raised them above the inhabitants of other parts of the world. Our hearts were filled with mingled feelings of delight and gratitude; we already offered up thanks to Providence for inspiring the most generous and enlightened nations of the West with the glorious ambition of planting in Asia the arts and sciences of Modern Europe.

We find [however] that the Government are establishing a Sanskrit school under Hindu Pandits to impart such knowledge as is already current in India. This seminary can only be expected to load the minds of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of little or no practical use to the possessors or to society. The pupils will there acquire what was known two thousand years ago with the addition of vain and empty subtleties since then produced by speculative men, such as is already commonly taught in all parts of India.

Neither can much improvement arise from such speculations as the following which are the themes suggested by the Vedanta: in what manner is the soul absorbed in the Deity? What relation does it bear to the Divine Essence? Nor will youths be fitted to be better members of society by the Vedantic doctrines which teach them to believe that all visible things have no real existence, that as father, brother, etc., have no actual entity; they consequently deserve no real affection, and therefore the sooner we escape from them and leave the world the better.

The Sanskrit system of education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness, if such had been the policy of the British legislature. But as the improvement of the native population is the object of the Government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy, with other useful sciences, which may be accomplished with the sums proposed by employing a few gentlemen of talent and learning educated in Europe and providing a College furnished with necessary books, instruments, and other apparatus. In presenting this subject to your Lordship, I conceive myself discharging a solemn duty which I owe to my countrymen, and

---

Pandits: learned teachers.


Vedanta: a branch of Hindu philosophy.
also to that enlightened sovereign and legislature
which have extended their benevolent care to this
distant land, actuated by a desire to improve the in-
habitants, and therefore humbly trust you will ex-
cuse the liberty I have taken in thus expressing my
sentiments to your Lordship.

Document 18.2

The Indian Rebellion

In 1857–1858, British-ruled India erupted in violent rebellion (see p. 890). Some
among the rebels imagined that the Mughal Empire might be restored to its
former power and glory. Such was the hope that animated the Azamgarh Pro-
clamation, issued in the summer of 1857, allegedly by the grandson of the last
and largely powerless Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah.

■ What grievances against British rule does this document disclose?
■ How does the proclamation imagine the future of India, should the
rebellion succeed? How does this compare to Ram Mohan Roy’s vision
of India’s future in Document 18.1?
■ To what groups or classes of people was the proclamation directed?
What classes were left out in the call to rebellion? Why might they have
been omitted?
■ Does the proclamation represent the strength and authority of the
Mughal Empire or its weakness and irrelevance?

Prince Feroze Shah

The Azamgarh Proclamation

1857

It is well known to all that in this age the people
of Hindustan, both Hindus and Muslims, are
being ruined under the tyranny and oppression of
the infidel and the treacherous English. It is there-
fore the bounden duty of all the wealthy people of
India, especially of those who have any sort of con-
nection with any of the Muslim royal families and
are considered the pastors and masters of their people,
to stake their lives and property for the well-being
of the public . . . I, who am the grandson of Bahadur
Shah, have . . . come here to extirpate the infidels re-
siding in the eastern part of the country, and to liber-
ate and protect the poor helpless people now groan-
ing under their iron rule. . . .

Section I: Regarding Zamindars

It is evident the British government, in making [land] settle-
ments, have imposed exorbitant jummas, and have
disgraced and ruined several zamindars, by

Hindustan: northern India.

Source: “The Azamgarh Proclamation,” Delhi Gazette,
September 29, 1857.

Zamindars: landowners.

Jummas: taxes.
putting up their estates to public auction for arrears of rent, insomuch, that on the institution of a suit by a common ryot⁶ yet, a maidservant, or a slave, the respectable zamindars are summoned into court arrested, put in gaol, and disgraced. … Besides this, the coffers of the zamindars are annually taxed with subscriptions for schools, hospitals, roads, etc. Such extortions will have no manner of existence in the Badshahi government;⁶ but, on the contrary, the jummas will be light, the dignity and honour of the zamindars safe, and every zamindar will have absolute rule in his own zamindary.

