HISTORY REVISITED

Robert Melville: The artist, Indophile and imperialist who founded Grindlays Bank

Robert Melville Grindlay’s life is one of the many metaphors for the history and ambivalence of the British Empire in India.

by Arup K Chatterjee
Published Mar 06, 2018 · 11:30 am
By the end of the 19th century, the operations of the erstwhile banking giant, Grindlays, expanded to include a substantial portion of the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and regions of Africa and Southeast Asia. From conducting its operation solely from London for decades, Grindlays opened offices in Calcutta (1864), Bombay (1865), Shimla (1912), Delhi (1923), Lahore
(1924), and Peshawar (1926). The firm underwent many changes in partnerships and acquisitions and attendant changes in appellation, including a merger with the National Bank of India (1948).

In 2000, ANZ Grindlays was acquired for $1.3 billion by Standard Chartered, following which the name Grindlays petered out of the public imagination. While many will know this already, very few know that the founder of Grindlays – arguably the first chief banker of the British Empire’s military expansions in Asia – was much more than a banking brand in his lifetime. He possessed not only infinite love for India’s landscapes and ruling elites, but also what Rudyard Kipling called the White Man’s Burden – the obligation to civilise and rule the subcontinent, through a sovereign dispensation.
Robert Melville Grindlay was born in 1786 at St Marylebone, at a time when the British Empire and Governor-General Warren Hastings were enacting controversial policies in Bengal. William Pitt’s India Act of 1784 intended to overhaul the management of the East India Company, marking the roots of a paternalistic form of government in India, which also shaped Grindlay’s early life. In 1803, his father, a London merchant, secured for his 17-year-old son a nomination as a cadet in the East India Company’s military service. A year later, Grindlay was promoted to lieutenant, rising to the rank of captain in 1817, and by 1820, he retired from the Bombay Native Infantry at the age of 34.

During his relatively short military career, Grindlay travelled extensively with his regiment. And on those travels, he produced an opulent volume of sketches and drawings depicting lives and landscapes of Western India. After
returning to Britain, he compiled and published them as *Scenery, Costumes and Architecture chiefly on the Western Side of India*.

Issued in six parts from 1826 to 1830 and comprising of 36 hand-coloured aquatint plates with annotations, the album showcases scenes and subjects inspired by the rich architecture, natural scenery and local customs of western India. The specimens in the book include breathtaking depictions of Bombay, Hyderabad and Gujarat; mountains of the Western Ghats; Hindu temples, ancient caves, tombs and fortresses; and cultural practices such as *sati* – all meticulously represented in the underlying motif of elaborate colouring and deep contrasts, soft mists, golden sunlight and atmospheric effects.
Grindlay was employed as a secretary at the Committee of Embarkation at Bombay, and personal assistant to the governor of Bombay. His artistic and official standing gave him ample opportunity to keep up his correspondences with influential colleagues in the Anglo-Indian Society of India, even after returning to Britain. In 1828, he started an agency house, Leslie & Grindlay, with a partner in Birchin Lane, London.

Initially, the agency helped secure travel arrangements of its clientele, to India and back, procuring sea passages, clearing and shipping baggage. The services graduated to banking operations, including insurance, savings and encashment of cheques and drafts. By 1852 – the year Grindlay retired – the firm had become the most distinguished bankers and agents to the civil and military officials of the business community and the British army in India.

**Imperial obligation**

Although motivated by classical imperial capitalism, Grindlay’s writing tends to betray a rebellious commitment to the emancipation of the Indian economy and infrastructure. His vision for the imperial obligation that Britain owed to India can be best observed in a pamphlet he wrote around 1837, when he was an agent for the Steam Committees of Kolkata and Madras.
At a time when Chintadripet, a small township neighbouring Madras, had started operating its own railways – arguably India’s first railway line – the Red Hills Railway, Grindlay’s *A View of the Present State of the Question as to Steam Communication with India*, ardently endorsed the establishment of steam as a medium of locomotion in India, via the Red Sea. The pamphlet seems more significant in the light of the extreme apathy of the British public towards the regulation of the steady sea traffic to India, and the building of Indian Railways, especially in the late 1830s and early ’40s, notwithstanding the disastrous economic and cultural effects of the railway mania in Britain.

