

# *‘A Blot on English Justice’: India reformism and the rhetoric of virtual slavery\**

ZAK LEONARD

*Department of History, University of Chicago*  
Email: [leonardzt@uchicago.edu](mailto:leonardzt@uchicago.edu)

## **Abstract**

Beginning in the late 1830s, a coalition of non-conformists, abolitionists, free traders, and disenchanted East India Company proprietors began to vocally challenge the exploitative policies of the colonial state in British India. Led by lecturer George Thompson, these reformers pursued a rhetorical strategy of associating groups who were converted into ‘mere tools’ by the Company abroad and the aristocracy at home. These monopolistic entities degraded Indian peasant cultivators, the British working classes, and princely sovereigns alike through forms of ‘virtual slavery’ that persisted in the post-Emancipation empire. In staging these protests, reformers ran up against an adversarial Board of Control and Court of Directors who obstructed their efforts to mobilize public opinion. Probing their agitation reveals the existence of a particularly combative strain of liberal imperialist thought that defied the political status quo.

## **Introduction**

In the winter of 1904, exiled publisher Vladimir Chertkov received a letter from his mentor, Leo Tolstoy, congratulating him on his recent biography of American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy had long endorsed Garrison’s principle of non-resistance as an expression of ‘concord and love’ that consisted ‘in the substitution of persuasion for

\* The author appreciates the anonymous reviewers’ sustained engagement with this piece and would like to thank Dipesh Chakrabarty, Jennifer Pitts, Gautham Reddy, Kyle Gardner, and Darren Wan for their pivotal critiques and assistance.

<sup>1</sup> The heterodox William Lloyd Garrison was the architect of the New England and American Anti-Slavery Societies and a close associate of George Thompson from the mid-1830s onwards.

brute force'.<sup>2</sup> Garrison had shrewdly recognized that enslavement was not solely an economic phenomenon, but rather stemmed from 'the ancient and universal recognition, contrary to the Christian teaching, of the right of coercion on the part of certain people in regard to certain others'. In assailing the institution of American slavery, he was therefore compelled to advance 'the principle of struggle against all the evil of the world'. The righteousness of this global outlook was confirmed following Garrison's sojourns to Britain in the 1830s and 40s, during which time he bore witness to 'oppression, degradation, vice, starvation ... side by side with monarchy, royalty, aristocracy, monopoly'.<sup>3</sup> Social conditions were so combustible that he predicted a republican revolution would occur in the event of Queen Victoria's death. Garrison's colleagues in the American Anti-Slavery Society concurred that the British aristocracy and 'bayonet-archy' had conspired to chase 'liberty from their beautiful island, or kept it from ever landing on it'.<sup>4</sup> Although few reform movements, by Garrison's reckoning, were sufficiently 'based on the broad, immovable foundation of human rights',<sup>5</sup> leading abolitionists, moral-force Chartists, and repealers of the Anglo-Irish union gravitated toward his camp.<sup>6</sup> India reformers, in particular, subscribed to a capacious understanding of what I will term 'virtual slavery'—a form of artificial constraint that bolstered the power of monopolistic cabals throughout the empire. Linked through lecturer George Thompson, a veteran abolitionist and a key spokesman for the British India Society (BIS, est. 1839), they characterized famished Indian *ryots* (peasant cultivators), impoverished British workers, and ousted native rulers as fellow victims of coercion.

Epitomizing a new kind of professional public moralist, the roguish Thompson hoped to convert the advocacy of various causes into a

<sup>2</sup> 'Tolstoi on Garrison', in *William Lloyd Garrison on Non-Resistance*, F. G. Villard (ed.), The Nation Press Printing Co., New York, 1924, pp. 49–54.

<sup>3</sup> W. L. Garrison to S. J. May, 6 September 1840, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 2, W. M. Merrill (ed.), Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1973, p. 696.

<sup>4</sup> The original writer in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* nevertheless praised the efforts of abolitionist India reformers like George Thompson, Elizabeth Pease, William Adam, and Daniel O'Connell. See 'British Abolitionists', *Liberator*, 4 December 1840, p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> W. L. Garrison to E. Pease, 28 February 1843, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 3, W. M. Merrill (ed.), Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1974, p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> One could identify as a Garrisonian while holding contrary opinions on Christian perfectionism, disunionism, and non-voting. See W. C. McDaniel, 'Repealing Unions: American Abolitionists, Irish Repeal, and the Origins of Garrisonian Disunionism', *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2008, pp. 255–57.

full-time occupation. One historian has described him as a 'sort of street Arab of reform, a man who had been raised in a hard and shattering school' of personal privation.<sup>7</sup> With only a brief education, Thompson began his career as a travelling lecturer for the Agency Committee of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1831; he thereafter participated in the Edinburgh and Glasgow Emancipation Societies (GES), the Aborigines' Protection Society (APS), and the anti-apprenticeship campaign before taking up Indian issues in 1838. As the BIS experienced an organizational decline from 1841 onwards, Thompson remained the animating force behind India reform while lending his energies to the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL), Anti-Slavery League (ASL), and the self-determinist Peoples' International League (PIL).<sup>8</sup> Throughout these ventures, he maintained that monopolistic practices bred a global 'school of corruption' that 'slavery attends ... freedom abhors [and] religion condemns'.<sup>9</sup> The aristocracy's monopolization of political power bound the disenfranchised working classes 'in chains', while its sequestration of the 'green earth' through the Corn Laws had turned the English countryside 'into a desert'.<sup>10</sup> The East India Company (EIC) had relinquished the bulk of its economic monopolies following the Charter Acts of 1813 and 1833, but it continued to exercise a boundless authority over the *ryots* and princes alike. Some reformers speculated that its directors had purposefully converted India into a permanent battlefield where their sons could readily receive 'promotions; and load themselves with the spoils of unhappy nations'.<sup>11</sup>

In analysing the reformers' imbricating rhetoric of virtual slavery, we may identify two primary protest 'scripts'. The first, based on abolitionist tropes of physical dehumanization, was used to advocate for

<sup>7</sup> C. Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists, 1833–1861*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 1981, p. 55. For the most comprehensive biography of Thompson, see R. M. Gifford, 'George Thompson and Trans-Atlantic Anti-Slavery, 1831–1865', PhD diss., Indiana University, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging the famine deaths in Ireland, reformers at the inaugural meeting of the PIL concluded that the disenfranchised Briton was 'a slave to all intents and purposes'. See *Report of a Public Meeting Held at the Crown and Anchor...to Explain the Principles and Objects of the Peoples' International League*, London, 1847, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> 'Free Trade, Monopoly, and Their Effects', *British Indian Advocate*, no. 15, 1 January 1842, p. 177.

<sup>10</sup> G. Thompson, *Speech of George Thompson, Esq. at the Great Anti-Corn-Law Conference*, Manchester, 1842, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> W. Howitt, 'India, the Proffered Salvation of England, No. II', *Howitts' Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*, vol. 2, 1847, p. 274.

voiceless groups like the *ryots* and the metropolitan mill-workers and agriculturists. Delivered in the idiom of natural rights, this script foregrounded issues of production, consumption, and self-preservation with an implicit affirmation of free-trade economics. Unable to fulfil their basic corporeal needs, these subjects' bodies and minds were no longer their own. In essence, this was an application of what David Brion Davis terms the 'slavery test': reformers aiming to stoke the sympathies of Parliament and the middle classes after 1833 were compelled to depict 'horrors equivalent to those in abolitionist literature'.<sup>12</sup> The second script was grounded in the proposition that Indians were entitled to the same constitutional protections enjoyed by Britons 'now walking the streets of London'.<sup>13</sup> Reformers rallied behind Pratap Singh, the deposed Raja of Satara, as a virtual political slave removed from his hereditary position upon trumped-up evidence that would 'not have warranted the hanging of a *dog*'.<sup>14</sup> In bringing the Bombay government's duplicity to light, they situated the dethronement as the most recent episode in a long catalogue of colonial scandals dating back to the Warren Hastings regime (1772–85). By warping treaty terms and exploiting India's native princes as disposable puppets, the colonial administration continued to undermine societal hierarchies for the sake of bureaucratic expediency.

### Liberal imperialism revisited

Pratap Singh was not the only Indian ruler swept up in the tide of colonial alarmism in 1839. As rumours of an anti-British Wahhabi conspiracy came to light, Company authorities dethroned and imprisoned a number of Muslim notables in the Deccan region. In these cases, as in Satara, local animosities cast a long shadow over the legal proceedings; hard evidence of collusion remained elusive and damning documents were revealed to be forgeries with some regularity. Gesturing to the minority of officials who debunked these fabrications, Chandra Mallampalli observes that 'liberal imperialism' provided 'a language for

<sup>12</sup> D. B. Davis, 'Reflections on Abolitionism and Ideological Hegemony', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 92, no. 4, 1987, p. 809.

<sup>13</sup> G. Thompson, *Addresses: Delivered at Meetings of the Native Community of Calcutta and on Other Occasions*, Calcutta, 1843, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> J. Sullivan, *Speech of Mr. John Sullivan, in the Court of Proprietors at the East India House*, John Wilson, London, 1843, p. 23, emphasis in original.

exposing the Company's abuses of power and breaches of the rule of law'.<sup>15</sup> But he further suggests that these pragmatic liberal agents, who first and foremost sought to maintain the loyalty of the Muslim aristocracy, may not be entirely worthy of our praise. The fact that their protests 'arose *after the fact* of violence diminishes their authenticity and purchase' and might indicate that they were simply conducting 'mere rituals of conscience'.<sup>16</sup>

As a scholarly construct, the concept of liberal imperialism is notoriously slippery. Per Eric Stokes's classic formulation, 'English liberalism' in the context of Indian policymaking rested upon the individualist pillars of free trade, Evangelicalism, and philosophic radicalism.<sup>17</sup> The acolytes of these doctrines generally supported Anglicization efforts and sought to liberate Hindus from the deadening thrall of their 'slavish' religion. Noting the 'latent authoritarianism' residing within this liberal thought, Stokes linked James Mill's Utilitarian aspirations to empower the executive government and eradicate the native princely states with Governor General Dalhousie's annexationist 'modernization' programme of the late 1840s. More recently, political scientists have exposed the fluctuations in liberal thought from the late eighteenth century onwards. Jennifer Pitts, for instance, elucidates the ways in which Edmund Burke's liberal harangues targeted the Company's systematic abuses and invalidated its leaders' rationalizations for their arbitrary mode of rule. Burke was especially perturbed by Britons' 'excessively constricted circle of sympathy and moral concern'; if colonial agents presumed that they were sent out to lord over a 'set of vile, miserable slaves', the affective relations that were essential for good governance would fail to develop.<sup>18</sup> According to Pitts, Burkean interventions on behalf of the colonial excluded diminished in frequency following the Hastings trial (1788–95). New theories of 'imperial liberalism' increasingly legitimized

<sup>15</sup> C. Mallampalli, *A Muslim Conspiracy in British India? Politics and Paranoia in the Early Nineteenth-Century Deccan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 176.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223, emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> E. Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990, pp. xiv, xvi, 250. Metcalf declares that this liberalism was 'distinguished by a belief in the malleability of human character and a limitless enthusiasm for the reformation of Indian society'. See T. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of the Revolt: India, 1857–1870*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1964, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> J. Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, pp. 61, 74.

the Company's despotism by establishing facile dichotomies between backwards and civilized peoples. John Stuart Mill, for instance, posited that barbarians and savages would need to be trained to esteem cooperation and reciprocity before they could flourish under liberal rule.<sup>19</sup> If a colonized people rejected these pedagogical overtures, policymakers simply attributed any resistance to 'cultural intransigence'. Such assimilative failures eventually necessitated the innovation of indirect rule as a new form of governmentality designed to ward off the threat of overhasty modernization.<sup>20</sup>

In light of these ideological shifts, it is hardly surprising that myriad parties interpreted liberal imperialism to serve their particular ends. While some metropolitan liberals sponsored a chauvinistic programme of cultural renovation, non-official Britons residing on the subcontinent invoked liberalism to safeguard their own privileges. They were particularly concerned with issues of European settlement, the composition of juries, press freedoms, and the opening of the Chinese tea trade.<sup>21</sup> As C. A. Bayly has demonstrated, native intellectuals also reformulated the 'ambient ideologies' within liberal thought to speak to 'specific political and economic conflicts within the Indian world'.<sup>22</sup> The writings of Raja Rammohun Roy, in particular, espoused a kind of liberal constitutionalism that was informed by concurrent political events in Europe. Observing that the ancient Hindu constitution had suffered corruption, Roy proposed various reforms that would promote governmental transparency, individual property ownership, and civilizational blending.<sup>23</sup> Beginning in the early 1840s, his civic brand of liberalism was increasingly overshadowed by a more radical strain that endowed marginalized groups like the *ryots* with inalienable rights.

In approaching liberal imperialism as an evolving 'historical constellation',<sup>24</sup> we ought to further consider how a selective defence of its key tenets could bring the state itself into disrepute. England's premiere liberal thinkers may have erected a mental barrier between

<sup>19</sup> K. Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2010, pp. 31–33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> L. Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy and the Making of Victorian Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, pp. 111–17.

<sup>22</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> Mantena, *Alibis of Empire*, p. 8.

their anti-slavery activism and their colonial politics,<sup>25</sup> but the same cannot be said of the network of former officials, abolitionists, free traders, and native polemicists who coalesced around Thompson and the BIS. Recurrent allusions to virtual slavery in their rhetoric indicate that there was a reformist register of the language of liberal imperialism—one capable of unifying an array of causes at home and abroad. Going far beyond any ritualization of conscience, it was an adversarial, uncompromising idiom that would only tolerate British dominion in India if certain anomalies were remedied. The colonial regime, Ranajit Guha once argued, relied upon its own persuasive ‘idiom of Order’ to cloak its pernicious nature.<sup>26</sup> Reformers sought to discard this screen and unmask the Company as an atavistic agent of disruption in its own right. The following sections of this article will both probe their neo-Burkean attempts to stimulate an imperial public consciousness and identify the numerous obstacles that confronted their agitation. A series of case studies will further clarify how reformers intertwined the mistreatment of the *ryot*, British labourer, and native prince to fashion a stinging reproof of coercive governance.

