

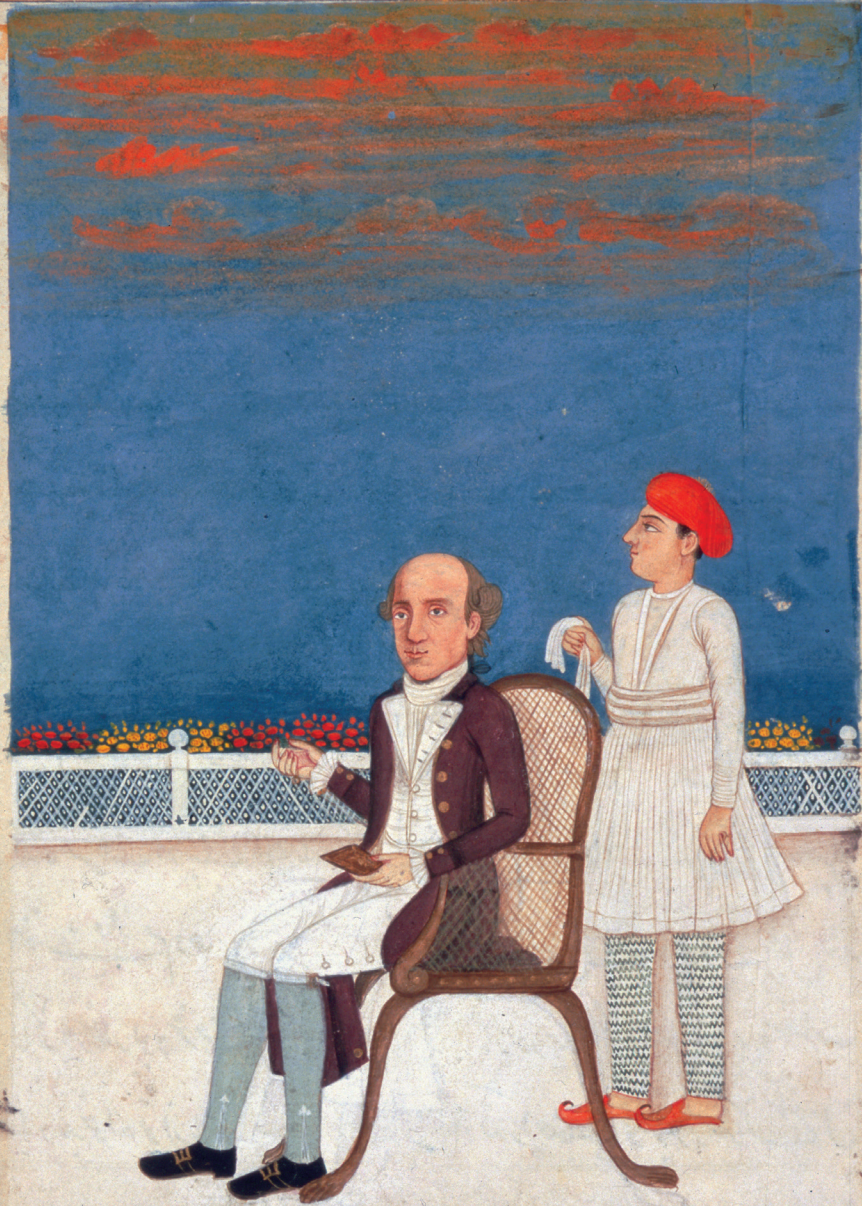
# THE ENLIGHTENED NABOB

The nabobs of the East India Company were considered violent, greedy and – worst of all in a time of Enlightenment – uneducated. Could their reputation as philistines be laundered? *Joshua Ehrlich*



آنچنان حادثه در عهد تو شد مستاصل

سبقتش بجز غیر حق نیست صحیح



که بود ما بموالید ز عقل اول

انقدر فرق ز قدر تو بود ما بقول



Previous: Warren Hastings depicted in a manuscript of the Divan of Minnat, India, c.1782.

