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Cartooning the Colony, Empowering the Empire: A Study of *Punch* Cartoons

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Abstract: This paper addresses the larger politics of the machination of the British Empire in order to preserve its overseas colonies like India, the precious jewel in the crown. It examines a significant aesthetic apparatus of colonial domination, in the form of political cartoons, on the colony published in the British weekly magazine, *Punch* or *The London Charivari* (1841-1992 and 1992-1996). While both literature and politics are "serious" affairs, the cartoons, for one thing, treated them as "casual" or "non-serious" perhaps only to charge them with an alternative seriousness. This politics of deception is central to the functioning of the cartoon. Cartoons triggered humor not merely for their aesthetic purpose but with the larger aim of disseminating and validating the operations of empire in the colony. While this paper does not aim at reaching the simplified conclusion that these visual cartoons actually symbolize the political gaze of the British Empire at the colony producing a self-other/master-slave binary, these visuals surely exploited the porous boundaries between literal and the figural, between meaning and non-meaning. These cartoons, by means of distortion and exaggeration, produce a colonial subject which needs to be tutored by the benign hands of the British. Interestingly, the cartoon was the easiest medium for reaching out to the larger mass within the empire and the colony, thereby solidifying the ground for control and containment. This paper would argue that this textualization of colonial subjects validates colonization both at home and the colony. This paper will critically examine several cartoons on the "Sepoy mutiny," the Indian Maharaja, Indian everyday life, the political issues of the empire and so on. This analysis would foreground the role of literary forms as the "mask of conquest".
Keywords:*Punch*, Cartoon, Colonialism, British Empire

I would like to begin my paper with a reference to the famous scene in J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* where the giant marble heads of Plato and Socrates served as shelters for the British gunners and when conventional ammunition had run out, the "electro-metal figures" of English poets like Shakespeare and Keats replaced the cannon shot in order to attack the Indian mutineers. Shooting people dead with the cultural icons of the colonizers is not merely a metaphor of the "ennobling powers of literature" (Farrell 6), but also an allegory of the complex nature of colonization. Culture here crosses the boundary of acting as minimal agent of Ideological State Apparatuses aiding only in consent building but it becomes enmeshed with the violent side of Repressive State Apparatuses. This scene in a way unearths the political nature of aesthetics in the colonial contact zone. This politicization of aesthetics is central to my paper as this would argue that the cartoons related to colonies published in the British

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weekly magazine, *Punch* or *The London Charivari* (1841-1992 and 1992-1996; Mark Lemon was the first editor followed by others) were important tools of colonial domination. The literary and artistic form of cartoons published in the *Punch* actually disseminated, validated and strengthened colonial ideology. This paper would then examine political cartooning in the long nineteenth century as one significant aesthetic apparatus of colonial domination.These cartoons triggered humor not merely for their aesthetic purpose, but with the larger aim of validating the operations of empire in the colony. While this paper does not aim at reaching the simplified conclusion that these visual cartoons actually symbolize the political gaze of the British Empire at the colony producing a self-other/master-slave binary, these visuals surely exploited the porous boundaries between the literal and the figural, between meaning and non-meaning.

While both literature and politics are "serious" affairs, the cartoons are treated as "low", "casual" or "non-serious" perhaps only to mask an alternative seriousness.This politics of deception is central to the functioning of cartoons. The Empire's growing prominence in the colonies was transmitted to the British public through a variety of images shaped by emerging visual technologies. Political cartoons remained the most powerful and consistent medium for representing overseas politics, even as painting, engraving, and later photography and filming gained ground with newer visual experiences. As opposed to the other visual media, the cartoon has the inherent quality of representing through distortion or caricature and this technical exercise was crucial for representing the "other". The art historian Ernst H. Gombrich pointed out the core technique of caricature: "the cartoonist can mythologize the world of politics by physiognomizing it" (Gombrich139). Caricature is fond of violent disproportion and exaggeration of defects. The body is the caricaturist's primary target and place of operation, his physiognomic laboratory, because it is a spectacle of semiotic compression and *Punch* cartoons portrayed the "savage", "native" and "uncivilized" body with full sadistic pleasure leading to a symbolic epistemic violence on the body of the subjects. If art strived to represent the essence of the subject, then the cartoonist was similar to the artist: "The caricaturist has a corresponding aim. He does not seek the perfect form but the perfect deformity, thus penetrating through the mere outward appearance to the inner being in all its littleness or ugliness" (Gombrich and Kris 320).

