

Lamb, Peacock and Mill

By Arup Chatterjee, March 23, 2019

How a bunch of career clerks sitting in Company headquarters in London, who never visited India, managed to create an empire in writing.

“I had grown to my desk,” wrote a retiree in Romantic England as he turned 50, “and the wood had entered into my soul.” The author of *Essays of Elia*, and *Tales from Shakespeare* (written with his sister Mary), Charles Lamb was much more than someone whose wistful yet practical essays helped augment sales of *London Magazine*, or one befriended by the great wordsmiths of the age, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Hazlitt and William Wordsworth.

Lamb was a career clerk with East India Company, and known for his persistent unpunctuality. He was one of several English authors whose literary excursions came as spin-offs of the enormous drudgery of running the Indian empire from the mildewed chambers of East India House in London. Since 1661, Craven House, an old Elizabethan mansion in Leadenhall Street, had been the headquarters of the East India Company.

In 1858, when the Company was abolished in favour of the Crown, operations were transferred to India Office in Whitehall. East India House was demolished and rebuilt as Lloyd’s building, housing London’s insurance institution. In 1813, after East India Company lost its monopoly of trade with India, its administrative role was amplified. Company officials found a ‘decidedly literary’ environment in India House, as described by Herbert Preston-Thomas, a latter-day clerk.

Writer’s building

‘Clerk in the East India House’ was also how Lamb was known. He had joined the Company as an unsalaried apprentice in 1792. ‘Writer’ was a common designation for clerks and accountants working in the Company. After 30 years, earning more wages than his peers, and double the honorarium from *London Magazine* than fellow-contributors, Lamb retired from both his stations of ‘writing’ in 1825. Lamb never visited India, whose governors, viceroys and nabobs he saw only as portraits in the galleries and corridors of East India House. Later a portrait of his by Henry Hoppner Meyer was to find a place at the India House.

Due to Britain's thriving opium, saltpetre and textiles industry, the Court of Directors splurged on dinners and gatherings, incurring damages to the tune of £3000-4000 (£240,000-460,000) each year, 'guttling and gormandising at the expense of the Company,' as H.V. Bowen says in *The Business of Empire*.

Lamb was never a slave to discipline or dedication, notwithstanding his letters to William Wordsworth or Samuel Taylor Coleridge, of being overworked and fatigued. Yet, his salary boasted an annual increment of £40, amounting to £730 (about £55,000 today) — no mean achievement considering his supreme tardiness at work — at the time of his retirement. That and his writings sustained him handsomely between the vicissitudes of the domestic insanity of his sister, Mary, and the imperial insanity of the drug trade in South China Sea.

Plays and operas

Bowen recalls other authors who came to spend long careers at India House. One of them was James Cobb, who began as a clerk at the Secretary's Office in 1771, and retired as the Secretary in 1814.

Working in the capacity of the Company's French translator, Cobb produced numerous plays and operas. Thomas Rundall, who also worked at the Secretary's Office, wrote on history, especially the Japanese Empire. Thomas Love Peacock, another luminary of the Romantic era, took up his position at the Examiner's Office at India House in 1819.

Whether or not imperial boredom prospered at India House, its clerks and examiners certainly helped keep up appearances. India House was the mothership meant to engineer London's imagination of a milieu of metropolitan surpluses — from curry to chinaware, muslin to mahogany, tea to tobacco — consuming which was a means of safeguarding the English national identity. "I now pass every morning at the India House," wrote Peacock, "studying Indian affairs... It is an employment of a very interesting and intellectual kind..., in which it is possible to be of great service, not only to the Company, but to the millions under their dominion."

The immobile mills

A year earlier, James Mill, author of *The History of British India*, was brought in as Assistant to the Examiner. He acquired substantial notoriety

in India for his History — by flattering the workings of the Company in the subcontinent.

Besides his doctrine that Hindus were minstrels of perfidy and cowardice, and Muslims of sensuousness and promiscuity, Mill was one of the most vociferous advocates of the ryotwari system, which led to the slow but steady abolition of zamindari in India, leading finally to a despotic socialism where not only landlords but also peasants were ruined by the end of the 19th century, as landholdings also became a commodity, in addition to cash crops. In the 15 years he spent at India House, Mill deeply influenced the administration and policies of the Empire, entirely through correspondences and despatches, what Bowen calls 'an empire in writing'.

David Gilmour's book, *The British in India*, explores how a race of administrators from Leadenhall Street never visited India, Mill being an extraordinary example of this sublime immobility. So influential was Mill's utilitarianism that when Lord William Bentinck left London in 1828, as the first Governor-General of British India, he is said to have told Mill, "I shall not be Governor-General. It is you that will be."

Even Thomas Babington Macaulay, who launched a scathing attack on James Mill's essay *On Government*, in the *Edinburgh Review*, in 1829, went on to recognise his *History* as 'the greatest historical work which has appeared in our language since that of Gibbon.'

Writing literature, as a derivative occupation for company officials and later civil servants, was also equally in the interests of Empire. Even after the dissolution of the Company, public servants such as Tom Taylor, Matthew Arnold, William Rossetti and Anthony Trollope went on to prolifically write drama, prose, fiction and criticism.

Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* charts the growth of English studies in India, arguing how that discipline came to be invented in the Raj, for emancipating the moral and ethical dimensions of the Indian subjects. Beyond Shakespeare, Bacon and Milton, therefore, the Romantics were what Indian syllabi turned to. Once the seeds of India's governance were sown, the Lambs, Peacocks and Mills were shipped out to harvest little tracts of England from the minds of the earliest generations of English educated Indians.

The writer is author of *The Purveyors of Destiny: A Cultural Biography of the Indian Railways*.