### The search for redress

In the early 1830s, policymakers began to reconceptualize India as a ‘single terrain’ that could be subjected to the ‘unaccountable exercise of British power’ and governed with ‘mechanical regularity’.<sup>27</sup> The 1833 Charter Act curtailed the provincial governors’ legislative abilities and enabled the metropolitan Board of Control (BoC) to transmit orders regarding ‘levying war or making peace, or treating or negotiating with any of the Native Princes or States’ directly to India through the Secret Committee.<sup>28</sup> The act also stripped the Company of its remaining trading privileges while retaining its Court of Directors (CoD) as an administrative body. In the metropole, this reshuffle lent an air of inscrutability to Indian affairs. The collision of

<sup>25</sup> Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> R. Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> J. Wilson, *The Chaos of Empire: The British Raj and the Conquest of India*, Public Affairs, New York, 2016, pp. 212, 221.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Article XXXVI’, in *Preliminary Papers Respecting the East-India Company’s Charter*, London, 1833, p. 517.

the BoC and CoD, one director admitted, was ‘calculated to produce delay, incongruities, and sometimes an absolute suspension of the functions of government’ while ensuring the ‘total absence of all responsibility’.<sup>29</sup>

So long as Indians were barred from the halls of political power and obstructed from securing a judicial appeal in sensitive cases, it fell to the reformers to air their grievances by any means necessary.<sup>30</sup> As the Anglo-Afghan War dragged on, colonial statistician and editor Robert Montgomery Martin asserted that the ‘Hindoo fellow-subjects’ who fought alongside their ‘European brethren’ in the mountainous defiles had earned the ‘poor privilege of raising their voices against oppression’.<sup>31</sup> While earlier reformers had suggested that a single orator could most effectively thrust Indian issues before the House of Commons,<sup>32</sup> Martin instead sought to reconstitute the Company’s lame-duck Court of Proprietors (CoP) as an expert body composed of retired officials. Few stockholders, however, were inclined to transform their forum into the ‘domestic Indian parliament’ that he envisioned.<sup>33</sup> Even when dissenting proprietors secured sufficient votes to bring an issue to the attention of the directors, the BoC controlled the flow of official information and could hobble investigations.<sup>34</sup> In May of 1847, a number of reformers complained that the Secret Committee had concealed papers regarding the dethronement of Pratap Singh for the

<sup>29</sup> S. Marriott, *India: The Duty and Interest of England to Inquire into its State*, 2nd ed., Longman and Co., London, 1857, p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> Established in 1833, the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council could serve as a court of appeal for subjects abroad. The Company itself was charged with forwarding cases from the Sadr Diwani Adalats in the presidency towns to the attention of the committee. See P. A. Howell, *The Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, 1833–1876*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, p. 44.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Debate at the India House’, 8 February 1843, British Library (henceforth BL), Mss Eur E932/282, f. 647.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Debate at the East-India House’, in *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, vol. 20, W. H. Allen, London, 1836, p. 122. Charles Forbes believed that this imagined parliamentarian could emulate MP Daniel O’Connell, the famed advocate of Irish interests.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Responsible Government for British India’, *The Colonial Magazine and Commercial-Maritime Journal*, vol. 3, R. M. Martin (ed.), Fisher, Son & Co., London, 1842, p. 57.

<sup>34</sup> Writing to Dalhousie in 1848, Hobhouse urged him ‘not to be afraid of Blue books, or any books over which I have a control’. See J. Hobhouse to J. Broun-Ramsay, Marquess of Dalhousie, 23 December 1848, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/27, f. 89.



past 14 months.<sup>35</sup> Thompson, who had acquired EIC stock solely for the purpose of making speeches in the CoP, predicted that these documents would provide damning evidence of the Bombay government's machinations, but his optimism was ultimately misplaced.<sup>36</sup>

The invigoration of public opinion through pressure-group activism offered an alternative to this institutional impasse. Operating within an enlarged political sphere, the 'modular' Victorian reformer was able to flexibly 'combine into specific-purpose, *ad hoc*, limited association without binding himself by some blood ritual'.<sup>37</sup> A defining feature of British abolitionism, in particular, was the 'constant spillover of individuals into new causes'.<sup>38</sup> Much as Garrison and Thompson characterized their agitation as non-partisan, they celebrated the fact that the transatlantic abolitionist was typically the scourge of establishment interests. Thompson noted early on that slaveholding stemmed from the exercise of despotic power; upending this system called for the substitution 'of public, judicial, and responsible authority, for private, arbitrary, and irresponsible control'.<sup>39</sup> These demands could readily be interpreted as affirmations of radical constitutionalism. Garrison even identified English abolitionists as 'the genuine reform party of that country' and predicted that their exertions would ultimately 'abolish the unholy union of Church and State', the House of Lords, and the 'landed monopolies' altogether. It was the Tory party, after all, that had always been 'in favor of both white and black slavery'.<sup>40</sup>

Established by a coterie of Quakers and Anglo-Indians in 1839, the BIS embodied this capacious spirit of moral uplift. Its members linked the material deterioration of native society with the colonial government's

<sup>35</sup> Petitioners included John Sullivan, Holt Mackenzie, John Briggs, Charles Forbes, and Joseph Hume.

<sup>36</sup> By November 1847, Thompson was convinced that he had 'got the Govt and the folks in Leadenhall Street into such a fix' that they would likely 'kneel down their flag and give us victory'. See G. Thompson to R. D. Webb, 12 November 1847, Boston Public Library (henceforth BPL), Anti-slavery Collection, MS.A.1.2.v.17, f. 70.

<sup>37</sup> E. Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1994, p. 100.

<sup>38</sup> British women who had honed their protest skills during the anti-sati campaign of the 1820s turned their attentions to opposing animal cruelty and vivisection in the following decade. See Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy*, pp. 56, 70.

<sup>39</sup> W. L. Garrison, *Lectures of George Thompson, with a Full Report of the Discussion between Mr. Thompson and Mr. Borthwick, the Pro-Slavery Agent*, Isaac Knapp, Boston, 1836, p. 45.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xxxi–xxxii.

lack of guiding principles and its monopolistic tendencies, which served to ‘endanger the public peace’ and ‘cramp the exertions of industry and the progress of improvement’.<sup>41</sup> Zoe Laidlaw and Andrea Major have amply documented the society’s rise and fall, noting its supporters’ often-fractious relations with their humanitarian associates in the APS and British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS).<sup>42</sup> This conflict stemmed in part from disagreement over the proper means of eradicating Indian forms of domestic and agrestic slavery; the BFASS demanded immediate, legislative abolition, while reformers generally favoured a less bullish approach. Some, like Quaker BIS founders William Howitt and Joseph Pease, believed that the government should concentrate its efforts on sponsoring free-labour, colonial agricultural production that could undermine the American plantation system.<sup>43</sup> Others were sceptical that emancipation by fiat would prove practicable. In 1839, Thompson called upon the EIC to inquire into and abolish various forms of Indian slavery so long as such matters came ‘within the legitimate sphere of our authority’.<sup>44</sup> Two years later, a delegation of BIS personnel advised the BFASS that appealing to the upper classes was the only tenable approach, as forced labour was essentially authorized by the caste system.<sup>45</sup> Wantonly liberating presumed slaves would likely constitute religious interference on the

<sup>41</sup> S. R. Mehrotra, ‘The British India Society and Its Bengal Branch, 1839–46’, *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, vol. 4, no. 131, 1967, p. 139.

<sup>42</sup> Z. Laidlaw, ‘“Justice to India—Prosperity to England—Freedom to the Slave!” Humanitarian and Moral Reform Campaigns on India, Aborigines, and American Slavery’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2012, pp. 312–18; A. Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and Empire in India, 1772–1843*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2013, p. 336.

<sup>43</sup> ‘The Address of the South Durham British India Society’, *Liberator*, 20 October 1843, p. 167.

<sup>44</sup> *British India: Speeches Delivered by Major-General Briggs and George Thompson, Esq., at the Annual Meeting of the Glasgow Society*, W. Oliphant, Edinburgh, 1839, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> BIS committee member William Adam, secretary Francis Carnac Brown, and Garrisonian lawyer W. H. Ashurst approached BFASS representative John Scoble with this suggestion. See J. Scoble to J. Beaumont, 21 April 1841, Bodleian Library [henceforth BOD], Brit.EMP.S22.G91. Despite the ‘de-legalization’ of Indian slavery in 1843, customary forms of labour coercion continued to perplex the colonial administration decades later. In the South Indian Chingleput *taluk*, a series of revenue collectors in the 1880s argued that the low-caste *paraiyars* still lived in a state of virtual slavery under the landholding *mirasidars* on account of their debt peonage and lack of housing rights. The Board of Revenue, however, preferred to refer to the *paraiyars* as ‘farm servants’ and concluded that private charity would most efficaciously promote

part of the Company. Wary of this minefield, reformers charged the colonial administration itself with having innovated *new* forms of enslavement through its fiscal policies and coercive approach to interstate relations. Under the present system, ‘princes and people [were] bought and sold like bales of cotton’ to appease the Company’s investors, who traded in ‘thrones and nations’ in the manner of ‘goods and merchandise’.<sup>46</sup> If the British state, by extension, continued to use the ‘rod of oppression’ to bind its foreign subjects ‘down in slavery’, it would surely meet the fate of Rome, Carthage, and Nineveh.<sup>47</sup>

In gauging the appeal and utility of virtual-slavery rhetoric, we must venture beyond the confines of the BIS and chart the formation of broader reformist networks that persisted from the mid-1830s to the late 1840s. Howitt, for instance, helped sow the seeds of India reformism in 1838 with his brazen *Colonization and Christianity* tract, which provided a compendium of Company offences. In subsequent years, he published Thompson’s Satara articles, took up the cause of free trade, and joined the Garrisonian ASL. Thompson could also depend on the counsels of Major General John Briggs, a former political agent who had been stationed at numerous princely courts and boasted an extensive knowledge of historical land-taxation practices. Sympathetic personnel in the transatlantic-abolitionist community further supplemented the ranks of the India reformers and infused critiques of monopolization and arbitrary power with a spiritual aversion to coercive practices in their entirety.<sup>48</sup> Garrison himself travelled to Britain to attend the invidious 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention<sup>49</sup> and returned in 1846 to castigate the Free Church of Scotland for receiving donations from Southern slaveholders.

their uplift. See E. Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795–1895*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, pp. 153–90.

<sup>46</sup> ‘The Changes of a Century’, *British Indian Advocate*, no. 7, 1 July 1841, p. 60.

<sup>47</sup> G. Thompson, *Lectures on British India, Delivered in the Friends’ Meeting-House, Manchester, England*, William and Robert Adams, Pawtucket, RI, 1840, pp. 59–60.

<sup>48</sup> Extreme Garrisonians entertained a capacious definition of slavery as all ‘submission or subjection to control by the will of another being’. See L. Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1973, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> Thompson, Howitt, O’Connell, and Ashurst won plaudits for opposing the convention managers’ exclusion of female delegates. See ‘Resolution of the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Convention’, in *Sixth Annual Report of the Glasgow Emancipation Society*, Aird & Russell, Glasgow, 1840, p. 29.

Despite such wide-ranging support, Thompson's India-reform campaign was at a disadvantage compared to other radical and middle-class movements that proliferated at the time. From the outset, it was largely conceived as a pedagogical exercise; the metropolitan public had to be informed of concealed misdeeds abroad before they could awaken to a sense of their duty. As such, the movement revolved around lectures and petitioning, but lacked the more rambunctious or convivial elements that traditionally characterized the British mass platform.<sup>50</sup> India reformers acknowledged that swaying public opinion would be a gradual process and predicted that they 'must be defeated twenty times' before they could succeed in their endeavours.<sup>51</sup> By 1841, Elizabeth Pease, the daughter of Joseph, was urging Thompson to controversially 'strike for the Abolition of the Company's charter', as it was a 'plain issue, and the people would understand it'.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, working through established political channels threatened to alienate radical American abolitionists, as Garrison's rather extreme doctrines of non-resistance and moral suasion precluded his followers from holding public office.<sup>53</sup>

In excavating the reformers' agitational techniques, I do not wish to impart a false homogeneity to a heterogeneous movement. Some 'conservationists', like Thompson and Briggs, sought to retain native institutions ranging from the village municipality to the princely court. Anglicization was wholly irrelevant to their ideal of responsible governance, as they anticipated that access to global markets would naturally result in the Indians' material uplift.<sup>54</sup> Like these reformers, Martin challenged the home government's fiscal policies and sought to implement a system of 'real', reciprocal free trade between Britain and

<sup>50</sup> Vernon has discussed the radicals' adoption of a new 'sober' style of mobilization that challenged 'exclusive definitions of citizenship in the public sphere'. See J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 219–35.

<sup>51</sup> J. H. Bell, *British Folks & British India Fifty Years Ago: Joseph Pease and His Contemporaries*, London, 1891, p. 84.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>53</sup> Thompson was nonetheless elected MP for Tower Hamlets in 1847. Garrison could be classified as an 'anarchist perfectionist' on account of his disdain for religious institutions and his rejection of third party politics. See D. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY, 1999, p. 38.

<sup>54</sup> *British India: The Duty and Interest of Great Britain, to Consider the Condition and Claims of Her Possessions in the East: Addresses, Delivered before the Members of the Society of Friends*, Johnston and Barrett, London, 1839, p. 11.

India.<sup>55</sup> But he ultimately went one step further by casting this economic pivot as a first step in a broader integrationist programme that necessitated the promulgation of England's 'language and laws and literature'.<sup>56</sup> Whereas Thompson and his radical allies were inclined to rebuke Company personnel directly, Martin typically limited his attacks to the ruling ministry and the BoC.<sup>57</sup> Despite these divergences, the trope of virtual slavery provided India reformers of various stripes with a common rhetorical mooring that enabled them to represent distant suffering in familiar terms.

### **Expansion and contraction in the rhetoric of slavery**

Metaphors of slavery had long pervaded British literary culture, appearing in fervent sermons against sinfulness and early feminist tracts.<sup>58</sup> In the late 1820s, journals like the Unitarian *Monthly Repository* called upon abolitionists to denounce the practice of sati, as Indian widows were 'the unhappy captives of a barbarous superstition'.<sup>59</sup> Slavery analogies were also attractive to the 'sailors, servants, colonists, convicts, and religious minorities' throughout the empire who wished to protest their marginalization.<sup>60</sup> In the India reformers' polemic, references to slavery signalled a violation of the natural right to self-preservation or an exclusive dependence on a single person or institution. A process of 'natal alienation', which genealogically isolated the dishonoured slave

<sup>55</sup> Martin and Thompson toured Scotland in the autumn of 1838 under the auspices of the APS and successfully solicited an organizational link-up with the GES.