Punch was published weekly right through the nineteenth century from its first issue of 17 July 1841, and remains one of the key sources for elucidating the opinions of nineteenth century middle England. The 12-page double column issues, each costing 3 dollars in the first instance, comprised visual and textual profusion.The popularity and circulation of the *Punch* outnumbered many satirical journals of the time and achieved a circulation of approximately 165,000 in 1850. *Punch* assembled a number of requisite elements for success: the tradition of wood-engraved illustrations, its early backing by a financially stable printer/publisher like Bradbury and Evans,its appointment and retention of a succession of brilliant illustrators and cartoonists like John Leech, Richard Doyle, John Tenniel and Charles Keene, andits development of Mr. Punch as its chosen collective editorial voice.

As a satirical periodical *Punch* was a huge brand in the nineteenth century. But apart from the material reason for its success, I would like to disclose the ideological ground upon which it operated.Interestingly, the first article in the first issue of *Punch* promised two things: that the periodical's satire would be harmless and never at the expense of others, and it would serve a moral purpose. *Punch*'s respectable humor was constructed against existing popular satirical papers like the *Age*, the *Town* and the *Satirist* which *Punch* competed with in the 1840s.These periodicals were characterized by vituperative attacks on political opponents, personal abuse, and manipulation of scandalous affairs. *Punch* completely followed what Thackeray wrote of satire that it has washed, combed, clothed, and taught the rogue good manners. But the agenda of propagating respectable humor was not always commercially very demanding.*Punch* was an anxiogenic site for the clash between two modes of satire in two British historical periods. The conflict between the sober, soft and respectable humor and more bitter and vituperative humor was easily transformed into the body of the racial and ethnic "others" of Britain's occupied territory. *Punch* became politically correct and popular by producing soft humor towards its own Victorian society and by outsourcing its roguish and bitter aspect to its "others". It became imbricated into the imperial ideology of validating a binary division between the perfect self and the grotesque other.Tapati Guha-Thakurta has pointed out that "the colonial encounter brought into being a new social entity – the artist – with heightened self-awareness about individual identity and nationality". She further states that "this encounter produced a special discursive and institutional space for art within middle-class society. Together, both art and artist – in their new privileged status and modernized conception – became important agents in the articulation of national sovereignty and middle-class cultural hegemony" (Guha-Thakurta 7-8). Though Guha-Thakurta argues her point in the context of nationalist uprisings in the colony, this is similarly applicable for the artists in the metropolitan centre because the large British Empire also needed a strong nationalistic solidarity at home in order to control its overseas colonies. *Punch* cartoons became a reflection of the Victorian artist's tribute to the nation.

R. D. Altick in his study of *Punch* has claimed that the magazine remains, along with the *Illustrated London News*, a frequently cited illustrative resource for thinking about Victorian politics, manners and public events. Satirical journals generally belong to a superposed textual order in which they base their oblique presentation presupposing prior acquaintances with the news already covered by the daily newspapers. This mutual intertextuality solidifies the formation of public opinion. If newspapers are dry and factual, and in a sense "official" spokespersons of imperial agenda, satirical periodicals are "unofficial", flexible, playful and hence more appealing. We can consider *Punch* cartoons as palimpsest which actually resurfaces the already circulated news in a playful manner doubly validating the imperial agenda. Images often added an emotional dimension and reinforced stereotypes. While official discourses of ruling the colonies operated along a vertical axis-bottom within the centre of the empire, political satires operated, almost rhizomatically, on a horizontal axis, in its reach and targets, with the aim to coalesce a publicsupportive of the agenda of the British Empire. The re-circulation of back *Punch* volumes is also a case in point where it is possible to influence and mould public opinion by reasserting the caricatured savage bodies of the colonized. *Punch*

cartoons then became the easiest medium for reaching to larger mass within the empire and the colony and thereby solidifying the ground for control and containment.

This paper would now closely look at some of the cartoons published in *Punch* in the heyday of the empire.

