

The Examination of Britain's Annexation of Awadh Illustrates how Colonial Misinterpretation Validated Imperial Policies

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Abstract: This paper examines the British annexation of Awadh (1856) through the framework of colonial misinterpretation, focusing on how the British applied the norm-deviation concept to justify their imperial policies. Drawing on Partha Chatterjee's "Pedagogy of Violence," the paper critiques how Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's rule was mischaracterized as "deviant" due to its divergence from Western bureaucratic norms. This portrayal fueled British claims of misgovernance, leading to the annexation, which disregarded Awadh's indigenous political systems and cultural vitality. The annexation's economic and social disruptions—heavy taxation, property confiscation, and the erosion of local industries—created widespread discontent among peasants, nobility, and sepoys, culminating in the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Additionally, the paper explores the conservative critique of British liberal policies, which highlighted the failures of ignoring local traditions. This conservative backlash advocated for a more respectful approach to Indian customs, ultimately influencing British governance reforms, including the Queen's Proclamation of 1858. By examining these dynamics, the paper reveals the consequences of imposing foreign standards on a culturally rich and politically complex society, underscoring how the annexation of Awadh became a case study in the larger imperial struggle between governance, cultural misunderstanding, and resistance.

Keywords: Pedagogy of Violence, British Governance, Culturally Rich, Complex Society, Cultural Misunderstanding

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper begins by exploring the double transitions of power that occurred in Awadh, from the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of the Nawabs as successor states, to the eventual subjugation of Awadh under British rule. I use Partha Chatterjee's "Pedagogy of violence" to cite the concept of norm and deviation, which is used to argue that the British viewed Awadh's governance through a colonial lens that deemed local practices and rulers as deviant from their own standards of administration. The paper critiques this norm-deviation framework, highlighting how it was employed to delegitimize Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's rule, portraying him as unfit to govern based on Western norms of bureaucracy and governance.

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The paper further examines the impact of the annexation on the Indian Rebellion of 1857, illustrating how the British policies of heavy taxation, land confiscation, and disregard for local customs fueled resentment among the peasantry, nobility, and sepoys. The paper's final section discusses the conservative critique of British liberal policies, which emerged in response to the revolt, advocating for a governance model that respected India's unique traditions and social structures. Through this analysis, the paper aims to shed light on the intersection of cultural misunderstandings, imperial ambitions, and the consequences of imposing foreign norms on indigenous political structures.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AWADH – DOUBLE TRANSITIONS IN POWER FROM MUGHALS AND NAWABS TO BRITISH

The historical development of Awadh reveals the narrative of power transition during the decline of the Mughal Empire. It became the 'successor states' in the early half of the 18th century (Kazmi 2013, 447) [3]. The founder Nawab Sa'adat Khan was a Mughal governor of the region in 1722 and subsequently his successor Nawab Shuja-ud-daulah helped evolve the kingdom into a stable political and economic unit, with well well-organised administration, modern army, and a vibrant culture (Kazmi 2013, 447).

However, in my understanding, one more power transition happens with the introduction of the British as a new power in Awadh. The Battle of Buxar in 1764 marked a pivotal turning point (Kazmi 2013, 448). Shuja-ud-daulah's defeat initiated the British subjugation of Awadh. The Treaty of Allahabad, which followed, imposed crippling war debts on Awadh and drastically reduced its military strength to 35,000 troops (Kazmi 2013, 448). Under Nawab Asaf-ud-daulah, the British consolidated their dominance by sending a permanent resident to oversee Awadh's affairs, effectively making the Nawab a puppet ruler (Chatterjee 2012, 197) [2]. The Treaty of 1801 formalized Awadh's status as a subsidiary ally of the British, allowing them to control both military and financial aspects of the region while maintaining the façade of Nawabi rule (Chatterjee 2012, 197). This arrangement was not merely administrative, it was a strategic manoeuvre to extract revenue and assert control. The British disbanded Awadh's indigenous army, replacing it with their own forces, which functioned both as security and as revenue because Nawab had to pay for these services (Kazmi 2013, 454) [1]. The movie's symbolic depiction of the Nawab slicing a cake representing Awadh's territory and handing it to a British official underscores this exploitation. Similarly, scenes illustrating

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the Nawab's obligatory payments to British officials whenever they demanded reflect the broader dynamics of control and subjugation.

In essence, the British emerged as a new power that consolidated the control in Awadh, and this mirrors the earlier transitions of power seen during the Mughal Empire's decline and rise of successor states like Awadh itself.