<sup>56</sup> 'Public Meeting', *Glasgow Argus*, 10 September 1838, Library of Congress (henceforth LOC), Scrap books collected by George Thompson and Frederick Chesson, vol. 5, p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> An enigmatic figure, Martin had assisted James Silk Buckingham and Rammohun Roy with their radical, free-trade publishing ventures in the late 1820s. Upon returning to England, he attempted to find permanent employment with the Company by calling for a temporary extension of its Chinese-tea monopoly and rejecting the schemes for European colonization that he had hitherto supported. In the late 1830s, he was roundly decrying the protectionist tariffs that safeguarded the Lancashire textile manufacturers from Indian competition. See Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy*, p. 124.

<sup>58</sup> B. Pasanek, *Metaphors of Mind: An Eighteenth Century Dictionary*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2015, pp. 126, 132.

<sup>59</sup> Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy*, p. 68.

<sup>60</sup> L. Benton, 'Just Despots: The Cultural Construction of Imperial Constitutionalism', *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2011, p. 213.

and forbade him ‘any independent social existence’, often facilitated this subordination.<sup>61</sup>

The fluidity of Thompson’s network invited participation from reformers differing in locality, class, and gender. Given this ease of admittance, debates over scope naturally arose, namely whether national issues should take precedence over the uplift of the global oppressed. Following an economic downturn in the early 1840s, Chartists and their sympathizers co-opted the rhetoric of political slavery to dramatize the immiseration of the labouring poor.<sup>62</sup> The agents of oppression were certainly legion; Chartist imagery of tyrants crushing ‘the yielding, suppliant slave’ evoked the common villainy of ‘the slaveholding planters, factory overseers, and upper-class government officials’.<sup>63</sup> Writing in Garrison’s *Liberator* newspaper, Chartist lawyer W. H. Ashurst declared that ‘the workingman in Europe is a slave in fact, though a freeman in name’.<sup>64</sup> The workshop system imposed by the New Poor Law of 1834 had disturbed the familial order and brought about ‘apathy, brutality, and moral degradation’. In a ‘slave state’ of ignorance, the working classes exhibited illicit behaviours that reflected their rescinded humanity. It was this unholy reduction of men to beasts that alarmed the abolitionist Joseph Sturge, who condemned political slavery as a ‘means of degrading men without the use of the lash’.<sup>65</sup> The demoralizing effects of disenfranchisement were only compounded by the proletarian slavery

<sup>61</sup> O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982, pp. 7–10.

<sup>62</sup> The manifesto put forth by the Chartist General Convention in 1839 declared that ‘the Government of England is a Despotism and her industrious Millions are Slaves’. See P. Gurney, “Rejoicing in Potatoes”: The Politics of Consumption in England during the “Hungry Forties”, *Past & Present*, no. 203, 2009, p. 107.

<sup>63</sup> B. Fladeland, “Our Cause Being One and the Same”: Abolitionism and Chartism’, in *Slavery and British Society, 1776–1846*, J. Walvin (ed.), Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 1982, p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> W. H. Ashurst, ‘Interesting Letter from England’, *Liberator*, 15 July 1842, p. 110. Ashurst was a mutual associate of Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini; Garrison published a number of Mazzini’s articles in the *Liberator* that compared American slavery with forms of Italian political oppression. See E. Dal Lago, *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini: Abolition, Democracy, and Radical Reform*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 2013, p. 132.

<sup>65</sup> J. Sturge, *Reconciliation between the Middle and Labouring Classes*, Abel Heywood, Manchester, 1842, p. 17.

of the wage labour system that—in the words of Friedrich Engels—established the bourgeoisie’s ‘monopoly of all means of existence’.<sup>66</sup>

Historians differ over whether common invocations of slavery entwined parallel reform campaigns or prompted pressure-group jostling. According to Gregory Vargo, Chartists projected ‘a crystallized image of the worst injustices of English society’ onto colonial rule and opposed militaristic overseas expansion.<sup>67</sup> Press organs like the Scottish *Chartist Circular* reprinted articles by BIS members; Thompson raged against the Anglo-Afghan War and castigated the political establishment for capitalizing on Russophobia to play up domestic sedition charges.<sup>68</sup> However, the Chartists’ enthusiasm for colonial revolts and their habit of storming anti-slavery meetings to elect their own chairmen incensed the respectable sort.<sup>69</sup> David Turley therefore warns against an oversimplified reading of abolitionist–Chartist amity, as rioting in the summer of 1842 deterred any stable link-up between the middle-class and proletarian organizations.<sup>70</sup> The reports of the Garrisonian GES further testify to the difficulty of fashioning a globally oriented movement. Although most members embraced Thompson’s efforts to ‘protect the liberties, and advocate the rights of the Natives of the British dependencies’ through his Satara agitation, the Chartist reverend Patrick Brewster attempted to draw his comrades’ focus to the Corn and Provision Laws, which concerned the suffering of ‘multitudes of men [rather] than individuals’.<sup>71</sup>

Radical advocates of universal emancipation also engaged in a fraught discursive relationship with the exceptionalism of chattel slavery. ‘For the most part,’ Richard Huzzey posits, ‘transatlantic abolitionist networks often distinguished tactfully between the struggle for global abolition

<sup>66</sup> F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, F. K. Wischnewetzky (trans.), George Allen and Unwin, London, 1950, p. 76.

<sup>67</sup> G. Vargo, “‘Outworks of the Citadel of Corruption’: The Chartist Press Reports the Empire’, *Victorian Studies*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2012, p. 248.

<sup>68</sup> G. Thompson, *The Affghan War: A Lecture*, George Rowe, Cheltenham, 1842, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> One eruption occurred in Darlington, the hometown of Joseph Pease; Francis Carnac Brown surmised that ‘the end of the world is coming, and Chartism and chaos are to reign over it supreme’. See ‘A Quaker of Sixty Years Ago’, in *The Westminster Review*, vol. 139, Henry and Company, London, 1893, p. 425.

<sup>70</sup> The unrest doomed Sturge’s Complete Suffrage Union. See D. Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780–1860*, Routledge, New York, 1991, p. 193.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Adjourned Meeting’, in *Seventh Annual Report of the Glasgow Emancipation Society*, Aird & Russell, Glasgow, 1841, p. 50. Joseph Pease also disapproved of the Satara agitation, suggesting that Thompson should aid India’s ‘dumb millions’ instead. See Bell, *British Folks*, p. 140.

and questions of domestic politics.’<sup>72</sup> Rejecting the metaphor of political slavery, American orator Frederick Douglass famously compared the plights of the working classes and plantation slaves to the difference between ‘light and darkness’ during his British lecture tour.<sup>73</sup> Chattel slavery alone hindered Christian self-improvement by smothering ‘the intellect burning—the spark of divinity enkindled’ in all men. This was a refrain on a classic abolitionist trope: the singular evil of personal slavery as something akin to ‘soul-murder’.<sup>74</sup> A master effectively committed an atheistic act of brutalization by ‘depriv[ing] God himself of his prerogative, as the sole proprietor ... of his immortal and accountable workmanship’.<sup>75</sup> Still, Huzzey notes that Garrison (Douglass’s fair-weather colleague) solicited the support of the British working classes and encouraged abolitionist advocacy of the People’s Charter. In past orations, Garrison had defined slavery broadly, noting that ‘Every man has a right to his own body—to the products of his own labor—to the protection of law—and to the common advantages of society’.<sup>76</sup> By the 1840s, he was wondering whether ‘England or America demand[ed] the liveliest sympathy’, for both were ‘laden with iniquity’ and ‘full of the elements of self-destruction’.<sup>77</sup> He nonetheless refrained from endorsing the broad concept of white slavery, as the degradation suffered by British labourers was fundamentally distinct from the supposed wage slavery of enfranchised Americans.<sup>78</sup>

Reformers within Thompson’s network generally concurred that poverty alone did not necessarily testify to one’s enslavement.

<sup>72</sup> R. Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2012, p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> D. B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2014, p. 304. One scholar has argued that Douglass associated Irish poverty with intemperance rather than institutionalized oppression; in contrast to actual slaves, the Irish abused the freedoms they already possessed. See F. Sweeney, *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2007, p. 88.

<sup>74</sup> Garrison, *Lectures of George Thompson*, p. x.

<sup>75</sup> ‘American Slavery’, *Royal Leamington Spa Courier*, 27 February 1847, p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> W. L. Garrison, ‘Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Convention’, in *Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd Garrison*, R. F. Wallcut, Boston, 1852, p. 68.

<sup>77</sup> W. L. Garrison to H. C. Wright, 1 April 1843, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 3, p. 125.

<sup>78</sup> Prominent Garrison Edmund Quincy declared soon after that the ‘white laboring men in America’ held ‘the scepter of Sovereignty in their own hands’. If they approached a state of slavery, they had ‘nobody to blame but themselves’. See ‘Chattel Slavery and Wages Slavery’, *Liberator*, 1 October 1847, p. 158.



Conditions mattered insofar as they unjustly deprived a person of freedom of action or impaired their natural rights. According to philosopher William Paley (whom Thompson cited), these included ‘a man’s right to his life, limbs, and liberty; his right to the produce of his personal labour; to the use, in common with others, of air, light, and water’.<sup>79</sup> Yet the theoretical distinction between personal and political/virtual slavery was sometimes a murky one, as reformers adapted content from a wide range of sources. In one lecture directed against the Free Church of Scotland and the Evangelical Alliance in 1846,<sup>80</sup> Thompson declared that true slavery consisted not of ‘curtailing rights, but annihilating them’, thereby converting a ‘free agent’ into ‘a mere *tool* for another’s benefit’.<sup>81</sup> These insights were actually derived from an 1837 article by Reverend George Bourne that probed the ‘teachings of the Old Testament on the subject of human rights’. For Bourne, neither ‘restrictions upon freedom’, ‘apprenticeship’, nor ‘political disabilities’ were indicative of enslavement.<sup>82</sup> Defining slavery narrowly as an act of ‘man-stealing’, he claimed that Jewish law had severely penalized such transgressions and affirmed ‘the entire separation of human beings from brutes and things’.<sup>83</sup> Thompson opportunely appropriated this biblical exegesis to rebuke the pro-slavery clergy, though he had previously denounced apprenticeship in the West Indies and the Indian coolie trade as forms of slavery by another name.

The shifting valences of slavery can also be attributed to the demands of the lecture circuit and the interplay between the languages of constitutionalism and natural rights.<sup>84</sup> In January of 1847, Thompson was airing the Raja of Satara’s grievances before literary clubs, taverns, and the Eastern Institution while simultaneously participating in the

<sup>79</sup> Garrison, *Lectures of George Thompson*, p. 149.

<sup>80</sup> At the time, this Alliance was still accepting slaveholding clergymen into its American branches.

<sup>81</sup> G. Thompson, *The Free Church of Scotland and American Slavery*, T. & W. M’Dowall, Edinburgh, 1846, p. 18, emphasis in original.

<sup>82</sup> G. Bourne, ‘Is Slavery from Above or from Beneath?’ in *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, vol. 2, Elizur Wright (ed.), American Anti-Slavery Society, New York, 1837, pp. 241–42.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>84</sup> Epstein suggests that ‘distinctions ... between arguments based upon historical precedent and those based upon natural rights, were rarely drawn very sharply’ at the level of popular politics. See J. Epstein, ‘The Constitutional Idiom: Radical Reasoning, Rhetoric and Action in Early Nineteenth-Century England’, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1990, pp. 555–56.

Free Trade Club and ASL.<sup>85</sup> At one meeting the following month, he lauded the anti-slavery movement as a ‘vindication of the rights of man’ and reminded his audience that he ‘had long ceased to discuss the question of slavery as one of colour or climate, of locality or treatment’.<sup>86</sup> Whether ‘in the rags of an American outcast’ or ‘decked out in robes in the palace of an Oriental despot’, all humans boasted ‘the right to be free’. The following evening, he returned to the local hall to protest the mistrial of Pratap Singh; attendees resolved that it was the ‘inalienable right of every man, whether prince or peasant, to be heard in his defence, when accused of crime’. By featuring summaries of these lectures in the same newspaper column, the *Royal Leamington Spa Courier* linked the two campaigns as complementary assaults ‘against the various forms of oppression existing in the world’.

Huzzey’s hypothesis of a bifurcation between the abolitionists’ global and domestic concerns may hold water in certain cases, but it does not adequately take into account the imperial dimension of reformist agitation. In tracing the artificial origins of the Agra famine and the ‘hungry forties’ in England, reformers observed that institutionalized hardships prevented the starving *ryots* and cotton operatives from educating themselves, embracing religion, or benefitting from the produce of their labour. Once officials classified Pratap Singh as a puppet king who ruled at the whim of his colonial superiors, they effectively converted him into a disposable tool and endorsed his natal alienation. The Satara debacle also prompted a legalistic debate over whether stringent treaty terms could legitimately reduce a native sovereign to the position of a virtual slave. The reformers’ campaign against monopolism in its political and economic forms was essentially an exercise in rendering the ineffable complexities of Indian governance comprehensible. A moralized version of liberal imperialism predicated on safeguarding individuals from coercion would only thrive under unremitting public scrutiny.

### **Script 1: the dehumanization of the *ryot* and British labourer**

With a contemporary estimated mortality rate of 500,000,<sup>87</sup> the 1837–38 famine in the North-Western Provinces provided seemingly

<sup>85</sup> Diary of George Thompson, John Rylands Library (henceforth JRL), REAS 7/2.