Below: *The Teshu Lama Giving Audience*, by Tilly Kettle, c.1775. George Bogle stands in Tibetan costume beside two cross-legged men. Right: William Jones, anonymous artist, 1793.



**A**nabob, *Town and Country Magazine* reminded its readers in 1771, 'is a person who in the East-India Company's service has by art, fraud, cruelty, and imposition obtained the fortune of an Asiatic prince and returned to England to display his folly and vanity and ambition'. Yet if the nabob's bad deeds and bad morals made him reprehensible, then so too did his ignorance and philistinism: he was a 'bad ... scholar' who, for all his pretensions, possessed but 'a common education' and a 'confined' and defective knowledge.

The nabob was a stock character in British pamphlets, plays and parliamentary speeches in the late 18th century. He was modelled on Robert Clive, who, during stints in the 1750s and 1760s, had conquered and governed the

province of Bengal for the East India Company – and made a fortune in the process. The concern of commentators in Britain was not only that men like Clive had profited from violence in India but that upon coming home they had brought back with them, in the Earl of Chatham's words, corrupting 'Asiatic luxury' and 'principles of government'. Historians have shown that the nabob embodied anxieties about the domestic effects of the Company's foreign commerce and, increasingly, conquests. They have been less alert to the implications of the fact that what was an age of imperial expansion was also the age of Enlightenment.

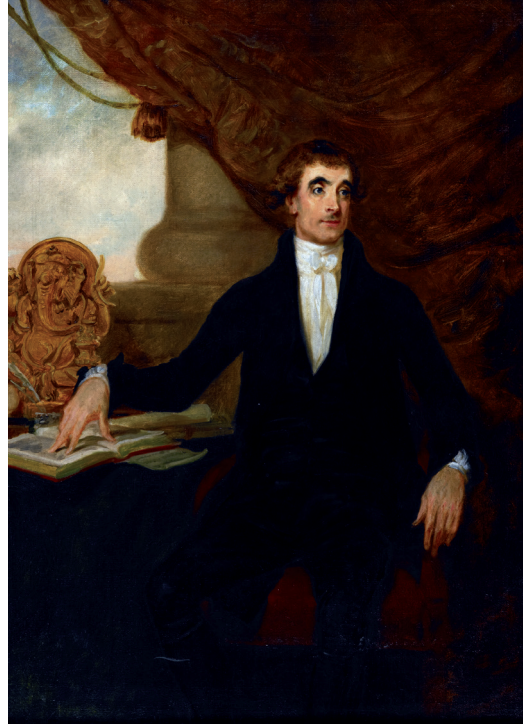
#### **Nabobs of letters**

The Enlightenment fuelled criticism of the Company but also furnished means to redeem it. Could Company officials be represented not

## ‘If the nabob’s bad deeds made him reprehensible, so too did his ignorance’

as base nabobs but as Enlightened men of letters? Around the time that the previously cited satire ‘Memoirs of a Nabob’ appeared in *Town and Country* similar accusations were beginning to be levelled by the Company’s critics in Britain. The free merchant and literary entrepreneur William Bolts, whom the Company had unceremoniously expelled from Bengal, maintained in 1772 that acquisitions of knowledge could not be expected from officials, ‘whose great object, [in] going to India, is the acquisition of wealth’. The antiquarian Thomas Maurice later remarked on the ubiquity of such ‘inflamed invective against ... certain characters [nabobs], equally hostile to literature and freedom’. What drove the critique was a longstanding expectation – now heightened by the Enlightenment thirst for knowledge – that merchants and travellers to foreign lands would return not only with material goods but also with intellectual ones.