III. DOCTRINE OF LAPSE AND THE CONCEPT OF NORM AND DEVIATION

Dalhousie discovered the doctrine of lapse that he used to successfully increase the company's territory. The movie shows how he is fond of cherries that represent different kingdoms and swallows the cherries one by one. These kingdoms included Punjab, Burma, Nagpur, and Satara. Only Awadh was left to be swallowed. Since Awadh and the British had treaties, it was understood as sovereign and thus it became difficult to justify the Annexation (Chatterjee 2012, 191). It was also depicted in the movie where it is accepted by General Outram himself that it's not fair to take over the kingdom despite having treaties and will lead to the breach of the treaty. However, the Company devised the principle of misgovernance as a ground to argue that the Nawab himself had broken the treaties since he could not ensure proper governance and thus it gave the company the power to take over (Chatterjee 2012, 191).

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was an accomplished poet, and his intelligence and aesthetic sensibility were admired while Dalhousie was a self-disciplined, autocratic, and bureaucratic person (Chatterjee 2012, 191). So, he thought about Nawab as someone who was not fit to rule. Here the concept of norm and deviation seems to be applied. Partha Chatterjee argues that the British saw governance in a comparative framework where there were two senses of norm as the empirically prevailing average and as the desired standard to be achieved (Chatterjee 2012, 191). Britishers used the empirical norm to measure a society or a government regarding how deviated it was from the desired standard and then using the second norm the desired standard, it would set suitable policies for such deviant cases (Chatterjee 2012, 204).

This concept of norm-deviation method in my view gave the Britishers justification to annex the territory and can be seen in the case of Awadh. Here, Nawab was seen as unfit to rule as he was a poet, dancer, and connoisseur of art. Sleeman in his report depicted him as a "crazy imbecile in the hands of a few fiddlers, eunuchs and poetasters" (Chatterjee 2012, 205). British set of norms regarding effective governance included principles such as justice, good faith, and the welfare of the populace (Chatterjee 2012, 205). In my understanding, British norms regarding desirable standards for administration relied on prevailing Western methods. It was influenced by the conception of bureaucracy that was characterized by rationality, efficiency, impartiality, highly organized, and impersonal. Thus, they viewed their administrative practices as superior and more civilized compared to those of the local rulers in India, including the nawabs of Awadh (Chatterjee 2012, 205). So, Nawab was a deviation from the desirable standard set by the colonial lens

regarding how a ruler should be and thus it was felt by the company to intervene. However, this intervention of the British did not lead to good governance as promised as it was based on a fundamental misunderstanding of governance and culture

IV. THE DEVIATION AND NORM PRINCIPLE - A FUNDAMENTAL MISUNDERSTANDING OF GOVERNANCE AND CULTURE

The British annexation of Awadh in 1856 can be critically examined through the lens of cultural misinterpretation and a fundamental misunderstanding of the region's political landscape. This misinterpretation played a pivotal role in justifying the annexation, as British officials failed to grasp the complexities of local governance, social structures, and the significance of the Nawab's role in maintaining order and stability. British officials operated under a colonial mindset that viewed Indian political structures as inherently inferior and chaotic. However, this perspective overlooked the traditional governance systems that had evolved over centuries, like the Talukdari system, the differential justice system based on differences of religion that were deeply rooted in local customs and practices (Azmi 1973, 403).

The British approach to governance in Awadh was characterized by a lack of appreciation for the region's rich cultural tapestry. Awadh was not merely a political entity but a vibrant society with a complex social hierarchy, where relationships among different classes like peasants and Talukdars were governed by longstanding traditions (Azmi 1973, 403). The British viewed the Nawab's court as decadent and corrupt, failing to understand that the court was also a center of cultural patronage and social cohesion. The arts, literature, and local customs flourished under the Nawabi rule, contributing to a sense of identity and belonging among the populace. British also tried to crush the local industries, traders, and merchants by imposing new legislation and high taxes that were protected under the Nawabi regime and employed a huge section of the population (Azmi 1973, 404). As a result, a huge section of the population including nobility some of whom came from Mughal-ruled Delhi to Awadh due to its vibrant culture and development migrated from Awadh (Azmi 1973, 404).

The new bureaucratic administration of civil servants and judicial system introduced reflects the Britisher's prejudiced view regarding our system of administration as slow and inefficient. This is also depicted in the movie through the symbolic use of Western Chess rules that make the game very fast compared to Indian rules of chess. The new judicial system replaced the earlier Shariat Law and Hindu Customary Laws that were used to decide cases (Azmi 1973, 403). The British annexation not only disrupted the existing political order but also alienated the local population, who felt betrayed as the promise of good governance was not fulfilled. The perception of the British as foreign oppressors, rather than benevolent rulers, fueled resentment and resistance, culminating in the Indian Rebellion of 1857. This uprising was, in part, a reaction to the British



disregard for local governance and cultural identity, highlighting the dangers of imposing an alien political framework without understanding the underlying social dynamics.