<sup>86</sup> ‘American Slavery’, *Royal Leamington Spa Courier*, p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Later famine experts put the death toll at approximately 800,000. See *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, vol. 1, Famine Relief, London, 1880, p. 11.

incontrovertible evidence of societal decline under British rule. The event triggered an interrogation of land-taxation policies and infrastructural neglect amidst a reconceptualization of the *ryot* as a rights-bearing subject. The question of metropolitan publicity, however, has largely been dwarfed in the historical literature by a focus on state famine policy as the colonial extension of a middle-class 'reform complex'. Despite the failure of the summer and winter monsoons, a number of colonial officials determined the cause of the famine to be a dearth of work and a surge in prices rather than a scarcity of food. Instead of barring grain hoarding or prohibiting its export, the government set nearly 80,000 'able-bodied' Indian paupers to work principally on road-building projects. This modern system of relief, Sanjay Sharma argues, functioned as a mechanism of control whereby the state extended its purview over the local economic sector.<sup>88</sup> Like the temperance and Sunday-school movements initiated in the metropole, the relief works aimed to instil sufferers with self-discipline and discourage deviancy.<sup>89</sup>

Reformers averred that the Company's response failed to address the root causes of the famine. This pushback against the inevitability of 'natural' disasters was part and parcel of a long-running critique that Burke had initiated decades earlier in his speech on Fox's East India Bill, when he maligned the Company's failure to have 'left some monument, either of state or beneficence, behind'.<sup>90</sup> The absence of material improvements was without precedent in the annals of conquest and more befitting 'the ourangootang or the tiger' than an enlightened government.<sup>91</sup> The following year, Burke blasted the Company for its parsimony during the parliamentary debate on the Nawab of Arcot's private debts. In their depressed state, the lands of the Carnatic could not possibly yield a sufficient tax base to fund the nawab's civil establishment, army, and repayments to his European creditors. Instead of attempting to recuperate fictitious debts, the government ought to

<sup>88</sup> S. Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy, and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001, p. 168.

<sup>89</sup> Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery*, pp. 135–39.

<sup>90</sup> E. Burke, 'Speech on Fox's East India Bill', in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 5, *India: Madras and Bengal: 1774–1785*, P. J. Marshall and W. Todd (eds), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981, p. 402.

<sup>91</sup> For Thompson, 'Burke's severe rebuke' still held true: 'if the English were driven from India, they would leave behind them no memorial worthy of a great and enlightened nation.' See Thompson, *Addresses: Delivered at Meetings of the Native Community of Calcutta*, p. 69; M. Lewin, *The Government of the East India Company, and Its Monopolies*, James Ridgway, London, 1857, p. 9.

have recognized its 'fundamental duty' to repair the region's thousands of reservoirs, the monuments of 'real kings' of bygone ages.<sup>92</sup> Burke's criticisms were revived in the parliamentary inquiries and debates that preceded the 1833 renewal of the Company's charter. Ardent free-trader James Silk Buckingham linked India's 'liability to destruction from floods and tigers' to the EIC's 'barbarous system of rack-renting' and its 'utter disregard' for the land's future condition.<sup>93</sup> Even more damningly, this state of affairs contrasted with the relative prosperity of princely states where 'great useful works are found and maintained'. Buckingham also drew attention to the Company's opprobrious monopoly over salt production in Bengal. Reflecting on the sight of peasants compelled 'to work in the salt pans under the scorching heat of the meridian sun', he suggested that the African sugar cultivators in the West Indies enjoyed a slightly more favourable existence.

Between 1837 and 1839, a handful of colonial agents published unofficial accounts testifying to the extent of misgovernment in India and the results of the grinding revenue system. In one influential text, magistrate Frederick John Shore likened the districts outside of Bengal to an 'apple in a cider press' being constantly squeezed by avaricious collectors.<sup>94</sup> As the state had anointed itself sole proprietor, or universal landlord, redress from this extortive system was 'almost unattainable'.<sup>95</sup> Former judge-advocate G. E. Westmacott also observed that the Company had failed to adequately redistribute its resources: 'charitable institutions, the asylums for the poor, the sick, and the maimed, [and] splendid and useful public works' were all 'crumbling to dust'.<sup>96</sup> Dr Henry Spry's *Modern India* travelogue, a favourite primer for aspiring India reformers, reiterated Buckingham's claim that the only

<sup>92</sup> E. Burke, 'Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts, 28 February 1785', in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 5, p. 522.

<sup>93</sup> J. S. Buckingham, Speech to House of Commons, 22 July 1833, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 3rd series, vol. 19, 1833, cols. 1071–72. In the same debate, the Company surgeon-turned-parliamentarian Joseph Hume attributed numerous diseases afflicting the poorest Bengalis to the absence of salt in their diet.

<sup>94</sup> F. J. Shore, *Notes on Indian Affairs*, vol. 1, John W. Parker, London, 1837, p. 171. India reformers cited this same passage during the hearings of the Select Committee on the Growth of Cotton in India in 1848.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in [R. M. Martin], 'Prosperity of India', in *The Oriental Herald and Colonial Intelligencer*, vol. 3, Madden & Co., London, 1839, p. 122.

<sup>96</sup> G. E. Westmacott, *Our Indian Empire*, 'Free Press' Office, London, 1838, p. 47.

well-maintained works were to be found in princely territories.<sup>97</sup> American visitors concurred that the over-taxed *ryots* were reduced to a state 'below that of our Southern slaves'.<sup>98</sup>

These revelations provided reformers with key evidence of Indians' ongoing debasement. Listing a litany of injustices, Howitt questioned why the 'avowed slavery of some half million of negroes in the West Indies' continued to excite abolitionist interest, while 'the virtual slavery of these *hundred millions* of Hindus in their own land' went unobserved.<sup>99</sup> Once Thompson took up the cause of India reform, local presses characterized the enterprise as an abolitionist offshoot and applauded his efforts to rescue 'over a Hundred Million of our fellow-subjects ... from a condition of poverty and slavery'.<sup>100</sup> Incidentally, improving the *ryots*' standard of living would create a new customer base for British manufactures and thereby promote the 'happiness of the population at our own doors'. By the time of the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention, reformers had come to consider the East Indies as a 'place where the worst slavery exists' for 'not only the actual bondsman' but 'every occupier ... under the basest tyranny'.<sup>101</sup> Similar sentiments expressed in the *Liberator* deplored the 'degrading slavery' under which the *ryots* had 'no title to their land, no right to their houses, [and] no species of permanent property, because the maladministration of the British Government in India has left them beggars in their native land'.<sup>102</sup> This defence of the *ryots*' interests dovetailed with the reformers' campaign to curtail the Mauritius and Guiana coolie trade. It was the oppressive land tax, Pease determined, that led 'to want and starvation ... compelling millions to become slaves for a long series of years'.<sup>103</sup> Aligning himself

<sup>97</sup> H. Spry, *Modern India: With Illustrations of the Resources and Capabilities of Hindustan*, vol. 2, Whittaker & Co., London, 1837, p. 11.

<sup>98</sup> Thompson, *Lectures on British India, Delivered in the Friends' Meeting-House*, p. 69.

<sup>99</sup> W. Howitt, *Colonization and Christianity: A Popular History of the Treatment of the Natives by the Europeans in all their Colonies*, Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longmans, London, 1838, p. 304, emphasis in original.

<sup>100</sup> G. Thompson, 'The Connection between the Protection and Civilization of the Native Tribes of the British Settlements and Colonies, and the Manufacturing and Commercial Prosperity of the Parent Country', *Renfrewshire Reformer*, 24 November 1838, p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> A. Stoddart, *Elizabeth Pease Nichol*, J. M. Dent, London, 1899, p. 106.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>103</sup> M. Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration to the British Caribbean*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1998, p. 120.

with Pease and Martin,<sup>104</sup> Irish MP Daniel O’Connell bombastically claimed that he would prefer ‘the total annihilation of [the Indian] race’ over ‘their being subjected to a new species of slavery’.<sup>105</sup>

To provoke the kind of ‘exact, slow, active, engaging seeing’ that Thomas Laquer associates with the ‘creation of sentiment’,<sup>106</sup> reformers adapted forms of narration that foregrounded the pathos of bodily suffering. There were certainly many templates from which they could draw. During the Hastings trial, Burke had recounted the harrowing experiences of the native population under the governor general’s reign of terror. Upstarts like tax collector Devi Singh subjected the cultivators to ‘cursed anarchy under the pretence of revenue’, as the non-payer could suffer a loss of limbs or be thrown into a well.<sup>107</sup> In the 1806 trial of Trinidad governor Thomas Picton for the torture of Louisa Calderon, the prosecution’s lurid portrayal of the event was captured in images that were recreated and circulated in the metropole.<sup>108</sup> Abolitionists, too, noted that members of the giving public were wont to contribute to causes that they could observe first-hand. Lingering on the ‘sensual details of cruelty’, their polemic exposed the condition of slavery as a perversion of the Victorian domestic ideal and recounted tales of desperate slaves driven to inhumane acts.<sup>109</sup>

Accounts emanating from India told of the ‘total debasement of human nature’ amongst the peasantry as ‘every natural affection [was] being absorbed in the universal principle of self-preservation’.<sup>110</sup> Thompson

<sup>104</sup> Martin opposed the India Labourers Protection Bill in 1838, as he feared it would draft Indians ‘from their native country to pestilential climates, in order that sugar, molasses, and coffee, might be raised out of their blood and bones’. See ‘Debate at the East-India House’, in *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, vol. 27, W. H. Allen and Co., London, 1838, p. 52.

<sup>105</sup> S. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 154.

<sup>106</sup> T. Laquer, ‘Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of “Humanity”’, in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, R. A. Wilson and R. D. Brown (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 40.

<sup>107</sup> L. Maxwell, *Public Trials: Burke, Zola, Arendt, and the Politics of Lost Causes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015, p. 66.

<sup>108</sup> J. Epstein, *Scandal of Colonial Rule: Power and Subversion in the British Atlantic during the Age of Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 29–30.

<sup>109</sup> Abruzzo references a gruesome illustration in the *Anti-Slavery Almanac* of an enslaved mother hacking her children to pieces to prevent their sale. See M. Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2011, pp. 129–38.

<sup>110</sup> T. B. H., ‘Famine in India’, *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany*, vol. 26, 1838, p. 269.

and Martin embellished this narrative of dehumanization by depicting a benighted country in which *ryots* were ‘dying like dogs’, while mothers threw their starving children into the Jumna River under the cover of darkness.<sup>111</sup> Elsewhere, Thompson lamented that a land of ‘gorgeous scenery’ and ‘unequaled fertility’ was now being ‘ravaged by disease and famine, and infested with mendicants, robbers, and murderers’.<sup>112</sup> The jungle threatened to reclaim civilization; scavengers pounced upon the dying while corpses impeded ‘the courses of small rivers’.<sup>113</sup> Identifying the Company as a habitual offender, Howitt offered excerpts from Abbé Raynal’s account of the 1770 Bengal famine that depicted the Ganges ‘choked’ with bodies, infants expiring ‘on the breasts of their mothers’, and peaceable natives ‘trampling under foot all authority, as well as every sentiment of nature and reason’.<sup>114</sup> Utterly demoralized, these *ryots* had thrown ‘themselves at the feet of the Europeans, entreating them to take them in as their slaves’.

The present crisis offered nothing less than a test of national morality. Inverting Evangelical language so often levied against Hindu practices, reformers rallied against famine deaths as a ‘horrid sacrifice to a selfish and inhuman system’.<sup>115</sup> Though metropolitan philanthropists were familiar with the ‘dreadful cruelty and suffering under the system of black-slavery’, the Agra famine cast light upon the comparable level of human devastation wrought by ‘fiscal oppression’.<sup>116</sup> Outside of Bengal, *ryots* contended with a hefty land tax that varied by the year and could only be paid in specie rather than in kind. Briggs, the author of an influential tome on the matter, declared that the government’s inflated assessment ‘bears down the peasant, and reduces him to a condition little better than that of a slave of the soil’.<sup>117</sup> The employment of costly European collectors, who each maintained a retinue of grasping agents, further contributed to a tax burden that had nearly doubled

<sup>111</sup> ‘Public Meeting’, *Glasgow Argus*, 10 September 1838, LOC Scrap books, vol. 5, p. 60. See also British India Society, *British Subjects Destroyed by Famine*, Johnston & Barrett, London, 1839, p. 2.

<sup>112</sup> Thompson, ‘The Connection’, p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> *British India: The Duty and Interest of Great Britain*, p. 15.

<sup>114</sup> Howitt, *Colonization*, pp. 269–71. Well into the nineteenth century, the colonial administration continued to tolerate ‘distress sales’ of native children.

<sup>115</sup> *Speeches, Delivered at a Public Meeting for the Formation of a British India Society*, London, 1839, p. 56.

<sup>116</sup> [Untitled], *Morning Herald*, 25 December 1838, LOC, Scrap books, vol. 5.

<sup>117</sup> G. Thompson, *British India: Its Condition, Prospects, and Resources*, Sheffield, 1839, p. 5.

since the transition from direct Mughal rule.<sup>118</sup> Reformers therefore demanded the extension of the Permanent Settlement, which would enable the *ryots* to utilize the surplus produced in bountiful years to temper periods of depression.<sup>119</sup> But land taxes were not the sole source of India's woes. Prejudicial tariffs compelled natives to receive England's steam-wrought manufactures 'almost duty free', while Indian textiles and produce were effectively barred from the home market.<sup>120</sup> The transmission of Company officials' private fortunes to England, which totalled half a million pounds annually, also justified their reputation as 'birds of prey and passage'.<sup>121</sup> Subtracting these remittances, additional home charges, the interest on the Indian debt, and exhaustive military costs, the colonial government was only left to operate on about one-fifth of the revenue collected. The vampiric nature of this drain was not lost on the Indian intelligentsia, who grew to resent the British as 'angels in theory but demons in practice'.<sup>122</sup>

Company apologists repudiated the reformist line that famine conditions were preventable. One editorial in the colonial press resented 'the interference of mistaken philanthropists at home' and sardonically predicted that Martin would move to recall the governor general and appoint himself as successor.<sup>123</sup> An incredulous writer for the *Edinburgh Review* also questioned the necessity of the BIS, noting that 'Mr. Thompson's picture [was] not like enough to be even a tolerable caricature' of the present state of India.<sup>124</sup> Still, one 'young married lady' in Madras contended that Thompson's 'accounts of the shameful

<sup>118</sup> J. Briggs, *The Present Land-Tax in India Considered as a Measure of Finance*, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, London, 1830, pp. 438–42. Briggs also served as treasurer for the BIS.

