

Revisiting globalisation

The early Indian globalisers

This article explores globalisation's historical geographies, using the example of visiting Indians in 1930s London to decolonise our presumptions about who helped craft the globe

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EXAM LINKS

- Globalisation

This article argues that historical geography can help us think about globalisation differently, and in more inclusive ways. India is used as an example here as it was the 'jewel in the crown' of the British empire, the most strategic and profitable part of its worldwide system of colonialism (see Box 1). But India also produced leading politicians and campaigners who argued against empire and for Indian freedom. These Indians were early globalisers and help us rethink the geographies of globalisation.

The history of globalisation is most often read through the lens of economic geography. Here are some of the most common assumptions:

- The industrial revolution created enhanced motivation to trade goods and resources.
- The world wars disrupted trade, while the Cold War globalised two alternate approaches to the economy (capitalism promoted by the USA and western Europe; communism promoted by the USSR and China).
- Multinational corporations (MNCs) pioneered industrial globalisation, supporting the rise of the four 'Asian Tiger' economies and others.
- The 'big bang' of financial services deregulation in the 1980s led to the

renewed dominance of global cities like New York, London and Tokyo.

While most of these examples are focused on Western countries, such explanations have another geography to them and that is the geography of empire:

- Industrial Europe conquered territories abroad and turned them into colonies, from which they could export resources and to which they could import goods.

Box 1

A glossary of colonial terms

Colonialism is an enduring relationship of domination between a local people and an outsider minority who forcefully acquire sovereignty over those lands and people.

Neo-colonialism was a term created in 1965 by Kwame Nkrumah, the president of Ghana, to describe how European and American powers perpetuated colonial forms of control over ex-colonies.

Anticolonialism describes the campaigns led by colonised people for their freedom, whether through debate, mass protests, or through violent, revolutionary uprisings.

Decolonisation historically refers to when colonies exited empires, to become independent states. The ongoing influence of colonial forms of land ownership and ways of thinking has led to calls that we need to decolonise the present, including the way geographers think about the world and its interconnections, in the past as well as today.



Delegates at the second session of the Indian Round Table Conference, St James's Palace, London

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- Empires exported Europe's wars to the world.
- Some colonies and ex-colonies later refused to align themselves with either capitalism or communism.
- Many view MNCs in places like Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan as perpetuating **neo-colonialism**, with global capitalist organisations taking the place of empires in exploiting non-white populations.
- Current leading global cities once organised the finances of vast formal (empires of ownership) and informal (empires of influence) imperial networks.

When we think of the historical geographies of globalisation we tend to think in terms of 'control' — that is, from the perspective of those who organised empires. From the Greek and Roman to the Russian, Chinese, French or British empires, whether land-based or sea-based, governments and economics dominate how we think the 'world' got turned into a 'globe'.

But what happens if we take our lead from the richness of ways in which geographers approach contemporary globalisation? From those who see it being created by migration and tourism; by media, entertainment and information; by movements of labourers and products; and by networks of protestors, such as climate change activists or even the

anti-globalisation movement itself? What would the historical geographies of globalisation look like if we did not just focus on control and domination? What if we stopped focusing quite so much on the history of white men?

Where was globalisation?

One way to do this is to study different places and different people in telling the story of the creation of globalisation. For instance, we might focus our attention on the dockers, sailors, seaman and **lascars** (sailors from the Indian Ocean arena) who manned (they were mostly men) the ships and ports that kept empires going. Shipping goods across empires often involved manual lifting and carrying, backbreaking work by men who lived and worked in conditions close to poverty. But these men were also among the most widely travelled and cosmopolitan of their day, speaking languages which crossed national borders, and making friends and families around the world in the ports of the colonies of Europe.

Recently, attention has fallen on the 'indenture' system. Indenture arose after the abolition of slavery in British colonies in 1833. Plantation economies found themselves short of the labour required to farm their fields of cotton, sugar and other products. Poor labourers, almost entirely from India, signed contracts which indentured them to labour in far-off countries for several years. This was for little pay in working conditions which many at the time equated with slavery.

In total 1.3 million Indian men and women undertook this work. Many of them chose to return to indenture after their initial term had expired, or to stay on in their land of work rather than return home (66% of contemporary Mauritius's population are descended from Indian labourers). Why would they do this? Again, this suggests a system which, while exploitative, enabled men and women from villages across India to participate in a global economy and to make lives and places afresh.

The downside of these approaches, however, is that they risk embedding within our geographies a divide between what we now call the Global North and Global South (like previous divides of MDC/LDC, West/East or Occident/Orient). The truth is that empires and colonies were often the origins of forms of globalisation which then got exported back to Europe, America or other imperial heartlands. Places like London and Paris were culturally globalised by fashions from Egypt, artefacts from China, or foods from India. But,

again, these transfers only accentuated the power and domination of colonies by their coloniser, showing off the spoils of empire.

India's global network in the 1920s

Those who had been colonised could also use global networks to campaign for liberty and freedom, in terms of government, and to keep more of their own money, in terms of economy. From India, **anticolonial** campaigners demanded freedom and greater self-government both within their country and beyond it.

During the First World War, from their bases in the USA, **Ghadr** revolutionaries plotted the overthrow of Indian colonialism, having been expelled by the British from India. They tried, but failed, to start a revolution in their homeland. These international networks marked an early attempt at anticolonial globalisation, connecting San Francisco, London and Calcutta.

The **Khilafat** movement, protesting against the dissolution of the **Ottoman Empire** after the end of the war, likewise rallied Muslims worldwide, creating connections between anticolonial campaigners in Cairo, Constantinople, Baghdad, Lahore and Singapore. It promoted Indian campaigners, including the **Ali brothers of Delhi**, to international fame and notoriety.