Section II: Regarding Merchants
It is plain that the infidel and treacherous British government have monopolized the trade of all the fine and valuable merchandise such as indigo, cloth, and other articles of shipping, leaving only the trade of trifles to the people, and even in this they are not without their share of the profits, which they secure by means of customs and stamp fees, etc., in money suits, so that the people have merely a trade in name. Besides this, the profits of the traders are taxed with postages, tolls, and subscriptions for schools. Notwithstanding all these concessions, the merchants are liable to imprisonment and disgrace at the instance or complaint of a worthless man. When the Badshahi government is established, all these aforesaid fraudulent practices shall be dispensed with; and the trade of every article, without exception both by land and water, shall be open to the native merchants of India, who will have the benefit of the government steam-vessels and steam carriages for the conveyance of their merchandise gratis. …

Section III: Regarding Public Servants
It is not a secret thing, that under the British government, natives employed in the civil and military services have little respect, low pay, and no manner of influence; and all the posts of dignity and emolument in both the departments are exclusively bestowed upon Englishmen. … But under the Badshahi government, [these] posts … will be given to the natives. … Natives, whether Hindus or Muslims, who fall fighting against the English, are sure to go to heaven; and those killed fighting for the English, will, doubtless, go to hell; therefore, all the natives in the British service ought to be alive to their religion and interest, and, abjuring their loyalty to the English, side with the Badshahi government and obtain salaries of 200 or 300 rupees per month for the present, and be entitled to high posts in future.

Section IV: Regarding Artisans
It is evident that the Europeans, by the introduction of English articles into India, have thrown the weavers, the cotton-dressers, the carpenters, the blacksmiths, and the shoemakers, etc., out of employ, and have engrossed their occupations, so that every description of native artisan has been reduced to beggary. But under the Badshahi government the native artisan will exclusively be employed in the services of the kings, the rajahs, and the rich; and this will no doubt insure their prosperity.

Section V: Regarding Pundits,⁷ Fakirs,⁷ and Other Learned Persons
The pundits and fakirs being the guardians of the Hindu and Muslim religions, respectively, and the European being the enemies of both the religions, and as at present a war is raging against the English on account of religion, the pundits and fakirs are bound to present themselves to me and take their share in the holy war, otherwise they will stand condemned … but if they come, they will, when the Badshahi government is well established, receive rent-free lands.

Lastly, be it known to all, that whoever out of the above-named classes, shall … still cling to the British government, all his estates shall be confiscated, and his property plundered, and he himself, with his whole family, shall be imprisoned, and ultimately put to death.

⁶**ryot**: peasant farmer.

⁶**Badshahi government**: restored imperial government.

⁷**Pundits**: scholars.

⁷**Fakirs**: religious mystics.
Document 18.3

The Credits and Debits of British Rule in India

Dadhabai Naoroji (1825–1917) was a well-educated Indian intellectual, a cotton trader in London, and a founding member of the Indian National Congress, an elite organization established in 1885 to press for a wider range of opportunities for educated Indians within the colonial system. He was also the first Indian to serve in the British Parliament. In 1871, while addressing an English audience in London, he was asked about the impact of British rule in India. Representing a “moderate” view within Indian political circles at the time, he organized his response in terms of “credits” and “debits.”

- According to Naoroji, what are the chief advantages and drawbacks of British rule?
- What is Naoroji seeking from Britain?
- How does Naorij’s posture toward British rule compare to that of Ram Mohan Roy in Document 18.1 or the Azamgarh Proclamation in Document 18.2?

DADABHAI NAOROJI

Speech to a London Audience

1871

Credit

In the Cause of Humanity: Abolition of sati® and infanticide. Destruction of Dacoits, Thugs, Pindarees® and other such pests of Indian society. Allowing re-marriage of Hindu widows, and charitable aid in time of famine. Glorious work all this, of which any nation may well be proud. . . .

In the Cause of Civilization: Education, both male and female. Though yet only partial, an inestimable

---

®sati: variant spelling of sati, the practice of widows burning themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres.

®Dacoits, Thugs, Pindarees: thieves, murderers, bands of robbers.

Source: Dadhabai Naoroji, Essays, Speeches, Addresses and Writings (Bombay: Caxton Printing Works, 1887), 131–36. 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. Security of life and property. Freedom from oppression caused by the caprice or greed 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 results.

Materially: Loans for railways and irrigation. 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 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 heading.

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, though.

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. Consequent on the above, an utter disregard of the feelings and views of the natives. . . .

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 expense of the colonies.

Materially: The political drain, 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 per annum, 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 windfall of the consequences of the American war, since 1890. Even with this relief, the material condition of India is such that the great mass of the poor have hardly tuppence a day and a few rags, or a scanty subsistence. The famines 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 persevered 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.

Summary:

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.