Territorialization: This first set of cartoons represents the mighty power of empire and its hold over an imagined geography. The image titled "The Rhodes Colossus" (Fig. 1) symbolizes the British expansionist agenda of ruling the earth. The man in the image, Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902) was a British-born South African politician who epitomized expansive British colonialism in the 19th century. He founded Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). This *Punch* cartoon links British imperialism with the Colossus of Rhodes (a statue of Apollo on the island of Rhodes which was one of the Seven Wonders of the World until destroyed by an earthquake). According to Paul Kramer, this image is "the archetypal image of British imperial power" (1333). Similarly another image titled "The Expansionist" (Fig. 2) suggests Britain's hold over the globe as the symbolic frogs are actually dancing on the image of a globe itself. In the third cartoon (Fig. 3) the contrast between an omnipotent God-like figure of the colonizer in the guise of a wise eagle and the tiny figures standing beneath justifies the rule of the colonizers. The cartoonist's gaze is here synonymous with the gaze of the eagle with microscopic human figures as the disempowered race. In another cartoon (Fig. 4) there is a shift from the land to the body. It signifies not merely a geographical colonization or colonization of physical body, but that colonization also entails a psychological domination and distortion as is evident from the reference to the nightmare. The next picture (Fig. 5) is a clear visual representation of the White Man's Burden to civilize the "natives" by killing the savage quality in them. The epigraph of the cartoon (Fig. 6) asserts: "He smiles a smile more dreadful/…When he sees the thick black cloud of smoke/ Go up from the conquered town." The readers of *Punch* magazine will also rejoice like the soldier in the picture because another territory is conquered and the "black" is eliminated from the land.

Encountering the Body of the "Other": Engagement with the body is also an effective technique of power and *Punch* very strategically manipulated the bodies of the colonial "other" in its cartoons. The picture of the "Asiatic Mystery" (Fig 7) stereotypes the image of a naked and weak Asian body. This is how *Punch* cartoons generalized the particular where one single naked body represents all the Asian people. This homogenization was actually a strategy of otherisation. The erotic body of the African woman (Fig. 8) is compared with the evil serpentile figure and thereby the body becomes synonymous with the beast. Ironically, the evil wooing of the biblical serpent that led to the fall of Eve from God's grace is metamorphosed into the colonization of Africa. At the same time this erotic body is the site of possible libidinous vent and a source of anxiety for British middle class. The cartoon demonstrates the colonized body as an object of colonial fear and desire. Similarly, another shy and passive African body (Fig. 9) is a spectacle with one Whiteman with the gun and another gazing at her symbolically measure and colonize the "black" body. The picture of a bound African bent inside the map of Africa (Fig. 10) is interesting for several reasons. It seems that the African bodies are still in the embryonic phase yet to be mature and the body is placed inside an "anachronistic space"

as the African map seems to be a distorted and deterritorialized figure. This man's effort to break his shackle is a source of anxiety for the colonizers and hence the cartoonist mocks the embryo's premature effort to come out of the womb. The image of the Indian Juggle (Fig. 11) performed at Royal Theatre in Westminster represents a world upside down. All the Indian bodies including an elephant's body are not in their normal status, rather they are unstable and in a state of crumbling down. This caricature represents the imperial mentality where Britain would only be at the centre and the "others" of the colony are always in a fallen state and the burden of the centre is to rule these unstable "others".

In the cartoon of Fig 12, the Nizam and other notabilities from Indian colony are portrayed comically. The plump figure of Nizam with his abdominous body is contrasted with the one behind him who is too old and too sick to walk. Interestingly the third figure angrily stares at the Nizam, thereby creating an antagonistic atmosphere. The cartoon suggests a larger political implication where the Indian rulers are hostile to each other and are also not "fit" (both physically and psychologically) to run the country. *Punch* caricature of the Great Exhibition of 1851 also brings into focus many racially "other" bodies. *Punch* reflects the general English attitude of superiority and its fear of the foreigner. Figs. 13 & Fig. 14 illustrate the disruption and disorder which the visitors were imagined to have produced in the supposedly clean and peaceful households of the imperial centre. *Punch* concretizes the foreign bodies visiting the exhibition as "mobs" characterized by its uncontrolled and riotous nature.