<sup>119</sup> The Permanent Settlement of 1793 fixed the Company's land-revenue assessment in Bengal in perpetuity. O'Connell lobbied to extend the settlement throughout India. See *Proceedings of a Public Meeting for the Formation of the Northern Central British India Society*, Manchester, 1840, p. 37.

<sup>120</sup> R. M. Martin, *Taxation of the British Empire*, Effingham Wilson, London, 1833, p. 230.

<sup>121</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on East India Produce*, House of Commons, 1840, p. 296.

<sup>122</sup> 'Debate at the East-India House, Dec. 19—Land Revenues of India', in *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, vol. 28, W. H. Allen and Co., London, 1839, p. 66. Reformist commentators also compared the Company's conduct to that of a 'vampyre' whose sole purpose was to drink India's national 'life-blood and drain its strength, to the last stage of exhaustion, in the shape of gold'. See 'Present Condition of British India', *Eclectic Review*, vol. 7, 1840, p. 311.

<sup>123</sup> 'Asiatic Intelligence—Calcutta', in *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, vol. 30, W. H. Allen and Co., London, 1839, p. 178.

<sup>124</sup> 'Revenue System of British India', *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 70, no. 142, 1840, p. 394.



taxation' were 'not in the least exaggerated'.<sup>125</sup> The reformers' agitation also found favour with members of the incipient Bengal British India Society who concurred that the Company had violated the *ryots*' customary landholding rights. No government could justly anoint itself sole proprietor of a country's territory for 'property, as being the product of labour, [was] natural with man'.<sup>126</sup> Some radical voices even went beyond Thompson and charged *zamindars* and Brahmins with subjugating the *ryots* in a manner reminiscent of the American plantation owners.<sup>127</sup>

In establishing virtual slavery as an endemic imperial evil, reformers asserted that the same coercive state apparatuses rooted in monopolization were curtailing the liberties of the *ryots* and metropolitan labourers alike. Much as the Company's tax demands inhibited the peasantry's productive powers, the aristocracy's manipulation of the grain market impoverished the British worker. Due to mill stoppages, 15 per cent of cotton operatives were thrown out of employment by the end of 1841 and quickly degenerated into shades of their former selves amidst Manchester's urban squalor.<sup>128</sup> In response, Chartists and ACLL polemicists employed Gothic imagery, giving credence to rumours that the urban poor were consuming the remains of dead dogs and committing infanticide as an act of mercy.<sup>129</sup> Leading an investigation into the plight of these labourers, philanthropist Joseph Adshead collected statistical data and anecdotal evidence confirming the extent of economic distress. His informants noted the 'strange anomaly' of seeing 'in wealthy, civilised, Christian England, multitudes of men living in the lowest state of physical degradation, and absolutely perishing from neglect'.<sup>130</sup> Searching for a prophylactic against such

<sup>125</sup> 'A Lady' [Julia Charlotte Maitland], *Letters from Madras, during the Years 1836-1839*, John Murray, London, 1846, p. 114.

<sup>126</sup> A. Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, p. 93.

<sup>127</sup> Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, p. 114. Later social reformers like Jyotirao Phule similarly condemned the Aryan Brahmins for having invented the caste system to subjugate the indigenous population and 'rivet firmly on them the chains of perpetual bondage and slavery'. See J. G. Fule, *Slavery (in this Civilised British Government under the Cloak of Brahmanism)*, P. G. Patil (trans.), Education Department: Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1991, p. xxxiii.

<sup>128</sup> G. R. Boyer, 'The Historical Background of the Communist Manifesto', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1998, p. 159.

<sup>129</sup> Gurney, 'Rejoicing in Potatoes', p. 116.

<sup>130</sup> J. Adshead, *Distress in Manchester: Evidence of the State of the Labouring Classes in 1840-42*, Henry Hooper, London, 1842, p. 50.

recessions, Adshead had previously demanded the ‘removal of the shackles upon industry’ that restricted the entry of Indian produce into the home market and reduced the natives’ purchasing power.<sup>131</sup> Reformist publications also admitted that it was impossible to ‘look upon a languid, unemployed operative, without being reminded of the errors ... which have marked our government of India’.<sup>132</sup>

In the fractured realm of middle-class philanthropy, some leaders of the ACLL considered India reform a distraction and sought to poach its leading lecturer.<sup>133</sup> Thompson agreed to temporarily enlist with the League, although he reassured supporters that he was not ‘ceasing (even for a time) to labour for India’, as the two campaigns were mutually reinforcing.<sup>134</sup> In depicting the havoc wrought by protectionism throughout the empire, Thompson once more relied on tropes of inversion and atavism. The Corn Laws, he declared, converted ‘plenty into scarcity’ and turned ‘the field into a forest’ by triggering price fluctuations and panics.<sup>135</sup> Such despoliation was contrary to natural law, as it impeded ‘the free gifts of God to the creatures he has made, and for whom he cares with the solicitude of a parent’. Unable to satiate their ‘animal wants’, the working classes suffered a ‘concomitant deterioration of public and private morals’ and lacked any incentive for self-improvement.<sup>136</sup> Artificial poverty also impaired the labourer’s liberties by making him solely dependent on the state’s reformatory institutions. In most cases, the pauper could not claim any protection unless he was ‘in a union house, the outcast in a prison, or the exile ... far from the place of his nativity’.<sup>137</sup> The most needy Britons were

<sup>131</sup> *Proceedings of a Public Meeting for the Formation of the Northern Central British India Society*, p. vii. Abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, a famed advocate of free-labour cultivation in Africa and India, served as this organization’s first president.

<sup>132</sup> ‘Justice to India’, *British Indian Advocate*, no. 13, 1 November 1841, p. 45.

<sup>133</sup> His transfer signalled the beginning of the end for the BIS. See Laidlaw, ‘Justice to India’, p. 317.

<sup>134</sup> G. Thompson, *Corn Laws: Lectures, Delivered before the Ladies of Manchester and Its Vicinity, on the Subject of a Memorial to the Queen*, Haycraft, Manchester, 1841, p. 19. Upon voyaging to India in 1843, Thompson was appointed agent for Calcutta’s Landholders’ Society; he subsequently established an office in London on its behalf. See S. R. Mehrotra, *The Emergence of the Indian National Congress*, Vikas Press, Delhi, 1971, p. 13.

<sup>135</sup> Thompson, *Corn Laws*, pp. 36–37, 42. Instead of exchanging manufactures for foodstuffs, Britain was forced to pay for foreign grain in gold in the event of a poor harvest.

<sup>136</sup> G. Thompson, *Farewell Address of George Thompson, Esq., to the National Anti-Corn-Law League*, Manchester, 1842, p. 9.

<sup>137</sup> Thompson, *Corn Laws*, p. 14.

effectively banished from their homeland and compelled 'to find asylum in some foreign land from penury and helplessness'.<sup>138</sup>

One of Thompson's initiatives for the ACLL, which had begun to rebrand repeal of the Corn Laws as a Christian duty, was to organize a 'sanctified parliament' of clergymen modelled on the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention.<sup>139</sup> Ditching the usual Evangelical interpretation of economic calamity as a sign of divine retribution, attendees concurred that Britain's plight was 'self-inflicted', the 'result of a departure, by human legislation, from the spirit and mandates of the divine law'.<sup>140</sup> But ministers would win few converts to the cause of free trade so long as Britain's agriculturists remained in a state of 'abject dependence upon those whose will can any time dispossess them of their means of subsistence'.<sup>141</sup> Facing high food prices and rack rents, the farmhand was bound in 'slavery to his landlord' and condemned to 'ignorance [and] tame submission to feudal tyranny'.<sup>142</sup> These observations echoed the classic anti-monopoly line that arbitrary rent hikes 'virtually include[d] the essence of personal slavery' by obliging 'one man to labour for the benefit of another without an equivalent'.<sup>143</sup> Nursing great expectations, Thompson anticipated that repeal would finally liberate the English tenant farmers 'from their bondage to the aristocratic proprietors of the soil' and lead them to embrace finance and franchise reform.<sup>144</sup> As MP, he continued to rail against the electoral system of 'mock representation' that was 'directly calculated to make men crouching slaves'.

Thompson's fellow lecturers on the free-trade circuit invoked the motif of virtual slavery in a complementary fashion. According to one pamphleteer, the Corn Laws constituted a 'Jacobin' assault against customary labour rights; forcing a worker to toil 'twelve hours for the bread that might be got in eight' was nothing less than an act of

<sup>138</sup> Thompson, 'The Connection', p. 6.

<sup>139</sup> P. Pickering, *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League*, Leicester University Press, London, 2000, p. 95.

<sup>140</sup> B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, p. 247.

<sup>141</sup> 'National Conference of Ministers of Religion of all Denominations on the Subject of the Corn Laws', *British Indian Advocate*, no. 10, 1 September 1841, p. 111.

<sup>142</sup> G. Thompson, *Lecture on the Corn Laws*, Carlisle, 1842, p. 13.

<sup>143</sup> T. P. Thompson, *Catechism on the Corn Laws: With a List of Fallacies and the Answers*, 18th ed., London, 1834, p. 31.

<sup>144</sup> 'Speech of Mr. Thompson', *Liberator*, 22 November 1850, p. 187.

‘man-stealing’—an unjust tax of men’s ‘nerves and sinews’.<sup>145</sup> Locking horns with the protectionist BFASS, which prioritized the economic interests of recently liberated cultivators in the West Indies, Howitt denounced the tariffs that prevented the influx of cheap sugar into England. Slavery, he reminded his abolitionist listeners, did not simply consist of being ‘bought and sold’, but rather was a general ‘condition of privation of free will, and being put under the arbitrary will of another’.<sup>146</sup> Idle, starving metropolitan workers were effectively ‘the slaves of political enactments’ and the victims of market manipulations. Their emancipation could only come about through investment in the low-cost, free-labour production of Indian sugar and cotton.

By representing concomitant reform initiatives as a grand rebuff of monopolization, polemicists within Thompson’s circle were able to orient the *ryots* and working classes as victims of a common plight. The recession and Agra famine had not been triggered by pestilence or internal wars, but rather were the result of governmental malfeasance. When Britain suffered yet another downturn in 1847, reformers once more declared that the Company ought put India’s ‘millions in motion, and bury American Slavery for ever beneath the limitless mass of free-labour produce that she will pour in upon us’.<sup>147</sup> Evidence presented to John Bright’s select committee on the growth of Indian cotton spoke to the adequacy of soils and the capitalistic disposition of the native population. If the ‘land were not incumbered by taxes’ and ‘the natives were not in a state of almost inextricable slavery’, the subcontinent’s supply of cotton would surely increase.<sup>148</sup> As reformers continued to charge the Company with obstructing economic development, they simultaneously contested its coercive approach to interstate politics by popularizing the figure of the fallen prince as a virtual slave. The following section will plumb the depths of the prolonged Satara agitation—a historically neglected but contemporarily provocative affair that tested the limits of public-sphere agitation.

<sup>145</sup> P. Harwood, *Six Lectures on the Corn-Law Monopoly and Free Trade*, John Green, London, 1843, pp. 24–26.

<sup>146</sup> W. Howitt, *A Serious Address to the Members of the Anti-Slavery Society on Its Present Position and Prospects*, London, 1843, pp. 7, 9.

<sup>147</sup> W. Howitt, ‘Thomas Clarkson, the Advocate of the Extinction of Slavery by Means of India’, *Howitts’ Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*, vol. 2, 1847, p. 338.

<sup>148</sup> G. Thompson, Speech to House of Commons, 18 June 1850, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 3rd series, vol. 112, 1850, col. 57.

**Script 2: the native prince as disposable tool**

On the night of 4 September 1839, Raja Pratap Singh was roused from his slumber and ousted from his palace, the victim of a cabal between his brother Appa Sahib and political agent Colonel Charles Ovans. Thrown 'half-naked' into a palanquin, the newly minted political prisoner was marched into exile with his courtly retinue. The raja's adviser, Balla Sahib Senaputtee, pleaded for a halt when his wife gave birth shortly after the journey commenced; denied this request, he suffered a fit of duress, contracted an illness, and died. Pratap Singh's *vakeels* (legal agents) denounced these events as 'repugnant to justice and humanity' and demanded 'as their birthright ... a fair and impartial inquiry into the charges against his Highness'.<sup>149</sup> As acting chairman of the BIS, Charles Forbes petitioned the House of Commons in September 1841 to account for the cruelties endured by the raja. Ovans refuted his accusations, claiming that the march was a lavish and leisurely affair that had been planned three months in advance.<sup>150</sup> This rebuttal was hardly the end of the matter. As late as 1847, John Cam Hobhouse, the president of the BoC, was still denouncing Forbes's petition as a libellous assassination of Ovans's character. Regarding the dethronement, he concluded that 'the forfeiture of the dominion of a dependent chief' could not 'be placed on the footing of a criminal trial in a court of judicature'.<sup>151</sup> The raja's right to a fair trial, in other words, was denied.

Full of 'the marvelous, the romantic, and the affecting',<sup>152</sup> what Garrison termed 'the atrocious case of the afflicted Rajah of

<sup>149</sup> E. R. R. Sirkey, B. R. Wittul, and R. Bapojee, *A Letter with Accompaniments from Eszwunt Row Raja Sirkey, Bhugwunt Row Wittul and Rungo Bapojee, Vakeels of His Highness the Deposed Raja of Sattara*, London, 1841, pp. 34–36.

<sup>150</sup> Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel C. Ovans, Resident at Sattara, to J. P. Willoughby', in *Copies or Extracts of Correspondence and Papers Relating to, and Explanatory of the Deposition of the Raja of Sattara*, Part II, House of Commons, London, 1843, p. 1291. According to Lieutenant F. Cristall, who supervised the march, Balla Sahib had been taken ill with a cold in late January and refused the aid of a Company surgeon; both he and the former raja preferred to use a *hakim* in medical matters. See F. Cristall to C. Ovans, 12 March 1840, BL, Papers of Sir John Willoughby, Mss Eur E293/152.

<sup>151</sup> J. Hobhouse, Speech to House of Commons, 6 July 1847, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 3rd series, vol. 93, 1847, col. 1236.

<sup>152</sup> G. Thompson, *The Plot Unravell'd: Speech of George Thompson, Esq., at a Great Meeting in the Hanover Square Rooms*, Ridgway, Piccadilly, and Effingham Wilson, London, 1847, p. 33.

