

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

**Prof. Pramod K Nayar**

**Department of English**

**University of Hyderabad**

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**Lecture- 02**

### **Imperial Vulnerability - II**

We continue our exploration of imperial vulnerability in this lesson. You might recall that when we discussed imperial vulnerability in the previous lesson, we were talking about vulnerable bodies and we had examples from the mutiny narratives. We looked at accounts where the English, in the grip of war or horrific situations like siege, still managed to try and present themselves, represent themselves as heroic, stoic and despite all the adverse conditions, there was a very clear attempt to talk about true British grit, true British character and strength and thereby, present themselves as deserving of the “colonial conqueror” label. So, imperial vulnerability was experienced by the colonizers as direct and sometimes indirect threats and insecurities. Direct threats were those when they were under siege which would be the examples that you have seen of say, Holwell, the black hole narrative, Julia Inglis, which was an excerpt from her diary of the Lucknow siege and others.

Or they were under threats, faced vulnerabilities of a different kind when assailed by the diseases and adverse climatic conditions of the subcontinent. This included malaria, cholera, extreme heat and conditions like that. So imperial vulnerability, especially in narratives of the period that we are interested, in which is to say somewhere from the 1750s to the present, actually inverted the image of the confident colonial. Which means it also inverted the image and the rhetoric of colonial triumph. That is to say, the image of the all powerful, the all conquering Englishman, and in some cases, the Englishwoman. This image was subject to stresses and strains and in some cases, inversion, because for a change the Englishman or the Englishwoman was being presented as vulnerable, diffident, under threats and worried or anxious and in some extreme cases even afraid.

But the point is that even under such conditions of siege of being afraid or anxious or weak, the narratives of British India, the colonial discourse set in British India, managed to transform conditions of vulnerability into a means of reinforcing conditions of colonial power, into a means of showing why and how they were conquerors and this they do by other means as well. One of the methods by which they do so is to show how this Englishman, and like I said, in some cases, the English woman was actually a savior and if you look at the screen now there is a small passage from James Inglis which describes

the beaters coming out of the jungles. The beaters were this large group of servants employed to encircle a specific area of the forest and beat the drums so that the animals like the tigers would be scared and try to run away from their music, away from the drums and the noise and when they ran away from the noise, they would run towards the hunters who were waiting on this side. So, there is a circle of beaters, they beat these drums and the animals would rush out.

When they rush out, the hunters would be waiting for them and the hunters could then easily shoot and kill them. Now if you look at this description, the account is of frightened inhabitants and Inglis describes them as inhabitants of “some hive or ant heap”, a swarm and when they came hurrying out they fell down, they got entangled and he, because he's the stoic, brave, valorous Englishman could not help bursting into a resounding peal of laughter.

The other excerpt is from a later book by James Inglis where he speaks about worried and frightened women, their hearts thudding with trepidation, cast uneasy startled glances into every bush and they started at every rustle in the tall feathery swaying grass because the women believed there was a wild creature there. Isabel Savory, writing in 1900 mentions that by the 1860s, the country was literally swarming with them, tigers, and although many had been shot and killed there were still many more. Kate Martelli, cited in Joanna Trollope's book of 1983, writes that “tigers are shot in India, not as game is in England for hunting, to give amusement to men horses and dogs but to save the lives of natives and their cattle”.

What are these passages doing? First, they present, they represent, they characterize the natives as scared people, they are afraid of everything. So, you can see the description of James Inglis which shows “affrighted” women, “hearts thudding” with anxiety and in the first example they all rush out from the forest in such a way that they tumble and fall. The entire countryside, its people, its residents live with mortal fear of being killed by tigers. This provides the one side of the binary, one side of the dichotomy of the frightened native and the other binary opposition for this, the other pair to the dichotomy is the saviour Englishman or woman. So, here, imperial vulnerability, that is, the vulnerability of the English man or woman has been inverted and here too there is a certain triumph, there is a certain success because imperial vulnerability has been transformed into the colonizing mission, the rescue mission, where the Englishman or the Englishwoman, is cast as a saviour.