Violence and Colonial affect: Through caricature and mockery *Punch* cartoons categorized human experience and produced colonial affect. John Tenniel's famous Cawnpore cartoon attests to this fact. During the volatile period of 1857 "Sepoy Mutiny" Tenniel drew several cartoons that represent the unrest and anxiety. Regarding the picture titled "Justice" (Fig 15), the British newspaper, the *Free Press* noted on September 16, 1857:

> The last number of Punch presents us with a wonderful cartoon. Justice, in a Greekpeplum, accompanied by British soldiers, mangling Hindu bodies, and with the features of revenge. In the distance there is a row of guns with Sepoys about to be blown from them. In the rear, disconsolate women and children of Hindus. The title of it is Justice. Leaving to the imagination of the reader to fill in the words "of English CHRISTIANS IN THE YEAR 1857." Was the drawing designed to horrify Britons with the sight of themselves, or to brand upon them their new demon? (qtd. in Khanduri 4)

This kind of cartoon then not only awakens a sense of anxiety and fear among its readers in the centre of the empire but at the same time it suggests the containment of such violent revolts and hence confirms the mighty power of the colonial masters. The readers in the imperial centre identify emotionally with the British soldier and symbolically act with him while taking revenge. Again the cartoon entitled "The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger" (Fig. 16) is very significant because of its colonial content.

According to Layard, one of the editors of the *Punch*, Tenniel's India cartoon in general suddenly brought about an upsurge in *Punch*'s circulation rate. This cartoon garnered attention from *The New York Daily Times*:

> A recent number of *Punch* has a large picture, in which the state of feeling in England towards India is forcibly represented by a fierce lion springing upon a Bengal tiger, which is crouching upon a woman and her infant child. The lion is England, the tiger is rebel India, and the woman and child the Anglo-Indian subjects who have been sacrificed by the cruel sepoys. The temper of the British nation has been thoroughly aroused, and sooner or later a terrible retribution will be visited upon the heads of the rebel Indians who have shown a disposition to glut their revenge for a century of oppression and misgovernment….The roar of the British lion will soon strike terror into the heart of the Bengal tiger. (September 9, 1857, qtd in Khanduri 5)

I would like to emphasize here the interconnection between newspapers and satirical periodicals both complementing each other in the larger purpose of the empire by evoking sentimental and effective national bonding among its British readers.

Control and Containment: This set of *Punch* cartoons reveals the picture of a powerful British Empire content with its overseas colonies. These pictures are free from any violent scene. As Satadru Sen pointed out in the different context of Andamanese body in the British colony of India:

> One might argue after the "Sepoy Mutiny," the aboriginal savage serves as a repository of Romantic impulses in British–Indian colonialism. The savage is neither quite the Self nor absolutely the Other; instead, a pleasurable and continuous process of modulation occurs in which savagery can be immersed within, removed from, or repositioned in the various components of the modern Self: history, technological improvement, moral progress, and familiarity. (372)

Representation now becomes infused with the metaphor of improvement and there is a visual transformation of these "savage" and "unruly" natives into contented and docile subjects. These cartoons represent a colonial subject who needs to be tutored by the benign hands of the British. This image (Fig. 17) published just after the successful quench of Sepoy Mutiny indicates stronger British grip on India. Another cartoon (Fig. 18) signifies the forgiving and non-violent nature of British soldiers where forgiving the "violent" Indian sepoy is not mere act of compassion but the display of a more powerful nature of the masters. Again the cartoon depicting Lord Canning, the Governor General of India, trying to pacify an Indian sepoy (Fig. 19) contrasts the large size of Canning with tiny figure of the Indian sepoy. Rather than using coercion, it is the consent building phase of the empire that this cartoon manifests. Sitting on a chair and keeping his hand (almost like a sage) on a standing soldier immediately places himself in the position of a more knowledgeable figure and thereby consolidating knowledge/power nexus. As a