Sattara' could be transposed into a constitutionalist morality play in a way that fiscal debates could not.<sup>153</sup> From the arrival of Pratap Singh's representatives to London in 1838 to the Company's contested annexation of the territory in 1849, the matter galvanized reform networks that persisted long after the BIS had fallen into abeyance. Throughout this period, Thompson and his associates enumerated the injustices suffered by Pratap Singh as a semi-autonomous ruler. The victim of a conspiracy orchestrated by Company officials and local Brahmins alike, he had been tried by an illegal secret commission and deprived of the universal right to contest the charges. Forced to admit his guilt or suffer exile, the raja confronted the startling reality that British paramountcy over the princely states knew no legal bounds.<sup>154</sup>

The fact that Thompson received a retainer as a paid agent of the raja (which he later used to fund his parliamentary campaign) has led to an undue emphasis on his pecuniary motivations.<sup>155</sup> Historian S. R. Mehrotra disparaged Thompson for having 'wasted time and energy in taking up the cause of the deposed Raja' rather than 'working for the people of India' more generally.<sup>156</sup> A contributor to the *Calcutta Review* levied this same criticism in 1848, remarking that the very mention of Satara functioned as a 'potent talisman ... to clear the benches' of the House of Commons and discourage readership of India-reform propaganda.<sup>157</sup> But other commentators denounced the dethronement as a reckless scheme of territorial aggrandizement reminiscent of 'the days of Lord Clive and Warren Hastings'.<sup>158</sup> The Company's meddling in Satara also gained notoriety in the aftermath of the uprising of 1857, when critics denounced the annexation as a

<sup>153</sup> W. L. Garrison to H. E. Garrison, 13 September 1846, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 3, p. 393.

<sup>154</sup> Company apologists countered that the raja was merely obliged to reaffirm his subservience to the British resident, which the second article of the 1819 treaty had initially mandated.

<sup>155</sup> Thompson was forced to publicly defend his probity, declaring in one letter to the editor of the *Bengal Hurkaru* that he 'would see [his] children starve, rather than feed them on the wages of prostitution'. See *Ninth Annual Report of the Glasgow Emancipation Society*, David Russell, Glasgow, 1843, p. 55.

<sup>156</sup> Mehrotra, *The Emergence of the Indian National Congress*, p. 23.

<sup>157</sup> W. Murray, 'Satara—and British Connexion Therewith', in *Selections from the Calcutta Review*, vol. 3, Trübner & Co., London, 1882, p. 218.

<sup>158</sup> 'Dethronement of the Raja of Sattara', *Liverpool Mercury*, 23 April 1841.

formative experiment with the doctrine of lapse<sup>159</sup> and a blatant disavowal of the law of nations.

Even before the Satara quagmire, reformers were echoing Burke's conclusion that there was not 'a single prince, state, or potentate, with whom the rulers of India had come in contact that they had not sold'.<sup>160</sup> Prefacing a transcript of one of Thompson's lectures, the editor of the *Glasgow Argus* bewailed the fact that the 'princes of India [were] now but slaves of the Government of India ... crouching and often disaffected vassals of British power'.<sup>161</sup> Elsewhere, Thompson audaciously claimed that the 'misery engendered' by colonial governance in India could exceed that of 'the West India system, with all its horrors'.<sup>162</sup> The ruling classes, in particular, were 'compelled to bow humbly' before juvenile British tax-gatherers and suffered a striking loss of status. Thompson offered the example of the Raja of Nagpur, who was obligated to construct and maintain a road exclusively used by Company officials for their evening drives; soldiers stationed along its course prevented the raja's own subjects from even setting foot on the thoroughfare. Other reformers confirmed that the Company had pulled every one of the princes 'from their thrones, or has left them there the contemptible puppets of a power that works its arbitrary will through them'.<sup>163</sup>

Pratap Singh's dynasty was initially 'resurrected' in 1818 during the Third Anglo-Mahratta War to diminish popular support for the insurgent Peshwa. Mountstuart Elphinstone, the governor of Bombay, imagined that a native administration would guarantee the allotment of pensions to leading Brahmins and preserve tax-free *inams*.<sup>164</sup> According to a series of British 'residents' stationed at the raja's court, Pratap

<sup>159</sup> Governor General Dalhousie utilized this pseudo-legal mechanism to confiscate princely states from Hindu rulers who failed to produce a blood heir. See J. C. Marshman, *The History of India*, vol. 2, Serampore Press, Serampore, 1867, p. 724.

<sup>160</sup> 'India and the Colonies. A Lecture by Mr. George Thompson delivered in Rose Street Chapel, Edinburgh, December 17, 1838', LOC, Scrap books, vol. 6, p. 6.

<sup>161</sup> 'Mr. Thompson's Lecture on the Duty of Great Britain to her Hundred Million of Subjects in the East, delivered in George Street Chapel, Glasgow, on Wednesday, November 14 1838', LOC, Scrap books, vol. 6.

<sup>162</sup> Thompson, *British India: Its Condition*, p. 6.

<sup>163</sup> Howitt, *Colonization*, p. 213. This critique echoed Burke's claim that the Company rendered native princes 'odious' to their subjects by converting them into the instruments of the colonial regime.

<sup>164</sup> 'Dissent by Henry St. George Tucker', in *Papers Relating to the Question of the Disposal of the Sattara State, in Consequence of the Death of the Late Raja*, J. & H. Cox, London, 1840, p. 161.

Singh internalized the principles of enlightened governance; he established schools, collected taxes efficiently, sponsored public works, and oversaw an efficient judicial system.<sup>165</sup> If these agents identified one fault with the raja, it was his tendency to guard his prerogatives as a semi-independent ruler. Although an 1819 treaty declared that he would govern in 'subordinate cooperation' with British authorities, the details of this arrangement were never fully clarified. In one instance, Briggs (the resident at the time) had clashed with Pratap Singh over a property inheritance involving two young widows and a selection of possible heirs. Resenting Briggs's interference, the raja bypassed him altogether and sought confirmation from Bombay that he alone could settle the matter.<sup>166</sup> Pratap Singh also maintained a watchful eye over local notables who were in possession of certain *jagirs*.<sup>167</sup> Elphinstone seemingly confirmed that these territories were personal land grants that the raja could redeem upon the death of their present holders.<sup>168</sup> When Pratap Singh pressed the issue in the early 1830s, the CoD decreed 'the Raja's claims to the reversion of the feudal chiefs, of whom by treaty he was a sovereign ... should be admitted'.<sup>169</sup> The Bombay government dissented and withheld the court's reply for nearly three years. In the interim, its officials gave credence to rumours that the raja was entertaining hostile designs toward the Company and had violated the treaty article that forbade association with foreign powers.

In his final report on Satara, Briggs informed Elphinstone of whispers that Pratap Singh was engaged in unapproved communications with the

<sup>165</sup> J. Briggs, 'Final Report on the Raja's Government', 1 January 1827, BOD, John Briggs Papers, MSS.Eng.hist.C333, ff. 69–71.

<sup>166</sup> J. Briggs, 'The Phulthun Nimbalkur Family Case', 31 October 1826, BOD, John Briggs Papers, MSS.Eng.hist.C333, ff. 21–39. Despite this friction, Briggs received a diamond ring and a sword from Pratap Singh upon his resignation in 1827; he later advocated on behalf of the raja throughout the 1840s. See A. Deshpande, *John Briggs in Maharashtra: A Study of District Administration under Early British Rule*, Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1987, p. 178.

<sup>167</sup> Feudal estates granted by a princely sovereign often in recognition of past service. Advocates in the CoP asserted that the 1819 treaty fixed the boundaries of Satara at the Neera River, but also gave the raja jurisdiction over these specific *jagirs* beyond its borders. See *Proceedings at a Special General Court of Proprietors of East India Stock ... Respecting the Dethronement of his Highness the Raja of Satara*, J. Wilson, London, 1840, p. 34.

<sup>168</sup> Elphinstone informed the subordinate *jagirdars* that the raja ruled as the de facto paramount power and would determine the legitimacy of their adoptions. See 'Dissent by John Shepherd', in *Papers Relating to the Question of the Disposal of the Sattara State*, p. 165.

<sup>169</sup> P. Singh, *A Letter to the Right Hon. Sir Henry Hardinge*, Alex Munro, London, 1845, p. 6.



Raja of Kolhapur and other petty chiefs. But he insisted that these rumours need 'create no suspicion in the mind of the Honorable Governor in Council as to the fidelity and attachment of the present Raja'.<sup>170</sup> Elphinstone concurred that these liaisons were likely an attempt at self-inflation. A decade later, accusations of conspiracy emerged once more and ultimately cost the raja his throne. In July 1836, Resident Peter Lodwick informed his superiors in Bombay of an unsubstantiated allegation: Pratap Singh had attempted to involve two *subedhars* (native officers) in an anti-British plot. Despite the absence of hard evidence backing these claims, Governor Robert Grant notified the Secret Committee in September and dispatched Ovans and government secretary J. P. Willoughby to convene a secret commission of inquiry.<sup>171</sup> This investigation functioned as a kind of summary court martial. Barred from conducting a cross-examination, the raja was neither permitted legal representation nor provided with copies of the officers' depositions in Marathi, his native language. A regretful Lodwick later alleged that his colleagues were eager to convict the raja from the outset as a 'damned scoundrel ... treacherous to that power which had raised him from a prison to a throne'.<sup>172</sup> Though the commission officially disbanded in November after a key informer admitted to perjury, Ovans continued to linger at Satara as a 'grand inquisitor' and was appointed as Lodwick's successor the following June.

From that point on, Ovans proceeded to dredge up new conspiracies at every turn. Pratap Singh had reportedly connived with the Raja of Jodhpur to foment a Maratha restoration and encouraged Mudhoji Bonsle, the indigent Raja of Nagpur, to facilitate a Russian invasion of India with Turkish support.<sup>173</sup> The Bombay authorities noted that Pratap Singh had sent Bhonsle a pair of shoes and a sword as a collusive overture, though this claim itself was uncorroborated. More shockingly, Ovans reported that the raja had approached Don Manoel,

<sup>170</sup> Briggs, 'Final Report on the Raja's Government', f. 93.

<sup>171</sup> In a later minute, Grant admitted that the raja 'has a right to be heard in his own vindication' and urged his subordinates to avoid a 'farce of a trial'. See R. Bapojee, *Rajah of Sattara: A Letter to the Right Hon. J. C. Herries, M.P.*, G. Norman, London, 1852, p. 46.

<sup>172</sup> 'Letter from Major-General Peter Lodwick to the Chairman of the Court of Directors', in *Papers Respecting the Case of the Raja of Sattara*, J. L. Cox & Sons, London, 1842, p. 7.

<sup>173</sup> A handful of itinerants detained at Nellore in 1838 implicated Pratap Singh as the conduit linking the Raja of Jodhpur with Mubariz ud-Daula, the sponsor of Wahhabism in Hyderabad. See Sullivan, *Speech of Mr. John Sullivan, in the Court of Proprietors*, pp. 27–28.

the Viceroy of Goa, to secure 30,000 troops for his revolt.<sup>174</sup> Even after Pratap Singh was deposed and exiled to Benares, the Bombay government continued to situate him at the nexus of multiple transregional plots.<sup>175</sup> Thompson and Briggs contended that any treasonable correspondence was a forgery, the work of a long-running Brahminical conspiracy to unseat the raja and his supporters belonging to the Kayastha Prabhu caste.<sup>176</sup> Ovans, the reformers declared, was party to these machinations from the outset and could soundly be counted amongst ‘the greatest living criminals’ for his role in the regime change.<sup>177</sup>

Since the late eighteenth century, the Company had utilized its residency system to monitor the native sovereigns and curb their communication with other Indian rulers or foreign powers. The opening of steamship routes in the 1830s put this programme of ‘official and enforced isolation’ under severe stress.<sup>178</sup> In April 1837, Governor Grant tentatively allowed Pratap Singh to hire an agent who could bring the *jagir* debacle to the attention of the metropolitan authorities. The central government acknowledged the raja’s right to dispatch his personal physician, Dr Milne, to London. Having relinquished its economic monopoly, the Company could no longer circumscribe the movements of British subjects with ease, let alone bar ‘respectable individuals ... from undertaking the defence of natives of rank’.<sup>179</sup> But the Bombay administration soon altered its position and declared that the home government was effectively a foreign power; if the raja directly interacted with the BoC or CoD, he would be in violation of

<sup>174</sup> Manoel vigorously contested this charge after Joseph Hume contacted him directly in 1841.

<sup>175</sup> *Papers Regarding the Motion of William Hume M.P. in Favour of the Deposed Raja of Satara*, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/109. In the spring of 1841, Ovans suspected that the raja had somehow dispatched the ‘blind Brahmin’ Nursoo Punt to incite a rising of Arabs in Badami. See *Raja Shahji of Satara, 1830–1848: Select Documents from the Satara Residency Records, Peshwa Daftar, Poona*, R. D. Choksey (ed.), Poona, 1974, p. 7.

<sup>176</sup> J. Briggs, ‘*The Plot Discovered*’: *Speech of Major-General Briggs, Exposing the Conspiracy to Dethrone the Raja of Sattara*, A. Munro, London, 1847, pp. 19–23.

<sup>177</sup> G. Thompson, *The Raja of Sattara: His Innocence Declared by the Governor-General’s Agent*, Tyler and Reed, London, 1847, p. 23.

<sup>178</sup> M. Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India: Residents and the Residency System, 1764–1858*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991, p. 62.