Grindlay was attempting to do for steam communication between Europe and India, what Rowland MacDonald Stephenson and Dwarkanauth Tagore were about to do for the railways – passionately endorse a stronger communication between foundries and factories in England, and the vast meccas of mineral
and textile resources in India. Like Karl Marx, who believed that the railways would foster the growth of ancillary industries in India, Grindlay believed that unexplored networks of cotton, jute, spices and tea in India could help Britain’s ancillary industries in the east, and also overcome the expenditure of sustaining Britain’s intimate enmity with China.

This was also the time when the Anglo-Chinese wars were brewing, and two years after Grindlay’s pamphlet was published, the First Opium War broke out, concluding later in the concession of Hong Kong to Britain. Grindlay’s dream was realised in 1869, with the opening of the Suez Canal.

An exhibition allows Indians to experience the amazement of 18th and 19th century colonial settlers.
However, what remains as striking as ever is his subtle provocations to the annexations of the commerce of India, in the same breath as stating “nothing that enriches India can be a matter of indifference to England”. This character of imperial obligation assumed a fiendish face in the late 19th century, when on the one hand millions were dying of famines in the Deccan, Rajputana or the Central Provinces, while the Famine Commission went on with calling for an expansive railway network. The budget for the railways was a hundred times more than that for irrigation canals, whose penetration, in the first place, would have reduced famine mortality a hundred-fold if not more.

Meanwhile, the Kiplings and Mark Twains, supposedly among the finest chroniclers of India’s railways and construction projects, were vacationing in the famine land, in first-class carriages without so much as batting an eyelid.

Life

Like Stephenson, who ran The Englishman (an ancestor of the modern-day The Statesman), Grindlay established the periodical Home News (A Summary of European Intelligence for India and the Colonies) in 1847. A bimonthly in London, akin to The Spectator, it featured “an authentic record of European events for the civil and military community of British India and the colonies”.

Meanwhile, with the Second Opium War and Anglo-Afghan War, reinforcements of European troops in the Indian army accelerated the roles of the civil and technological arms of colonial governance – the Railways, posts and telegraphs. A steady stream of British officials and their families requiring private banking and allied services came knocking on the doors of Grindlays.
Grindlay's life is one of the many working metaphors for the history and ambivalence of the British Empire in India. While his military career was to be his tutelage into aspects of financing and the need for insurance services, his paintings rendered India into a nubile – and a highly insurable – object of acquisition. He was one in a line of eccentric British Orientalists whose love for India never quite matched the political universe of grotesque ambiguities. They were never certain whether Britain must have stretched itself or whether India ought to have been thoroughly impoverished. The course taken was the latter. Grindlay’s paintings usually revealed this remarkably, as a prolepsis.

With inputs from Dhirendra Shah.

Arup K Chatterjee is the founding chief editor of Coldnoon, an author and academic based in New Delhi.

We welcome your comments at letters@scroll.in.
By rewriting history, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh are threatening the very identity of their people.

"Your data has been activated." <10 seconds later> "You have crossed your data limit."

Published Mar 07, 2018 · 01:07 pm
The internet is an amazing space where you can watch a donkey playing football while simultaneously looking up whether the mole on your elbow is a symptom of a terminal diseases. It’s as busy as it’s big with at least 2.96 billion pages in the indexed web and over 40,000 Google search queries processed every second. If you have access to this vast expanse of information through your mobile, then you’re probably on something known as a data plan.

However, data plans or data packs are a lot like prescription pills. You need to go through a barrage of perplexing words to understand what they really do. Not to mention the call from the telecom company rattling on at 400 words per minute about a life-changing data pack which is as undecipherable as reading a doctor’s handwriting on the prescription. On top of it all, most data packs expect you to solve complex algorithms on permutations to figure out which one is the right one.
Even the most sophisticated and evolved beings of the digital era would agree that choosing a data pack is a lot like getting stuck on a seesaw, struggling to find the right balance between getting the most out of your data and not paying for more than you need. Running out of data is frustrating, but losing the data that you paid for but couldn’t use during a busy month is outright infuriating. Shouldn’t your unused data be rolled over to the next month?

You peruse the advice available online on how to go about choosing the right data pack, most of which talks about understanding your own data usage. Armed with wisdom, you escape to your mind palace, Sherlock style, and review your access to Wifi zones, the size of the websites you regularly visit, the number of emails you send and receive, even the number of cat videos you watch. You somehow manage to figure out your daily usage which you multiply by 30 and there it is. All you need to do now is find the appropriate data pack.

Promptly ignoring the above calculations, you fall for unlimited data plans with an “all you can eat” buffet style data offering. You immediately text a code to the telecom company to activate this portal to unlimited video calls, selfies, instastories, snapchats – sky is the limit. You tell all your friends and
colleagues about the genius new plan you have and how you’ve been watching funny sloth videos on YouTube all day, well, because you CAN!