corollary effect, both the cartoons of Figs. 20 & 21 signify the tamed subjects who are now ideologically "interpellated" by the colonial masters. Under colonial rule, "the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall! (freely) accept his subjection*, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself'" (Althusser 182). Hence the Indian woman takes shelter under the British patronage. The Indian sepoy seeing the British officers shot down, is no more fighting against the British officer but fighting for him in an act of colonial subservience. Similarly Tenniel's cartoon titled, "A Lesson" (Fig. 22) represents a Zulu who, despite his uncivilized nature and appearance, has mastered the subtleties of English (completely ignoring his native language) in order to communicate his "lesson" of war to his English listener. Fig. 23 & Fig. 24 are actually a shift from the cartoons of early phase of colonization. These cartoons are abundant with images of sumptuous food, idyllic landscape, and peaceful coexistence of both the colonizer and colonized, celebration of festivals in joyful manners as opposed to earlier cartoons depicting desolate and violent landscape. *Punch* actually generates these kinds of cartoons to represent a benign empire with its civilizing agenda.

This paper then argues that this textualization of colonial subjects in the pages of the *Punch* validates colonization in a very strategically aesthetic manner. The lion, the tiger, the sepoys, the blacks,all offer visual tropes suggesting how cartoons employ gender, animals and objects to contribute to the colonial registers. *Punch* cartoons literally enforces the colonized to acquire the status of what Edward Said calls representations, or objects without history. If colonization is "a cultural process", "imagined and energized through signs, metaphors and narratives" (Thomas 2), then *Punch* cartoons are one of the important mechanism of this process. As Foucault has argued that power is not wielded by people or groups by way of "episodic" or "sovereign" acts of domination or coercion, instead it is dispersed and "power is everywhere" embodied in discourse and knowledge (63). *Punch*, in a sense, was one of the agents of such discursive power formation in the age of the empire.*Punch* cartoons foreground the role of literary forms as the "mask of conquest".

I would like to conclude my paper with a contradictory argument about this grand claim and popularity of the *Punch*. These cartoons found their way into the colonies through readers and library subscriptions and these also influenced the "native" subscribers in the colony to bring out Indian *Punches*. According to Ritu Gairola Khanduri, *Punch* failed as a marketable product in the colonies but lingered on as a form for imagining colonial politics. These "upstart Punches" rewrite the colonial caricature. "The *Punch* versions in India thus need to be cast not merely as a derivative form of a colonial modernity but also as a tactical and tactile sensibility for subverting colonial politics" (Khanduri 54). As "native" versions of *Punches* clearly acknowledged the British *Punch* as their model, they also posed a challenge to the British censoring these journals. This whole project of representing the colonial body or colonial landscape can also be questioned following Derrida. Derrida questions the notion of the re-presentation and therefore the very notion of an origin or an original that needs to be re-presented. Derrida would argue that the "origin" is itself dispersed, its "identity" undecidable and unfixed. A hegemonic representation in *Punch* cartoons thus does not re-present an

original, fixed “truth”; rather it represents that which is always already represented. *Punch*’s representation is not thus a sacrosanct and “true” representation. This is deeply imbued with the political machination of the empire.

Appendix

Figure 1: “The Rhodes Colossus.” *Punch*. Dec. 10, 1892: 266.

Figure 2: "The Expansionists." *Punch*. Feb.12, 1936:183.

ON THE SWOOP!

Figure 3: “On The Swoop!” *Punch*. April 26, 1890:198.