<sup>179</sup> *Debates at the India House: August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1845 on the Case of the Deposed Raja of Sattara and the Impeachment of Col. C. Ovans*, Effingham Wilson, London, 1845, p. 283.

the treaty of 1819.<sup>180</sup> Acting-Governor James Farish sabotaged one deputation's attempted venture to England in the winter of 1838 by instructing the Collector of Sea Customs at Bombay to bar a French-owned ship from departing with the agents on board. Treating the raja's representative as contraband irked leading agent Rungo Bapojee, who bemoaned his countrymen's apparent lack of legal rights.<sup>181</sup> Whereas the 'slave-born native of Africa' became free upon touching British soil, 'the free-born, but wronged, Native of India' was 'hunted, tracked, imprisoned, heavily fined, and the law twisted and tortured to chain him to the earth'.<sup>182</sup> In practice, the directors were under no obligation to recognize the delegations that did arrive. *Vakeels* were frequently forced to linger in London until they had exhausted their allowances, at which point the Company purchased their passage home.<sup>183</sup>

Reformers vowed that the government could not prohibit the influx of agents into London unless 'a law be passed that should make it a felony for a native to come to England at all'.<sup>184</sup> Upon their delayed arrival in London, the raja's emissaries were incorporated within an incipient India-reform network. Forbes subsidized the first deputed *vakeel*, Syed Mir Afzul Ali; Satara agents were also in attendance at the inaugural meeting of the BIS. After corresponding with Bapojee in early 1842, Thompson became 'more than ever convinced of the perfect innocence of the Raja of all the acts laid to his charge'.<sup>185</sup> From that point forward, Bapojee occupied a prominent position in the reform community, accompanying Thompson to lectures on Indian

<sup>180</sup> According to Thompson, Grant learned that the raja had appointed Mir Afzul Ali as his agent in the summer of 1836 and trumped up the *subedhar* case to discredit future metropole-bound deputations. See G. Thompson, 'The Raja of Satara', *Howitts' Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*, vol. 1, 1847, p. 47.

<sup>181</sup> Major B. D. Basu of the Indian Medical Service lionized Bapojee as 'the first Indian agitator in England' and a forerunner of Congress leaders Dadabhai Naoroji, Lalmohan Ghose, and Surendra Banerjee. See B. D. Basu, *The Story of Satara*, R. Chatterjee, Calcutta, 1922, p. 183.

<sup>182</sup> R. Bapojee, *Statement of Rungo Bapojee, Accredited Agent of His Highness Purtaub Sing... at a Great Meeting in the Hanover Square Rooms*, London, 1846, p. 11.

<sup>183</sup> M. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2004, p. 280.

<sup>184</sup> *Debates at the India House: August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and September 24<sup>th</sup>*, 1845, p. 171.

<sup>185</sup> G. Thompson to R. D. Webb, 11 April 1842, BPL, Anti-slavery Collection, MS.A.1.2.v.12.2, f. 43. Thompson initially communicated with Bapojee by using Briggs as a translator.

governance, abolitionist meetings, and even a party for the Lord Mayor of London.<sup>186</sup> One meeting at the Hall of Commerce, which prominently featured a reading of Bapoojee's statement on the Satara case, drew between 400 and 500 attendees and lasted over three hours.<sup>187</sup> His ubiquity about town led some sceptical proprietors to assert that he was simply 'brought here for stage effect'.<sup>188</sup>

India reformers contended with numerous institutional blockages while advocating on behalf of the raja. In February 1840, sympathizers in the CoP moved for an inquiry into the dethronement and were swiftly rebuked for their audacity, as it was 'inexpedient' for the court 'to interfere with the responsible Executive'.<sup>189</sup> The Company, however, could not dismiss the House of Commons' call for papers that came down the following year. This development triggered a new barrage of requests from proprietors for a fulsome investigation; by July 1848, reformers had reportedly brought the Satara scandal to the CoP's attention on 31 occasions.<sup>190</sup> In most cases, detractors rebuffed the agitation as the work of a 'small knot of persons' who had deluded the raja into squandering his resources.<sup>191</sup> Obstructionist proprietors challenged the reformers on matters of protocol, moved to strike their accusations against deceased personnel, and prematurely adjourned special general courts before their motions had received a vote. As early as August 1842, Thompson was privately admitting that the likelihood of the raja receiving an appeal was slight, but nonetheless vowed to persevere by circulating petitions amongst sympathetic MPs.<sup>192</sup> Briggs applauded Thompson's efforts to force the 'defence of the Rajah of Sattara down the throats of [his] unwilling auditors', though he also

<sup>186</sup> 'Entertainment at the Mansion-House of London', *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 27 July 1849.

<sup>187</sup> 'The Rajah of Sattara', *The Times*, 27 November 1846, p. 6.

<sup>188</sup> 'Debate at the India House', 8 February 1843, BL, Mss Eur Eg32/282, f. 647.

<sup>189</sup> Minutes of the General Court of Proprietors, 13 February 1840, BL, IOR/B/270, f. 112.

<sup>190</sup> J. Hogg, Speech to House of Commons, 11 July 1848, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 3rd series, vol. 100, 1848, col. 437.

<sup>191</sup> 'Dethronement of the Raja of Sattara: Proclamation', *Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce*, 11 September 1839, p. 578.

<sup>192</sup> Thompson even suggested to radical Irish publisher Richard Webb that he should reconfigure one of the raja's own dispatches as a visual prop and 'hang it up where it might be seen'. See G. Thompson to R. D. Webb, 25 August 1842, BPL, Anti-slavery Collection, MS.A.1.2.v.12.2, f. 81.

doubted that Pratap Singh would ever 'be replaced on the throne of his ancestors'.<sup>193</sup>

While reformers like Bapojee broadly 'framed [their] arguments on moral and legal grounds recognized as sacred by the British establishment',<sup>194</sup> we may further discern two distinct polemical modes that established Pratap Singh as a conscientious victim of coercion. The first characterized Ovans as a conniving scoundrel and exposed the Company's reluctance to censure its own employees.<sup>195</sup> The second cast the raja as a rights-bearing subject who had been ill-used as a virtual slave and denied a fair hearing. In contrast to trials of wayward colonial agents like Hastings and Picton, which operated as acts of purgation and served to 're-sanction legitimating norms',<sup>196</sup> the Ovans debacle demonstrated that a governmental *esprit de corps* could effectively safeguard officers from public scandal. Among Thompson's 12 charges was the damning allegation that Ovans had trafficked in forged correspondence implicating the raja's imprisoned minister, Govind Rao, in the *subedhar* affair. Ovans had allegedly come into possession of a letter signed by the minister's mother, who confessed her son's guilt in the hope of saving his life. Upon learning that this document was inauthentic, he paid the forger a small amount of hush money rather than informing his superiors of any subterfuge.<sup>197</sup>

After Thompson related this saga to the CoP in 1842, the Bombay government demanded his prosecution. He continued to encounter opposition from the majority of directors thereafter. James Hogg, a chief adversary of the reformers, inveighed that an 'inquiry into charges so false and malicious' would not only place a stigma on Ovans, but also bring about 'an end to the civil and military services ... if a servant of the East India Company ... were to be so treated'.<sup>198</sup> In the CoP, a Mr Fielder denigrated Thompson for behaving in a thoroughly un-English manner and called upon the chair to 'stop this abuse—this

<sup>193</sup> J. Briggs to G. Thompson, 2 August 1842, JRL, REAS 4/3, f. 1.

<sup>194</sup> Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism*, p. 288.

<sup>195</sup> Thompson defamed Ovans as 'a man with all the vices, but without one of the atoning or extenuating characteristics of Warren Hastings'. See *Impeachment of the Conduct of the Court of Directors, in the Case of the Raja of Sattara*, Effingham Wilson, London, 1846, p. 40.

<sup>196</sup> Epstein, *Scandal of Colonial Rule*, p. 42.

<sup>197</sup> The mother denied that she had signed the letter altogether. The forger soon demanded more compensation and petitioned the Bombay government seven times before ultimately applying to a judge at Poona. See J. Hume, Speech to House of Commons, 22 July 1845, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 3rd series, vol. 82, 1845, col. 905.

<sup>198</sup> *Debates at the India House: August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1845*, p. 114.

venom, venom, venom'.<sup>199</sup> Hobhouse rebuked the Company itself for having 'suffered one of their own honest servants to be calumniated and reviled by one of the most unscrupulous scoundrels who ever lived'.<sup>200</sup> Nevertheless, Thompson's Burkean invective damaged his target's reputation and raised suspicions that Ovans's high-ranking brother-in-law, Company secretary James Cosmo Melvill, had safeguarded his relation from further fallout. One published poem even charged Melvill with reimbursing 'his countless kindred from the public purse ... wrung with hot haste, by peculating knaves / From [India's] oppress'd and *too* submissive slaves'.<sup>201</sup>

While Thompson's excoriation of Ovans met with a backlash, his defence of the raja's natural and constitutional rights garnered wider support. Pratap Singh had been 'hurled to the dust; stripped of his state, and even personal possessions' amounting to 300,000 pounds in land and private property accumulated for the support of his retinue.<sup>202</sup> The case was hardly isolated, for it could very well set the stage for a more grasping style of colonial diplomacy unconcerned with maintaining the social standing of native sovereigns.<sup>203</sup> Authorities like former Bombay governor John Malcolm had previously noted the danger of rendering princes 'the mock and degraded instruments of our power' while allotting them an ambiguous amount of residual sovereignty.<sup>204</sup> Yet political agents at the native courts continued to assume 'that these princes [were] mere tools or puppets' in their hands. Hobhouse, too, looked upon 'a throne in India [as] a mere bauble' that could 'be taken away from these unfortunate princes just as though they were children or infants'.<sup>205</sup>

If the raja was, in fact, a dependent ruler, he boasted the 'undoubted privilege of all Englishmen' to contest the charges levied against him.<sup>206</sup>

<sup>199</sup> Thompson, *The Raja of Sattara*, p. 24.

<sup>200</sup> J. Hobhouse to H. Hardinge, 25 October 1847, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/22, f. 120.

<sup>201</sup> 'A Prognostic', *British Friend of India*, vol. 8, no. 47, 1845, p. 177, emphasis in original.

<sup>202</sup> 'Mr. Thompson and the Rajah of Sattara', *Indian Examiner and Universal Review* vol. 2, no. 1, 1847, p. 20; Anonymous, *India Wrongs without a Remedy*, Saunders & Sanford, London, 1853, p. 16.

<sup>203</sup> *Proceedings at a Special General Court of Proprietors of East India Stock*, p. 51.

<sup>204</sup> J. W. Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir John Malcolm*, G. C. B., vol. 2, Smith, Elder, and Co., London, 1856, p. 373.

<sup>205</sup> W. Ewart, Speech to House of Commons, 6 July 1847, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 3rd series, vol. 93, 1847, col. 1334.

<sup>206</sup> 'Mr. Thompson and the Rajah of Sattara', p. 21.

Few parties disputed the fact that his extralegal trial was grossly mishandled. Director John Forbes had condemned the proceedings in 1840 as a farce, noting that ‘no Grand Jury in England would have sent a case to trial’ based on such scanty evidence.<sup>207</sup> Former Madras official John Sullivan concurred that a charge alone ‘does not criminate’, for there was not a British ‘peasant who tills the ground, who [could] be deprived of his land except by a regular sentence of a judicial tribunal’.<sup>208</sup> Dragging Pratap Singh before the secret commission, moreover, was a ‘wanton insult’ that only served to ‘degrade him in the eyes of his own subjects’.<sup>209</sup> Writing directly to the governor general in 1844, Pratap Singh had asked for the most basic rights ‘which the Law, the Constitution, and the Religion of England, grants to the traitor and the assassin’.<sup>210</sup> Reformers concurred that the raja’s right to be heard was confirmed ‘by the laws of nature, of society, and of God’; the Company could ‘no more destroy that right than they [could] disturb the pillars of the universe’.<sup>211</sup> By 1847, Thompson had recast the Satara case as a moral parable in which ‘the right of universal humanity’ had come under fire. Not even the North American Indians, who were well ‘accustomed to the use of the tomahawk and scalping knife’, deprived a prisoner of an oral defence.<sup>212</sup> Recalcitrant officials attempted to discount such rights-talk by arguing that the commission’s investigation was a *political* act and not a trial at all, legally speaking. By extension, the ‘technicalities of the British constitution’ could not be applied to the case, as the raja’s overthrow ‘concerned the interpretation of a treaty and not of a law’.<sup>213</sup> This manoeuvre irked reformers, for it threatened to set a precedent whereby wronged princes would be deprived of a parliamentary appeal.<sup>214</sup>

In laying the Satara case before the CoP, the CoD, and the House of Commons, India reformers were searching for an impartial forum that could hear the grievances of the Company’s exploited victims. Although

<sup>207</sup> Singh, *A Letter to the Right Hon. Sir Henry Hardinge*, p. 32.

<sup>208</sup> *Debates at the India House: August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1845*, p. 78.

<sup>209</sup> Sullivan, *Speech of Mr. John Sullivan, in the Court of Proprietors*, p. 11. As a polemicist for the India Reform Society in the 1850s, Sullivan would continue to advocate for the perpetuation of princely states.

<sup>210</sup> Singh, *A Letter to the Right Hon. Sir Henry Hardinge*, p. 3.

<sup>211</sup> *Debates at the India House: August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1845*, p. 151.

<sup>212</sup> Thompson, *The Plot Unravelling*, p. 9.

<sup>213</sup> ‘Debate at the India House’, 8 February 1843, BL, Mss Eur E932/282, f. 625.

<sup>214</sup> Ewart, Speech to House of Commons, 6 July 1847, col. 1335.

Thompson's condemnation of the deposition as an illegal act contrary to statute law failed to move the directors,<sup>215</sup> the plight of the native rulers began to acquire a higher profile within a number of reformist organizations. Dr Burns of Paisley, a member of the GES, interpreted the destruction of the colonial army in Afghanistan as a divine protest against the Company's 'cupidity and cruelty' in India.<sup>216</sup> According to the Hibernian British India Society, the native population had perceived the 'grievous injustice' of the Satara case as evidence that their country was under occupation by a 'government of force'.<sup>217</sup> Thompson himself went so far as to suggest that the despoliation of Satara had provoked the recent aggressions in the Punjab; a people who had often 'had to choose between slavery and death', the Sikhs believed themselves to be the next target of the Company's wrath.<sup>218</sup> Speaking before an audience of several hundred in 1846, MP John Bowring hoped that a sympathetic spirit of resistance might soon be conjured in the metropole.<sup>219</sup> If English public opinion could be brought to bear on the recent Polish uprisings, why should it not condemn the Company's despotic overthrow of Pratap Singh?