![Image of a tiger](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Source: giphy.com

Alas, after a day of reign, you realise that your phone has run out of data. Anyone who has suffered the terms and conditions of unlimited data packs knows the importance of reading the fine print before committing yourself to one. Some plans place limits on video quality to 480p on mobile phones, some limit the speed after reaching a mark mentioned in the fine print. Is it too much to ask for a plan that lets us binge on our favourite shows on Amazon Prime, unconditionally?

You find yourself stuck in an endless loop of estimating your data usage, figuring out how you crossed your data limit and arguing with customer care about your sky-high phone bill. Exasperated, you somehow muster up the
strength to do it all over again and decide to browse for more data packs. Regrettably, the website won't load on your mobile because of expired data.

Getting the right data plan shouldn't be this complicated a decision. Instead of getting confused by the numerous offers, focus on your usage and guide yourself out of the maze by having a clear idea of what you want. And if all you want is to enjoy unlimited calls with friends and uninterrupted Snapchat, then you know exactly what to look for in a plan.
The Airtel Postpaid at Rs. 499 comes closest to a plan that is up front with its offerings, making it easy to choose exactly what you need. One of the best-selling Airtel Postpaid plans, the Rs. 499 pack offers 40 GB 3G/4G data that you can carry forward to the next bill cycle if unused. The pack also offers a one year subscription to Amazon Prime on the Airtel TV app.

So, next time, don’t let your frustration get the better of you. Click [here](#) to find a plan that’s right for you.
This article was produced by the Scroll marketing team on behalf of Airtel and not by the Scroll editorial team.
To learn the secrets of East Indian food, you need to read this rare committee-written recipe book

‘The East Indian Cookery Book’ painstakingly documents family recipes, which are closely-guarded and only passed down through the generations.

Watch: Wasn’t it only in 2017 that Naresh Agarwal swore never to join the BJP?
In this edition of our monthly column on old community cookbooks, we look at The East Indian Cookery Book, first printed and published by the Bombay East Indian Association in May 1981. You can read the previous column here.

When the Portuguese arrived in India in 1498, bringing a new wave of Catholicism with them, they weren't aware that they had arrived in a land with the unique distinction of having received the good word from not one, but two of the apostles of Christ – St Thomas who preached in Kerala, and St Bartholomew, who preached in Kalyan. Under Portuguese conversion, new Christians and the older Christian community were welded into one, in and around present-day Bombay. But this integrated faith began to fray not long after Bombay was transferred from Portuguese to British hands. To distinguish the native Christians of the north Konkan who were now British subjects from the Goans who remained Portuguese subjects, the former adopted the designation of “East Indian”, in allegiance to the Queen and the East India Company....
Watch: This man converted the trunk of his tiny electric car into a fully functioning kitchen

HISTORY REVISITED

For India’s docile media, a lesson in press freedom from 18th century Calcutta

Irish-American journalist William Duane wrote against the East India Company, even when the cost was high.

by Anu Kumar

Published Yesterday · 11:30 am
The story of press freedom in British India begins with, and is linked to, the East India Company. *Hicky’s Bengal Gazette*, the first newspaper in British India, was founded by James Augustus Hicky in 1780. It quickly ran afoul of Warren Hastings, the governor general, and other officials as it raised issues
of corruption and trade malpractices in the Company. It also made allegations about the extravagant lifestyle of Hastings' wife, Marian, which landed Hicky in jail. A decade later, another Irish-American would incur the East India Company's displeasure on two separate occasions, leading to his eventual deportation. William Duane, however, went on to make a new life for himself in which he was responsible for a key turn in American politics.

Sensex loses over 500 points after TDP quits NDA, biggest single-day fall in six weeks

Lahore High Court asks Pakistan's government why it had banned Hafiz Saeed's JuD, its charity wing
Born in 1760, Duane grew up in upstate New York. His father died when he was seven, and his mother decided to return to her family home in Ireland. It was in London, some years later, that Duane learned the printing trade as an apprentice. He angered his mother and lost out on a small family inheritance, when, against her wishes, he married Catherine Corcoran, a woman of the Anglican faith. It had been only a century since Britain had succeeded in driving the Catholic King, James II, into exile and religious differences could still create family divides. At that point, Duane decided to seek his fortunes in British India....

Actor Irrfan Khan reveals he has been diagnosed with a neuroendocrine tumour