And then if you look at this example except from James Inglis how when do you face a surly boar or a wild animal, you feel you have discovered a savage animal life that one does not soon forget. So, what is this kind of passage, this kind of description doing? The answer is fairly simple, isn't it? You set up a dichotomy, a binary between the helpless

native and the powerful English man or woman. You set up a binary between the frightened, vulnerable, weak, English, I'm sorry native, and along comes the Englishman with his gun, powerful, all conquering and most importantly unafraid. So, what you've got here is a landscape in which the English were vulnerable for various reasons as we have looked at there have been English imprisoned, there have been English killed in the wars, injured, there are English who have been attacked by local diseases such as cholera and died but, they still want to convert the situation into a situation of colonial triumph into the triumph of the white man. So, what do they do? They present the natives as helpless.

Once they present the natives as helpless, then it becomes the task, it becomes the duty, the moral duty of the English man to step in and what does he do? He kills the tiger; he frees the natives from the worries of living in a situation constantly afraid of a wild animal and a wild animal's attack. That's not all. Besides these wild creatures, the landscape is also presented as having bandits, marauders and thieves, killers. So, the battle against thugs and the *Pindaris* from the 1810-1820 onwards by W.H. Sleeman, Philip Meadows Taylor and others stems from one other mode of making sure that the landscape is controlled. So, one way of controlling the landscape was to make sure that the wild animals have been killed or put away so that the landscape is safe. The second mode is to make sure that any form of depredation, any form of predatory behavior, any kind of person, or groups of persons, who are dangerous to the peaceful life of the natives must also be controlled. So the campaign against *thugees*, so the campaign against the *Pindaris* and if you look at the works of W.H. Sleeman and others, there is the rhetoric of rescue, the rhetoric of being messiahs, saviors in a landscape where the people are very afraid.

So, the natives are afraid of the animals that are making it difficult for them to go about. The natives are also afraid to travel because on their travels en route to their destinations there are the thugs, there are the bandits, there are the *Pindaris*. Those make life difficult. So, the *Pindaris* and the bandits, the thugs and the tigers all of these become challenges to the Englishman. Why challenges? Because supposedly the Englishman is in control, right? The Englishman is the colonial master, he is the ruler and I use the gendered form of imperialism advisedly, mostly men as rulers, men as hunters and their control, their management of the native land is under threat, because here there are tigers, wild boars attacking humans and killing them, the natives and killing them. So, where do the native subjects go for protection? Who do they turn to? They have to turn to the Englishman and the Englishman then steps up, like I said, and steps in and says do not worry I shall make sure the landscape is safe. Likewise, with the thugs and the thugs too must be exterminated, must be eliminated so that the control over the land comes back to the colonial white man.

So if you look at the range of activities that they did, the Thuggee campaign was a famous one, it lasted 20-30 years and by 1839 W.H. Sleeman was able to declare that the entire Deccan plateau was free of thugs and that the landscape is safe. The landscape is safe, yes, but it also meant that the landscape was completely under the control of the Englishman, of the English rule. This third kind of control that they sought and tried to acquire and that has to do with supposed natural disasters and climatic conditions like cyclones. The English responded to such natural conditions, natural calamities through their use of science and technology and their networks of knowledge gathering and knowledge production. So, they studied the cyclones.

Henry Piddington was the man who supposedly coined the term “cyclones” by studying the phenomena in the Bay of Bengal, the phenomena of the cyclone were studied across several years and he published these documents, reports and memoirs of the weather conditions. The cyclones were disruptive of the travel arrangements, there were also climatic anomalies, earthquakes, likewise, and the English establishment, the English crown, the English government responded by saying we need to understand these phenomena. So, what do they do? They make sure that the phenomenon, whether it's the cyclone or the earthquake or tropical weather conditions are documented, monitored, recorded which also means the acquisition of scientific knowledge compiled into textual form through detailed tables and weather reports and what have you, so that the English show that the subcontinent might be a very strange natural setting. The subcontinent may be an anomalous zone of weather conditions but English or European science triumphs. So, the landscape is vulnerable because of cyclonic storms and things like that but European science will acquire knowledge about them.