Warren Hastings, soon-to-be governor and then governor-general of Bengal, reiterated this expectation when he wrote ‘of the advantages which might be derived to every branch of knowledge, from an acquaintance with ... the most remote nations’. Here, in the late 1760s, he was calling for the creation of a Persian professorship at Oxford. In his new situation, from 1772, he would be able to pursue larger ambitions. As Samuel Johnson urged him, Hastings might ‘enquire into many subjects of which the European world either thinks not at all, or thinks with deficient intelligence and uncertain conjecture’. Hastings duly set about compiling Indian laws, sponsoring surveys, founding colleges and patronising dozens of other scholarly ventures. His aim, he declared, was to reconcile ‘the People of England to the Natives of Hindostan’ – but also to Company officials, whom they saw as similarly depraved. His scholarly patronage comprised a ‘system of conciliation’ designed in no small part to rehabilitate the nabob.



As Hastings instructed George Bogle, whom he sent on an expedition to Bhutan and Tibet in 1774:

*there are thousands of men in England whose good-will is worth seeking, and who will listen to the story of such enterprises in search of knowledge with ten times more avidity than they would read accounts that brought crores [tens of millions] to the national credit, or descriptions of victories that slaughtered thousands of the national enemies.*

Bogle did not fail to meet Hastings’ expectations: he returned with a bulging journal which Hastings ordered précised for the Royal Society. Nor was Bogle the only official who appreciated the governor-general’s reasoning. Another was Richard Johnson, who,



after complaining about the aspersions cast on nabobs such as himself – and after being recalled for corruption – reinvented himself as a connoisseur of Indian literature. And then there was David Anderson, who forwarded to his old Edinburgh schoolmaster an astrolabe and an account of the arts and sciences of Asia. This scholarly turn, replied the schoolmaster, ‘surprises and pleases me not a Little’, since Britons who went to that continent typically did so to satisfy a greed for gold. He anticipated that Anderson’s ‘greater Thirst after knowledge and Wisdom than after the Golden Calf so generally worshiped’ would spare him from ‘the Reproachfull Epithet of Nabob’.

### Captains of iniquity

Yet that epithet was not easily shed. Certainly some literati appreciated Hastings’ efforts: the historian Robert Orme wrote of the ‘honour’ they did him, considering ‘to what other views and objects the abilities of Europeans have hitherto been directed in Indostan’. Other commentators, however, branded Hastings as a nabob all the same. The judge Robert Chambers wrote letters asserting that his government despised learning and that its only ‘object is to enrich the company’s servants’. In *A Letter from Warren Hastings, Esq., Dated 21st of February, 1784, with Remarks and Authentic Documents*, Philip Francis ridiculed Hastings’ claims to be a ‘promoter of learning and patron of men of letters’ considering his warmongering. Such was the state of affairs that Hastings found it necessary, in the preface to a translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, to refute rumours that he had coerced pandits (Hindu learned men) into disclosing their knowledge. The image of the Enlightened official that Hastings had meticulously constructed would come under sustained attack following his return to England in 1785.

In the impeachment trial against him in Parliament, which lasted for much of the next

Below: Queen Charlotte and George III in satirical prints, 1786. Charlotte is portrayed with a box of diamonds marked ‘Bulse’, referring to the bulse of diamonds presented to George by Warren Hastings and seen by many as an attempt to

bribe the monarch ahead of his trial. George, cast as Chait Singh, is also adorned with jewels gifted to him by Hastings. Right: Richard Johnson depicted in a manuscript of the *Divan of Minnat*, c.1782.





دار ذرخون صید صفا ناخن بلند  
در دافر حمایت صاحب زینم خجک

آزار ماست باعث آرایش سپهر  
اینک که باستم شرح بعد ازین



ممتاز دوله منفخر ملک و صیام خجک

آن افتخار دوده انگلیس جانسن



## ‘The Company had been personified as a nabob; it was now an Enlightened scholar’

decade – and which saw Edmund Burke portray him as ‘the captain-general of iniquity’ – Hastings upheld this image determinedly, not to say desperately. As he wrote to the agents he tasked with collecting testimonials in his favour from Indians across the Company’s territories, among the several questions he hoped they would address was: ‘Whether I have shown a disregard to science; or whether I have ... given effectual encouragement to it’. The testimonials did not disappoint. Many alluded to his scholarly patronage. According to one from the district of Nadia, for instance, ‘the whole body of the learned’ sang in his praise. To his main accuser, Burke, however, Hastings was a ‘swindling M[ae]c[en]as’: an arch-nabob who used scholarship to hide his crimes and indulge his vanity.