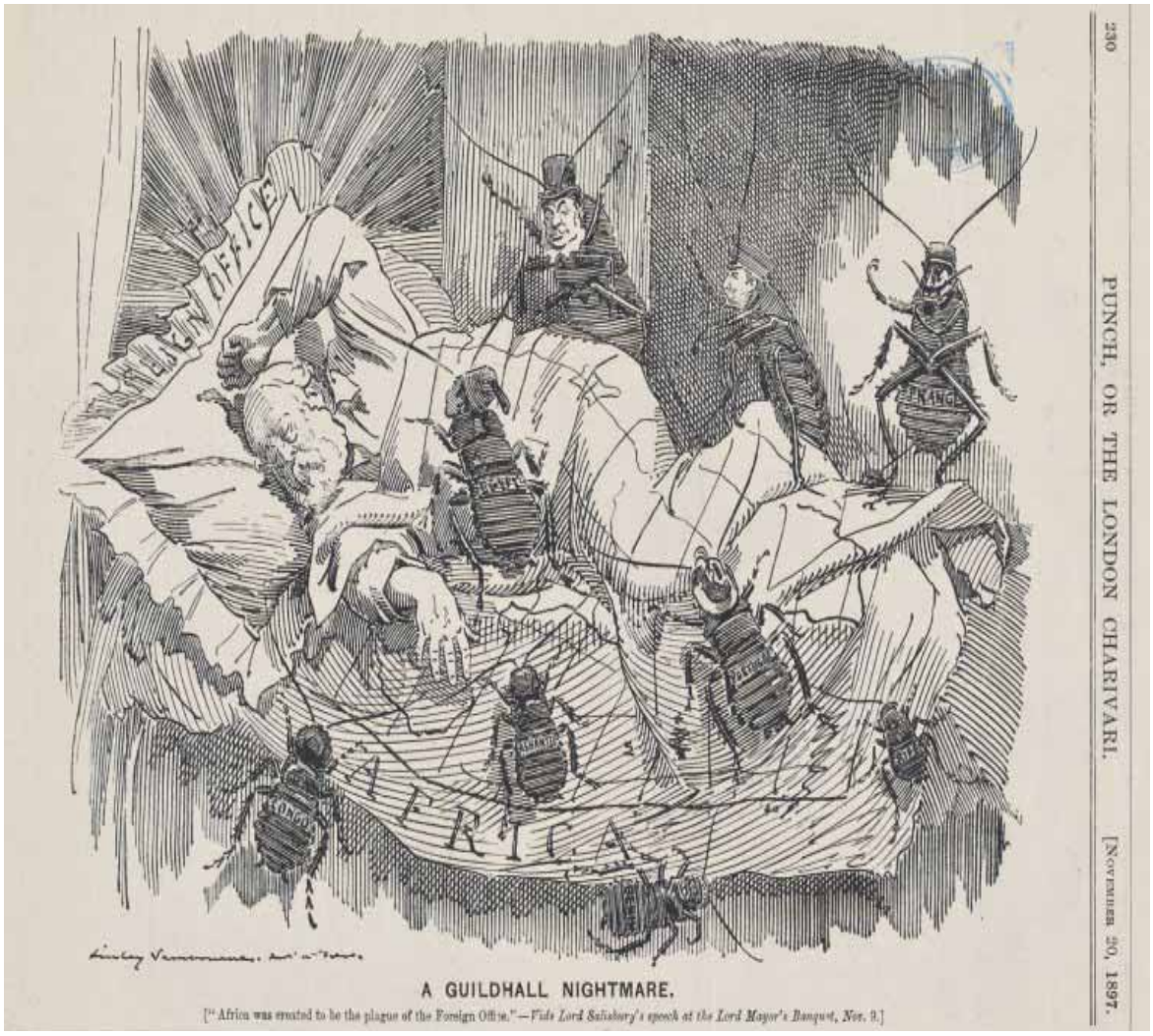


Figure 4: "A Guildhall Nightmare." *Punch*. Nov. 20, 1897: 230.

THE AVENGER!

Figure 5: “The Avenger!” *Punch*. July 25,1900: 64.

Figure 6: "Mars Triumphant." *Punch*. October 16, 1935:435.

Figure 7: “The Asiatic Mystery.” *Punch.* August 8, 1857: 55.

Figure 8: "Wooing the African Venus." *Punch*. Sept. 22,1888:134.