It will acquire knowledge and eventually find a solution to the question of an answer to the question as to what is the safest season for ships to travel to India, which is the season where cyclones may be expected? What are the earthquake prone zones of the subcontinent? You address these, first by studying them, you documented them and the use of a large quantum of both instrumentation such as the barometer to networks, weather stations built across the landscape, they gather the data and put together, as several commentators have shown, the data about the region itself and the phenomena. So, through hunting, scientific knowledge production and explanations the English sought to alleviate their problem of not knowing the landscape or not being in control of the landscape and pictures such as these, the photograph that you are seeing of a very large tiger surrounded by Englishmen, some of them holding guns but all looking as though they've just done something big, the triumphal picture isn't it? Yes, it is because photographs such as these were circulated and archived and become an instance of the English power over the native landscape. So, on the one hand there was the rhetoric of rescue, the rhetoric of saviors, that is, we saved the natives but there was also this kind of

image which spoke about the power of the Englishman over the native landscape. It highlighted the virility, the masculine power of the Englishman.

So, there was the conquest of the *thugs*, there was the conquest over the land such as the ones you just heard about and just saw over the land, by which I mean, the landscapes, wild fauna and then there was the struggle and dominance over weather conditions such as cyclones, earthquakes and others. Now look at these short excerpts on the *thugs*. One is from Philip Meadows Taylor, 1873. Two are slightly earlier ones J.A.R. Stevenson's essay excerpted here from 1834 and W.H. Sleeman whose nickname, as some of you might be aware of, was *Thuggee* Sleeman and look at those excerpts. They are deeds of blood, they are evil, they are malignant, they are spread all over the country. What kind of discourse is this? The discourse is very clear, isn't it? It's a discourse of native evil, it's a discourse of native wickedness and these must be addressed.

So what does it do? The Thuggee campaign of the 19th century was, like I said before, and it's worth reiterating, was ostensibly undertaken to relieve the country and its people of the evil thugs and the English writings of the *Thuggee* period, the *Thuggee* anti-*Thuggee* campaign period represent Thuggee as an ancient practice that has remained. It has secret origins and a secret language, it's irrational and superstitious and stupid but it's rooted in native religious practices and beliefs and it's symbolic of the native criminal mind of their native bloodlust. What is it you're doing here? One, you suggest that India's evil nature is from a very long time ago, it's ancient. Second, it's rooted in its religious beliefs. So, this campaign against *Thuggee* also becomes by inference, by symbolic gesture and representation, a campaign against the evils of native religious beliefs and of native cultural practices.

So you say," well the thugs are evil because they are of this religion in the native landscape". "that they are believers in..." and we know that the thugs were worshippers of the goddess Kali. So, the English interpretation was well if you have such native belief systems, if you believe in such gods and you follow such religious practices, naturally you will be prone to evil. So, the battle against *Thuggee* also became quoted as the battle against native ways of thinking. It was deemed to be irrational and superstitious and of course that the natives are inherently barbaric and violent and you might recall here as a point of comparison, Holwell depicting the cruel jailers in the black hole narrative where the British are suffering and the jailers standing outside watching them suffer are laughing and this goes to show in the Holwell narrative that the natives are cruel, they are barbaric and they are indifferent to the suffering of the people inside. So the campaign against Thuggee was a mode of elevating the threats to colonial rule, so that groups of people who were an aberration, who were not under the purview and under the command and control of the Englishman would be put behind bars, would be executed.