Burke’s accusations drew additional force from the record of Hastings’ acting replacement. John Macpherson was a son of the Scottish Enlightenment – but also a rogue. When he was not expounding his vision of a global exchange of knowledge, Macpherson was intriguing against rivals and, reportedly, lining his pockets. One hint that he was using knowledge for corruption, very much as Burke charged Hastings with doing, came during planning for the new Calcutta Botanic Garden in 1786: Macpherson offered the management of the institution to an unqualified crony, who replied that he might accept – ‘if the thing were made worth my while’.

### The anti-nabob

The dual scandal of Macpherson in Calcutta and Hastings in London explains the cautious stance adopted by the new governor-general, Lord Cornwallis. Cornwallis agreed that the nabob might be redeemed through commitment to the cause of knowledge, yet saw that to persuade, in the current atmosphere, this commitment must appear pure. He kept scholars at arm’s length and held

them to new moral standards. Whether Indian or European, they must now combine learning with probity. Some of Hastings’ clients, such as the maulvi Majd ud-Din, the botanist Robert Kyd and the Persianist Francis Gladwin, fell from favour. Others, most notably the polymath William Jones, adjusted to the new dispensation.

Jones was the anti-nabob: an official in India whose fame as a scholar placed him above reproach. The learned society he founded, moreover, would help others to launder their reputations. The Asiatic Society of Bengal hosted papers from members and discourses from its president, Jones; its journal was reprinted in Britain. It did all of this with the sanction of – and at a proper remove from – Cornwallis’ government. In correspondence, Jones wrote that the aim of the society was to teach his countrymen in India to care about more than wealth. A further aim was to show to observers at home that they did so.

The efforts of Hastings, Cornwallis and Jones – along with a patriotic embrace of empire among Britons in response to the French Revolution – finally led in the 1790s to the end of the nabob controversy. Burke, it is true, saw nabobism and Jacobinism as twin threats; for him, moreover, the revolution showed the danger of men of letters conspiring with men of commerce. But he was almost a lone voice. *The Monthly Review* for August 1790 captured the prevailing opinion:

*It must be a source of extreme pleasure to observe, that the extensive provinces of Asia are now visited and explored for other purposes than the acquisition of wealth; and that our countrymen are ... importing the literature of the East ... [Hastings’] government, at least, merits the commendation of having been propitious to letters. Under his auspices, learning was encouraged, and the servants of a trading company were inspired with a*

*The Bengal Levee, by James Gillray, 1792. Lord Cornwallis holds a levee at Government House, Calcutta.*



*desire of traversing the rich and fragrant fields of Oriental science.*

Although Hastings' trial dragged on, his acquittal was now all but assured. When it came, in 1795, it prompted a wave of panegyric. Hastings was lauded in Britain as 'the distinguished patron of ... literature'; 'the enlightened politician, the comprehensive genius, and polite scholar'. One pamphleteer saw him as the inspiration for Lord Macartney's embassy to China, which, like those he had sent to Bhutan and Tibet, combined 'attention to ... commerce' with 'service to ... science'. Meanwhile, other Company leaders were emulating Hastings' scholarly patronage – and receiving similar praise for it. If the Company had long been personified as a nabob, it was now being personified as an Enlightened scholar.

### **No more nabobs**

This was not to last. In a few years the Company would be challenged by its own governor-general, Lord Wellesley, who enlisted scholars in his cause. As his protégés framed grand projects to assimilate Indian knowledge – a complement to his assimilation of Indian territory – the Company's anti-expansionist and commerce-minded directors in London cut ties. The Enlightened official thus went the way of the nabob. By 1819, the German orientalist Augustus Schlegel could write that 'literary or scientific zeal appears to be unknown to the English in India, and the spirit once called into animation by Sir William Jones seems to have now become extinct'.

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Joshua Ehrlich is the author of *The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).