V. AWADH ANNEXATION AND ITS ROLE IN THE REBELLION OF 1857

The annexation of Awadh in 1856 played a crucial role in setting the stage for the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (Metcalf 1979, 174) [5]. The annexation was perceived as a direct affront to the local rulers and the cultural identity of the people of Awadh [6]. The British policies following the annexation included heavy taxation and the confiscation of property, which adversely affected the local economy, the livelihoods of peasants, and land ownership of Talukdars as half of their lands were confiscated (Metcalf 1979, 175). They tried to disband the army of the Talukdars and captured the fortifications (Metcalf 1979, 175). The economic burden created significant discontent among the peasantry and the Talukdars, who felt betrayed by the British, leading to a sense of injustice that fueled the rebellion [7]. The annexation also had implications for the Indian soldiers (sepoys) in the British army (Metcalf 1979, 174). Many sepoys were from Awadh and were deeply affected by the loss of their local rulers and the subsequent changes in military policies [8].

Awadh became a symbol of British imperial aggression and cultural insensitivity. The annexation was viewed as part of a broader pattern of British expansionism that disregarded Indian sovereignty and traditions [9]. This perception galvanized various groups, including the nobility, peasants, soldiers, and subsequently Talukdars to unite against British rule, seeing the revolt as a means to reclaim their rights and dignity (Metcalf 1979, 176). The revolt and annexation policy led to a continuous debate between liberals and Conservatives of the British parliament in which Conservatives ultimately asserted its dominance in the new policies framed for governance of India [10].

VI. CONSERVATIVE RESPONSE – POLICY CHANGE OF BRITISH

The annexation was also a catalyst for Conservative critiques of British liberal policies. Conservatives like Ellenborough who was a previous governor general argued that the annexation and the accompanying policies were symptomatic of a broader failure of the East India Company to respect local customs and governance (Stubblings 2016, 735). The company followed the liberal policy of legal reforms, educational reforms, and land revenue policies to disguise its hidden economic objective (Stubblings 2016, 735) [4]. Legal reforms included Western legal systems and practices, often disregarding traditional laws and customs (Stubblings 2016, 735). The promotion of Western-style education as supported by Evangelicals was seen as a means to 'civilize' Indian society. British policies often displayed a lack of understanding and respect for Indian customs and traditions. This is also seen in the movie when General Outram shows his lack of knowledge regarding the local Muslim customs of Namaz. However, later General Outram

realizes this and both Sleeman and Outram become critics of liberal and annexation policies.

Conservatives including Benjamin Disraeli and Henry Baillie who were part of the British parliament argued that British cultural prejudice and exploitation were significant factors leading to the revolt (Stubblings 2016, 735). The annexation was seen as a direct assault on India's political, propertied, and religious institutions. Conservatives criticized the East India Company's policies, particularly the reform of land tenure, which agitated the powerful feudal nobility and the agrarian classes (Stubblings 2016, 735).

Conservatives emphasized the need to respect local traditions and customs, and these perspectives culminated in the 1858 Queen's Proclamation, which reflected Conservative values regarding India's governance (Stubblings 2016, 735). The Proclamation repudiated the liberal civilizing mission that had characterized earlier British policies, advocating instead for a governance approach that acknowledged and preserved local customs and institutions (Stubblings 2016, 735). The Conservative government sought to reorient British rule in India to support the interests of the aristocracy and landed proprietors. Conservatives believed that acknowledging and integrating local customs into governance would help mitigate tensions and foster loyalty among the Indian population, reflecting their broader concerns about maintaining social cohesion and stability. In fact, they succeeded in this by giving territory to the Talukdars who had revolted in 1857 and in return taking the promise of timely revenue and loyalty from them (Metcalf 1979, 186).

VII. CONCLUSION

The annexation of Awadh by the British was not merely a political manoeuvre but a profound cultural misunderstanding that disregarded local governance, customs, and social structures. This misjudgement, fueled by the colonial lens of norm and deviation, ultimately led to widespread resentment, contributing to the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The subsequent conservative critique of British liberal policies highlighted the need to respect indigenous traditions, culminating in a shift in governance that sought to preserve local institutions. This historical episode underscores the dangers of imposing foreign norms on complex and deeply rooted political and cultural systems.

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