The campaign against *Thuggee* was meant to reduce the sense of insecurity and vulnerability of the British in India, even while it was projected as a method of safeguarding, of protecting the natives, what I call the rhetoric of rescue. In the process, it also enabled, as we have just seen, to depict the native conditions of cultural belief, the native conditions of thinking, the native forms of thinking including religion and others as superstitious, inherently evil and something that needs to be destroyed as thoroughly as possible. So, these are primitive, they must be put out. Now, you have already heard me talk about the cyclones and extreme conditions of weather.

Here are some examples. This is from John Clark's narrative of 1773 which speaks about the weather conditions that cause Europeans to be subject to fluxes and distempers and a whole bunch of narratives, advice books, medical tracts were published between 1760 and through the 19<sup>th</sup>, from the mid-18th century all the way to the 19th and early 20th and the invention of tropical medicine was to help English men and women to avoid tropical illnesses such as malaria and cholera. So, you had to do something about it, you offered advice. Now medicine was a field where the British civilizing mission originated as a mode of treating the English of local native diseases of finding the cause. So, the research into malaria as you know Ronald Ross is a well-known figure here was because they were puzzled by this disease. India itself becomes a natural laboratory, in which several of these diseases could be studied in their native provenance, in their native points of origin but it was not meant originally to save the natives. It was designed, that is tropical medicine as a field, was designed to save the white man and the white woman from what was going on in terms of diseases. So, medicine was a field where the English or British civilizing mission had its most emphatic, most glorified presence and it remained an exercise in imperial power. India is no longer here just a place of beauty.

Now, moving on to our final examples of the cyclones and the study of meteorology you can see here a passage from *Report of the Vizagapatam and Backergunj Cyclones* from 1876 and here you see a description of something where there is a lot of activity and all that activity is being documented, studied and if you look carefully at the description here there are three readings conducted daily at 10 and 16 and 22 hours the station various weather stations, four readings of the barometer are made, they are all collated and it is corrected to the Calcutta standard and then it is believed to etc etc. This is meteorology, this is tropical meteorology but the point is that the cyclones and bad weather conditions disrupted the movement of the trade ships of the company that is the shipping trade and other transport forms of shipping were rendered vulnerable to the weather conditions.

The subcontinent itself was a natural laboratory, like I just said, and colonial science was a method to alleviate the vulnerability of their trade ships their routes so that the safety of the people on these ships could be ensured but it also meant like I said through all the

recording all the data in as a means of asserting, once again, a form of control over the local landscape so that you had your *thugs* being controlled, you had your wild animals being controlled and now you have the local weather conditions also being controlled. So, in all these cases what we are looking at is there is imperial vulnerability, there is no disputing that, but this imperial vulnerability has been converted into an opportunity to become saviors by killing off the animals, wild animals and ensuring that the thugs have been arrested and executed or incarcerated and finally, through offering scientific rational and objective explanations to the phenomena of the cyclone or the earthquake. So, here again, in the last case that is the colonial medicine and colonial meteorology, English or British or European science triumphs even in conditions of extreme weather conditions the Englishman has his data, has his instruments such as the barometer to measure the weather conditions. European science triumphs and what if you recall what we said about the dichotomy of the vulnerable native the helpless frightened native versus the powerful valorous courageous Englishman, here you have another dichotomy– the natives who do not understand the cyclone who believe it is of divine origin versus the scientific Englishman who is able to give a scientific rational explanation for an anomalous or extreme weather condition. So, here again, European science is dominant European rationality is dominant so the space of vulnerability which is the subcontinent and all its weather conditions, cyclones and earthquakes, also becomes a site where Europe triumphs Britain triumphs and the British men and women who worked as scientists triumph.

Vulnerability, therefore, is not the destruction of European or British virility, masculinity or character. Imperial vulnerability becomes a site where all conditions of vulnerability, have transformed into spaces of opportunity where imperial triumph racial triumph can be once again asserted. Thank you.