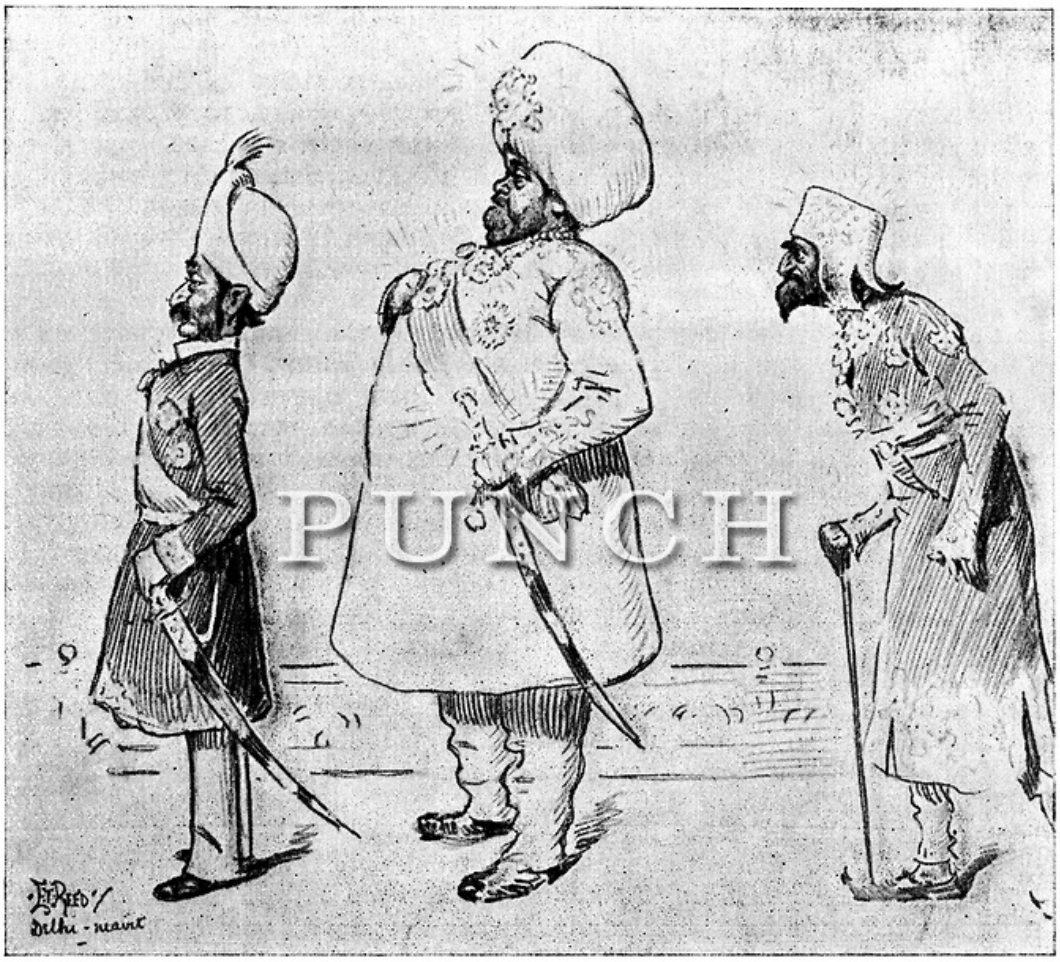
Figure 9: “Embarrassing!” *Punch*. June 7, 1890: 266.

Figure 10: "A bound African bent inside the map of Africa is ready to break his shackles." *Punch*. March 11, 1959: 339.

THE INDIAN JUGGLE.

(As Performed at the Theatre Royal, Westminster.)

Figure 11: "The Indian Juggle." *Punch*. May 15, 1858: 197.



The Nizam of Hyderabad and other notabilities playing "The Heavy Lead" in the Grand Spectacle entitled "The Delhi Durbar."

Figure 12: "The Delhi Durbar." *Punch*. Feb. 4, 1903: 77.1.

Figure 13: “Perfidious Albion…” *Punch*. 1851.

Figure 14: “The North American Lodgers.” *Punch*. 1851.