Anticolonial campaigners in India would also reach out to international networks to share their experiences and learn from other oppressed nations. Future Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru famously travelled to Brussels in 1927 to witness the founding of the League Against Imperialism, which brought together international campaigners wanting to 'deter imperialist governments from oppressing weak nations'.

The Ghadr, Khilafat and anti-imperial movements, where remembered, are objects of nostalgia and romance. Revolutionaries make very good heroes! Their daring acts were sung about, their portraits reproduced on posters, while their successful use of early networks of globalisation to seek international support against the action of European empires appealed to the hearts as well as the minds of colonial subjects.

Less romantic, but perhaps more influential, were the campaigns of non-revolutionary Indians who made their way to the heart of empire to live and campaign in different ways. These were agents of globalisation too. One estimate suggested there were 7,128 Indians living in London by 1932. This number included settled

GLOSSARY

Ali brothers of Delhi Maulana Mohammad Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali had been leaders of the Khilafat movement and found international fame having united India's Muslims against the treatment of the Ottoman Empire. They went on to represent India at the Round Table Conference

Ghadr A revolutionary movement that sought the overthrow of the British in India through violent means. It was started on the west coast of the USA but spread to India in the interwar years.

Khilafat A protest movement that emerged in the years after the First World War which felt that the Islamic Ottoman Empire had been unfairly treated. It unified Muslims worldwide who campaigned for fairer treatment.

Lascars Low-ranking Indian sailors who were employed on European ships.

Ottoman Empire A Muslim empire which had ruled much of North Africa, southeastern Europe and the Middle East from the fourteenth century onwards. It allied with Germany in the First World War and had many of its territories taken from it after the war.

lascars and traders, but also students, lawyers, actors, office workers, politicians and campaigners. These migrants kept a keen interest in Indian politics, and occasionally got to witness that politics at first-hand in the imperial capital.

The Round Table Conference

Between 1930 and 1932 a unique international conference took place in London. The British government invited social and political leaders from India to come to the city, during three sessions, to debate the future of India in the empire. Over 100 delegates took part in the Round Table Conference, giving new global prominence to leading Indian figures. The participants at the conference give us a new sense of who could, and did, participate in early globalisation.

Maulana Mohammad Ali

One of the delegates was Maulana Mohammad Ali (one of Delhi's Ali brothers) who still argued that Muslims ('Mussalmans') were inherently part of a global community, not just members of nation states. He believed that Muslims were part of a globalised religious family that could not be fitted into the geographies of empires and states alone. As he argued in a conference speech:

I belong to two circles of equal size, but which are not concentric. One is India, and the other is the Muslim world... We [Mussalmans] belong to these two circles, each of more than 300 millions, and we can leave neither. We are not nationalists but supernationalists, and I, as a Mussalman, say that God made man and the Devil made the nation.

Begum Shah Nawaz

Although only three Indian women served as delegates, they made a huge impression in a Britain which presumed Indian women to be uneducated and oppressed by their religions. The Begum Shah Nawaz was the unexpected star turn of the conference, although the press reported more on her saris than her speeches. She was, however, selected to read a concluding address at the end of the first session to prime minister Ramsay MacDonald, and featured on news footage around the world, speaking elegantly and effectively in perfect English (watch www.tinyurl.com/8e3z5eyn).

Mahatma Gandhi

By far the most famous delegate was Mahatma (great soul) Gandhi. Having

trained in London as a barrister and practised his trade in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and launched a series of mass movements after the First World War, insisting that the British leave India. What made him unique was that he insisted on non-violence, which would prove Indian superiority to British oppressive rule and police violence. He embodied this truth in his clothing (a homespun *dhoti*), where he lived while in London (a working-class district in the east end of London), what he ate (vegetarian) and how he practised his Hindu religion (musical prayers both at home and at work).

He exported this vision to the world, being a canny manipulator of global media, which was focused on London during his visit. He appeared in newsreel footage, especially in the USA, in photographs, sketches and political caricatures created by the leading figures of the day.

Forging international politics

Denied an easy resolution of the complex task it had set itself, the conference is read as a political failure. Nonetheless, it provides us with valuable resources to consider the range of people who moved



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Begum Shah Nawaz, was the unexpected star turn of the Round Table Conference

around the world in the age of imperial globalisation which was also an age of anticolonial globalisation. Indian migrants in London would throng to meetings of the international diplomats. Most of the conference delegates are forgotten now but they worked tirelessly to wrestle more self-control for India from the British government. They crafted new forms of international politics as Hindus, Sikhs, Muslim, Parsis and Indian Christians. And they remind us that globalisation was not simply a matter of control, orchestrated by the white men of Europe and America. This study forms part of broader claims that cultural neo-colonialism remains with us today, and that we must continually work to decolonise our worlds.

Questions for discussion

- 1 How long do you think globalisation has been happening? Who made it happen?
- 2 Where do we study globalisation? What places, in what times, might give us new perspectives on ideas about globalisation?

FURTHER READING

Hodder, J. 'Remaking internationalism'. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/mwh8n33f

Legg, S. 'Global governance and place making: India, internationalism and empire in 1930s London', Available at: www.tinyurl.com/46h9s7a3

Legg, S. 'Conferences as the origin of internationalism'. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/5r9death

KEY POINTS

- Globalisation is often studied in terms of control, government and economy.
- Globalisation was created by and helped sustain colonisation and empires.
- Although less widely discussed, globalisation was also created from the bottom-up and was used to fight against colonial control.
- Studying the historic presence of colonial subjects in the cities of Europe expands our understanding of who made the world into a globe.

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