The reformers' ongoing efforts to make Indian policy a public issue only incensed the BoC, thereby perpetuating the raja's captivity. Distraught by the re-emergence of the 'absurd Sattarah question' in the summer of 1847, Hobhouse mused that he could 'put an end to it in five minutes by striking off the final o of the ex-Raja's retired allowance'.<sup>220</sup> Pratap Singh died in exile that autumn, followed by his brother the following spring. In the

<sup>215</sup> Thompson argued that Governor James Carnac had gone rogue and confiscated the raja's sovereignty without prior authorization from the governor general or the Secret Committee, thereby violating the 33rd of George III, Chapter 52, Section 43. See Minutes of the General Court of Proprietors, 18 Mar. 1846, BL, IOR/B/271, f. 169.

<sup>216</sup> *Ninth Annual Report of the Glasgow Emancipation Society*, p. 28.

<sup>217</sup> *Appendix to the Reports of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Public Petitions*, 1845, p. 410. James Haughton and Richard Allen, the chairman and secretary of the HBIS, were also the co-founders of the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society. See also M. Bric, 'Debating Empire and Slavery: Ireland and British India, 1820–1845', *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2016, p. 572.

<sup>218</sup> G. Thompson, *Case of His Highness Pertaub Shean, the Raja of Sattara*, Alex Munro, London, 1846, p. 47.

<sup>219</sup> 'The Rajah of Sattara', *Morning Chronicle*, 27 November 1846. Bowring co-founded the PIL the following year. News of the Satara agitation reached the Continent, appearing in French papers like the Paris-based *National*. See 'The French Press and the Raja of Sattara', *British Friend of India*, vol. 8, no. 44, 1845, p. 152.

<sup>220</sup> J. Hobhouse to H. Hardinge, 24 July 1847, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/22, f. 24.



absence of a blood heir, Appa Sahib's widows continued to engage Bapojee's services to oppose the looming annexation of their state. This development led Hobhouse to privately defame Bapojee as a 'good-for-nothing personage' who continually 'threatens us with parliamentary squabbling ... and holds up Lord Dalhousie and the Court to the vengeance of the public'.<sup>221</sup> By 1849, he was pressuring the governor of Bombay to restrict the widows' stipend so that they could not 'keep alive a party in India' or 'pay for agitation in England'.<sup>222</sup> With his purse strings cut, Bapojee announced that his employer 'had been starved into a written renunciation of all [her] infant's rights' to the throne.<sup>223</sup> He nonetheless continued his crusade until 1853, when accumulated debt forced him to accept 2,500 pounds from the Company in exchange for abandoning 'all supposed claims against the Government of India'.<sup>224</sup>

The widows' anxieties were well founded, for expansionists in the late 1840s doubled down on their characterization of Pratap Singh as a 'mere instrument, set up to answer certain political ends'.<sup>225</sup> As the raja's advocates tirelessly denounced the violation of his constitutional and natural rights, the character of the 1819 treaty also became a matter of debate. Critics in the colonial press condemned the treaty early on as an iniquitous document that would never have been presented to a potential European ally.<sup>226</sup> Yet they maintained that Pratap Singh, while baited, had never violated its articles. Although the raja had been reduced to a 'mere slave without the power of proposing or acting in anything' without his resident's leave, 'the laws of nations and of nature' justified his legal claim to the *jagirs* as an aggrieved party. Edward Thornton, a Company undersecretary commissioned by the CoD to pen a voluminous history of British India, offered an inverted reading of the 1819 treaty: Pratap Singh had in fact 'exchanged the condition of a titled slave' under the Peshwa's thrall for 'the exercise

<sup>221</sup> J. Hobhouse to J. L. Cary, Viscount Falkland, 24 December 1849, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/27, f. 236.

<sup>222</sup> J. Hobhouse to J. L. Cary, 7 June 1849, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/27, f. 176.

<sup>223</sup> Bapojee, *Rajah of Sattara*, p. 10.

<sup>224</sup> M. Fisher, 'Indian Political Representations in Britain during the Transition to Colonialism', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2004, p. 672.

<sup>225</sup> 'Paper by Ross Donnelly Mangles', in *Papers Relating to the Disposal of the Sattara State*, London, 1849, p. 182.

<sup>226</sup> 'The Case of the Rajah of Sattarah', *East India Magazine*, November 1841, p. 347.

of actual sovereignty' after his liberation.<sup>227</sup> Following the raja's alleged indiscretions, Governor Carnac had avoided a formal trial lest it place him in 'the situation of a subject' when 'he had always been treated as a sovereign'. While Thornton at least recognized the anomalous nature of British paramountcy over princely states like Satara, Company director Ross Mangles saw the issue in starker terms. The 1819 treaty, quite simply, had deprived the raja of 'the freedom of action enjoyed by the humblest individual in a private sphere of life'.<sup>228</sup> By accepting British protection, the raja had knowingly condemned himself to virtual enslavement and forfeited all opportunity of redress. Twenty-five years after the annexation, Bapojee's former patron, the Ranee Suguna Bai Saheb, resurrected the case in an exhaustive formal appeal to Queen Victoria. Among her many points of contention was a refutation of Mangles' treaty interpretation couched in the language of unequal alliances and semi-sovereignty. Her conclusion was clear: a stronger contracting power like the 'late East India Company' could not have legally condemned the 'Rajas of Sattara to be [its] slaves' in perpetuity.<sup>229</sup>

As the annexation of Satara garnered public attention, the BoC took additional measures to guard against external interference in the Company's affairs. Hobhouse urged the Indian government to plug the leak of sensitive information from within its own ranks and stymie all communication with the Anglo-Indian press.<sup>230</sup> After one official allegedly published documents held by the Secret Committee, Hobhouse demanded Dalhousie make an example of him, lest reformers like Thompson get their hands on such material.<sup>231</sup> He further chastised Bartle Frere, the last resident at Satara, for drafting a minute that weighed the adopted heirs' vying claims to the throne, as

<sup>227</sup> E. Thornton, *The History of the British Empire in India*, vol. 6, W. H. Allen, London, 1845, pp. 85–86. For a refutation of Thornton's analysis, see 'The Court of Directors and Their Hired Apologists', *British Friend of India*, vol. 8, no. 44, 1845, pp. 137–44.

<sup>228</sup> 'Paper by Ross Donnelly Mangles', p. 181.

<sup>229</sup> S. Saheb, *Memorial to Her Majesty the Queen*, Union Press, Bombay, 1874, p. 314. By means of analogy, the ranee reasoned that the 'humiliating terms imposed by the victorious Romans on the state of Carthage' following the Punic Wars did not abrogate the independence of the conquered party.

<sup>230</sup> Kashmiri intermediary Mohan Lal informed Hobhouse that an agent of the ex-raja had paid a *babu* in the governor general's office Rs 10,000 for copies of the Secret Committee's dispatches. See M. Lal to J. Hobhouse, 15 November 1847, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/22, f. 224.

<sup>231</sup> J. Hobhouse to J. Broun-Ramsay, 25 April 1849, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/27, f. 151.

he had given an Indian newspaper the mistaken impression that the annexation had been called off.<sup>232</sup> Aside from browbeating his underlings, Hobhouse attempted to discredit Thompson as a paid agitator. He even admitted to Dalhousie that he might have permitted an adopted heir to inherit sovereign powers if such a suggestion had originated with the Indian government. It was instead a proposal ‘made by the enemy’; its acceptance would only have ‘encourage[d] further attempts to interfere with the decisions of Government’ and given ‘a decided triumph to the party who have kept us in hot water for so many years’.<sup>233</sup> Regardless of any treaty obligations, the fate of Satara had become a matter of principle.

### Conclusion

Tracing the convergences between abolitionist, free-trade, and India-reform polemic in the post-Emancipation period sheds light on the conceptual germination of a critical liberal imperialism rooted in accountable governance and anti-monopolism. Earlier transregional alliances like the anti-sati campaign of the 1820s had been infused with an Evangelical spirit of cultural improvement. As such, they had called upon the Company to extend its purview over the indigenous social sphere and intercede against the Hindu patriarchy.<sup>234</sup> Thompson’s network, in contrast, assumed a confrontational posture by identifying the Company as both an agent of oppression and a beneficiary of virtual slavery. In so doing, reformers contributed to an alternative imperial constitutionalism that transcended class lines and geographical boundaries. *Ryots* and British workers could be represented as slaves with relative ease, as monopolistic forces had violated their right to self-preservation and alienated their labour. Reformers rarely depicted Pratap Singh as a slave in this economic sense, though they denounced the trial as a ‘blot on English justice’ and challenged

<sup>232</sup> J. Hobhouse to J. Broun-Ramsay, 25 June 1849, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/27, ff. 180–181.

<sup>233</sup> J. Hobhouse to J. Broun-Ramsay, 7 June 1848, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/27, f. 10.

<sup>234</sup> While Roy initially rejected legislative ameliorants for sati and favoured working through the Bengali *samaj*, he publicly defended Bentinck’s abolition of the practice in 1830. See Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy*, p. 74.

mischaracterizations of the raja as an expendable puppet.<sup>235</sup> The Satara case also indicated that virtual enslavement had begun to afflict the Company hierarchy itself. In curbing dissent over the raja's treatment, the governor general claimed 'the right of annihilating the responsibility of his agents to their Divine Superior, and of absolving them from their obligations to observe the law of God'.<sup>236</sup> Commanded to absolute 'obedience to the injunctions of superior authority', officials were reduced to mere ciphers and dehumanized by corporate autocracy.<sup>237</sup>

Aside from resisting the annexation of princely states, reformist voices also began to characterize the near-exclusion of educated Indians from high governmental postings as a form of political enslavement.<sup>238</sup> Former *munshi* Shahamat Ali informed metropolitan readers that every man, in accordance with 'universal law', deserved 'a share in the making of the laws which are enacted to protect his rights and property'.<sup>239</sup> The inability of his countrymen to directly pursue legislation reduced them to a state of 'slavery, or worse'; they were afforded no protections, but forced to rely upon 'the empty consolation of *good intentions* and fine speeches'. At one large political meeting in Calcutta, Hurrochunder Dutt of the Hindu College artfully addressed this issue by setting up a dubious contrast. It was true that Bengal was 'in a better condition than many an American slave colony', as its inhabitants were never 'sold by public auction' nor 'hunted down' like the characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Nevertheless, systemic racial prejudices prevented the Bengali from making use of his political talents in a state of supposed freedom. The 'Anglo-Saxon', somewhat ironically, kept 'up the same distinctions of caste, against which, as an institution of Hinduism, he declaims so violently'.<sup>240</sup>

<sup>235</sup> B. Escott, Speech to House of Commons, 6 July 1847, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 3rd series, vol. 93, 1847, col. 1349.

<sup>236</sup> Thompson, *The Raja of Sattara*, p. 29.

<sup>237</sup> J. Hobhouse to J. L. Cary, 7 May 1849, BL, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/27.

<sup>238</sup> Reformers implicitly extended John Stuart Mill's claim that 'the only security against political slavery' in civilized states was 'the check maintained over governors, by the diffusion of intelligence, activity, and public spirit among the governed'. See J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy with Some of their Applications to Social Philosophy*, vol. 2, 5th ed., Parker, Son, and Bourn, London, 1862, p. 555.

<sup>239</sup> S. Ali, *Notes and Opinions of a Native on the Present State of India and the Feelings of Its People*, George Butler, Ryde, Isle of Wight, 1848, pp. 117–21.

<sup>240</sup> J. S. Buckingham, *The Coming Era of Political Reform*, Partridge, Oakey and Co., London, 1853, p. 233.

Polemicists connected with John Dickinson's India Reform Society (IRS, est. 1853) echoed these critiques with aplomb. In 1855, Malcolm Lewin, an IRS committee member and agent of the Madras Native Association, delivered a scathing oratory before the CoP in which he denounced the manner in which 'Indians have hitherto been treated as vassals and slaves'.<sup>241</sup> Degraded by Europeans, the native population was roundly 'despised by us because they submit'.<sup>242</sup> The CoD had done little to remedy this racial animus; the recent charter act provision that permitted Indians to sit for civil-service exams in England was widely regarded as a 'mere sham, a mockery, and a delusion'. In light of its historical obstructionism, Lewin demanded the Company's 'annihilation' and motioned for the 'perfect transfer' of the colonial administration to the Crown. Facing opposition, he continued to prophesize that the system that levelled educated Indians 'with the slave, and insults them with legal freedom' would soon result in a violent societal combustion.<sup>243</sup> These fears proved to be prescient. Following the Sepoy Uprising, press organs like *The Westminster Review* concluded that the Indians' state of 'political slavery' was historically comparable only to that of the provincial communities who were 'degraded into a sort of tame cattle' under Roman rule.<sup>244</sup>

The rhetoric of virtual enslavement belonged to a weaponized strain of liberal imperialist thought that re-emerged when the colonial government risked lapsing into blatant authoritarianism. Writing in the context of the Great Wahhabi Trial of 1870, Julia Stephens has argued that a liberal outcry against the misuse of executive power continued to constitute a 'potent—if chameleon-like—element of public debate'.<sup>245</sup> Such protests aimed to preserve the rule of law and should not be conflated with the administration's liberal programme of 'fostering social progress among "backward" peoples'.<sup>246</sup> This oppositional 'brand of liberalism',

<sup>241</sup> M. Lewin, *Speech of Malcolm Lewin, Esq., Delivered at the Quarterly Meeting of the Court of Proprietors of the East India Company, Wednesday, December 19, 1855*, Edward Stanford, London, 1856, p. 20. A former judge, Lewin had been removed from the bench in 1846 for acquitting Hindus accused of anti-Christian rioting in Tinnevely.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>243</sup> Lewin was particularly incensed by the Madras Torture Commission's revelation of state-sponsored violence. See M. Lewin, *The Way to Lose India: With Illustrations from Leadenhall Street*, James Ridgway, London, 1857, p. 6.

<sup>244</sup> 'Our Relation to the Princes of India', *Westminster Review*, vol. 69, 1858, p. 251.

<sup>245</sup> J. Stephens, 'The Phantom Wahhabi: Liberalism and the Muslim Fanatic in Mid-Victorian India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2013, p. 47.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

I would suggest, owed much to earlier reformist resistance and counter-preaching, which was necessarily reactive and concerned with the amelioration of specific injustices perpetrated by the state. The slipperiness of liberal imperialism results from the mingling of these two distinct ideologies that respectively challenged arbitrary, extractive forms of governance and demanded the cultural reformation of a colonized society. Ultimately, it was the colonial state's inability to process the reformers' critiques that brought the viability of liberal imperialism itself into question.