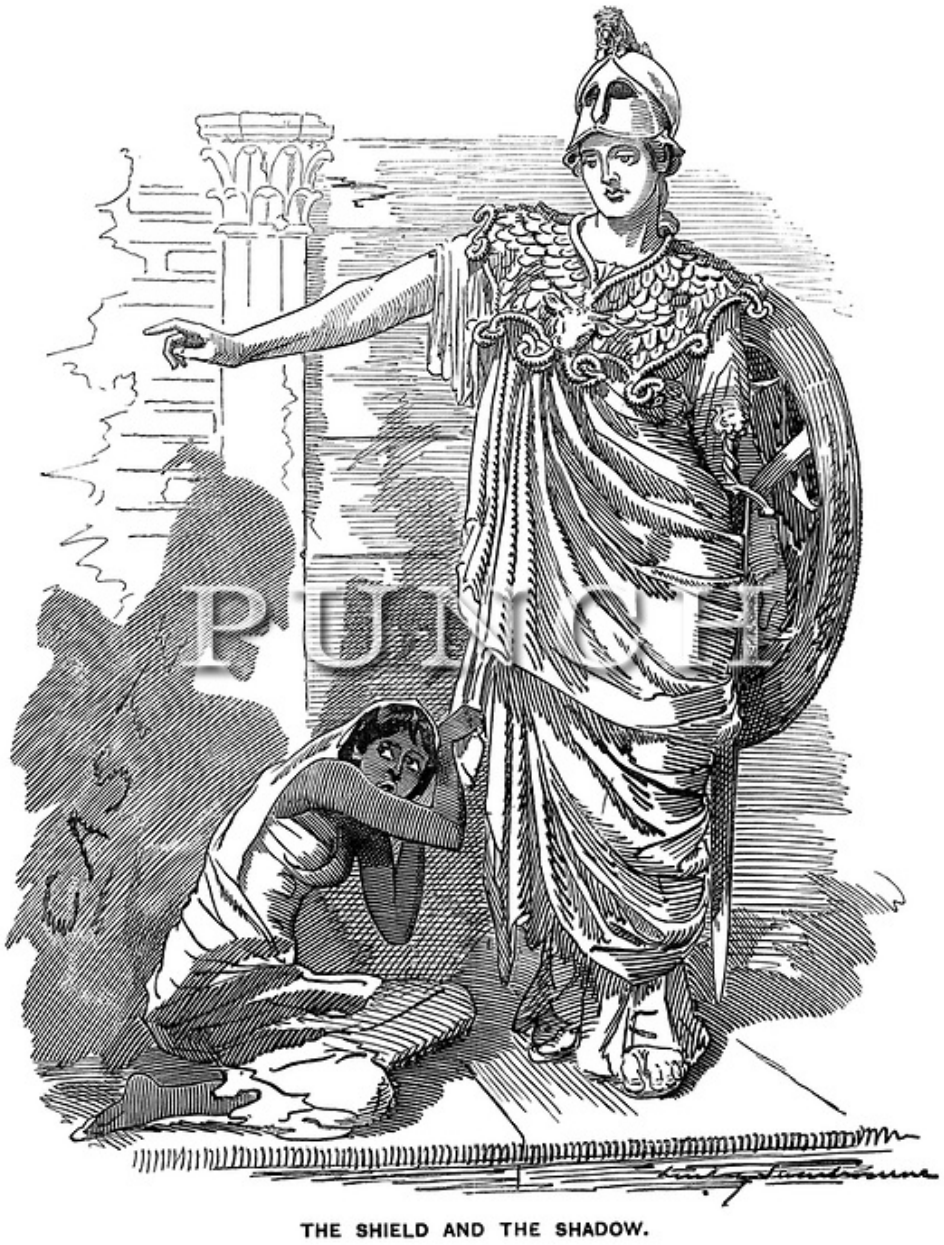
Figure 15: “Justice.” *Punch*., Sept. 12, 1857: 109.

Figure 16: “The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger.” *Punch*. August 22,1857: 76.

Figure 17: "The New Year's Gift." *Punch*. January 2, 1858: 5.

Figure 18: "Too 'Civil' by Half." *Punch*. Nov. 7, 1857:191.

Figure 19: “The Clemency of Canning.” *Punch*. Oct.24, 1857:171.



THE SHIELD AND THE SHADOW.

Figure 20: “The Shield and the Shadow.” *Punch.* October 18,1890: 182.

"BROTHERS IN ARMS."

["The stanchness and devotion of the whole force, and particularly the excellent conduct of the native officers when thrown on their own resources, are worthy of the highest praise; . . . . and the fact that at the very first the men saw all their British officers shot down, makes the stanchness and gallantry of the native officers, non-commissioned officers, and men even more praiseworthy."—*London Gazette Despatches quoted in the Times, Sept.* 8.]

Figure 21: "Brothers in Arms." *Punch*. Sept. 18, 1897:127.

A LESSON.

Figure 22: “A Lesson.” *Punch*. Jan.3, 1879:91.

Figure 23: “Hail Britannia!” *Punch*., May 8, 1886:222.

Figure 24: "Christmas Revels Throughout the Empire." *Punch*. 1935: 18. ALM

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