



THE UNCOMFORTABLE OXFORD PODCAST
A VERY BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Episode 3 - Thursday, May 7th, 2020

THE INDIAN OCEAN

With Olivia Durand (O), Paula Larsson (P), and Waqas Mirza (W)

Full Transcript:

P: Hello and welcome to the podcast 'A Very Brief Introduction to the British Empire.' This is a podcast run by Uncomfortable Oxford, which is a student-led social enterprise in the city of Oxford.

W: If you're interested in learning more about our various activities, feel free to visit our website at www.uncomfortableoxford.com.

P: My name's Paula Larsson, I am a doctoral student at the University of Oxford and co-founder and co-director of Uncomfortable Oxford.

W: Hi, I'm Waqas, I'm also a doctoral student studying French and English Literature.

P: And today our lecture will be given by co-director Olivia Durand, currently a doctoral student in Global and Imperial History.

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O: Hi everyone, I'm Olivia, thanks for joining us on our second lecture in our Very Brief introduction to the British Empire series. This talk is part of the Age of exploration module and will be on the Indian Ocean.

So, maybe a few facts to start off – what is the Indian Ocean?

The Indian Ocean borders Asia, Africa, Australia and the Southern Ocean (Antarctica). It is the world's third largest ocean. It is the only ocean that gets its names from a geographic location – the Indian peninsula. But it was not always named this way!

It was usually called Sindhu Mahasagara "great sea of the Sindhu" by people in Ancient Indian cultures. The Indian Ocean was also known as the Eastern Ocean, a name that was still in use during the mid-18th century



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India itself is a clumsy concept, because prior to British many called it Hindustan and Bharat but the overall identity as 'Indians' was missing. The idea of nationalism arose only during British period (during 1857 revolt).

The British Empire has an important role to play in the recent history of the Indian Ocean, from the 1600s onwards. But Britain was not the only empire in history, and this lecture series helps set the scene to how Britain eclipsed and supplanted its rivals to become a world power and amass a large amount of lands, all very distant from Britain.

The British colonial empire is a story that still sparks a lot of controversy today and the influence of empire is still felt in many countries across the globe.

O: So today, I will be talking specifically about the Indian Ocean region – looking at a map it comprises the:

- East Coast of Africa
- Down to the Cape of Good Hope
- The Arabian Peninsula
- The Indian Subcontinent
- South East Asia all the way up to China

This is about the early stages of exploration and conquest, but what I want to do is to try to unsettle dominant narratives of European explorers, discovering or conquering the Indian Ocean, by trying to go a little bit further back in history to also talk about non-European explorers and conquerors and try to problematise a little this idea of Age of Exploration.

P: So specifically you're saying that if we look at exploration and all the consequences of it, we're still only looking at the Europeans as the primary power, whereas what we should also be able to do is look at those who were colonised and see the agency that they had, the impact that they had on the incoming cultures?

O: Ahah, indeed! So just to jump on that, we talked in the last episode about how problematic the idea of an age of discovery is, but the Age of exploration is not much better at any rate.

In the Indian Ocean, the age of exploration for China and for other nations, groups and communities happened at a different time, so what we assume by Age of Exploration is very Eurocentric.

Most of the world had already been settled or indigenously occupied for thousands of years before any intrepid westerner set out to "explore" it.



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Such an assumption of “exploration” can also create a biased view of history with colonialism and expansion seeming unavoidable, although it only covers the last 4 to 5 centuries of our history.

So again, this podcast series, and this podcast lecture, are aimed at maybe problematizing a little bit more the idea of exploration, and the view that we have of certain regions of the globe.

Just to give an Oxford example, at the University’s Indian Institute, set up in the 1880s for the study of India, but also mostly for the training of future members of the Indian Civil Service, the History reader was only required officially to teach about the history of India from the start of Britain’s colonization. So although the podcast series is about the British Empire, I want to be careful to not adopt the same approach.

P: Ya definitely

O: This lecture will follow three movements:

- First, I want to highlight the early explorations of the Indian Ocean, which reverse the West/East dynamic of exploration, and creates a chronology of age of explorations that starts much earlier than the 15th century, at about 300 BCE.
- I want to show how fascination for an Eastward passage to India prompted European maritime explorations.
- Finally, the last part of the lecture will look at the colonization of the Indian Ocean by Europeans and the ‘Swing to the East’ in Britain’s colonial enterprises.

W: So clearly, all of this didn’t just happen overnight.

O: Of course, and it is important to see these explorations and settlements as part of a step-by-step process of taking small amounts of land, then more land, then slowly expanding through treaties, warfare and following economic interests. The early British involvement in India was a process that took about two centuries to reach its peak, with an important transformation of the forms of British presence and power on the ground, and Britain’s further expansion in other territories in the Indian ocean.

To start with a question: when thinking about explorations, who are the first explorers who come to mind who are not Europeans?



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P: Oooh, that's tough! Well I would go back to Indigenous populations that came into North America over the Bering Land Strait, so like 20'000 years ago. That's definitely exploration in its own right, moving through land that's newly revealed through ice age melts.

O: All the way from China through Siberia, and across to North America.

W: I'm thinking probably the oldest conqueror I can think of is Alexander?

P: Non-European?

W: Oh, non-european. Sorry...

P: Genghis Khan!

O: Genghis Khan is a pretty big one, and Alexander the Great is also an important figure – he is considered to be a European explorer to some extent, but also because he was from Macedonia, so he is sometimes framed as an Eastern explorer in his own right, because he was not Greek. When you think again of exploration in an age when you did not have very powerful boats, when you had only a very faint idea of what the world looked like, what modes of transportation do you think were used to explore the lands that surrounded the Indian Ocean?

P: Probably just riding animals, so Elephants? I remember Elephants being in many different images of Alexander the Great.

O: Elephants... Elephants make a big impression with Hannibal and the Roman Empire later on.

P: There's Indian elephants and African elephants so it makes sense both of them, one exploring into India and the other from northern Africa.

O: My point is that ships actually come into the story quite late.

For most of antiquity, Homer – the author of the old Homeric tales and mythologies - disseminated the image of a single, contiguous world surrounded by an empty ocean. So you would have Eurasia and Africa, all linked together, surrounded by infinite water.

And that was the dominant image and it scared anyone interested in more distant explorations of the ocean. So the first explorations started overland, and the maritime journeys remained closed to the shores:

Alexander the Great of Macedon, who you rightly mentioned was the first to introduce the Greeks and the entire Hellenistic world to the novelties of Arabia and India, because he



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launched very wide-ranging military campaigns, in a very short amount of years – just 10 years, which itself is impressive.

At the end of his Indian campaign in 324 BCE, Alexander, descended the Indus River to its mouth near present-day Karachi in Pakistan, from where he dispatched a fleet to explore some 1,400 miles of unknown coast back to Babylon, modern day Iraq.

When he did that, he brought attention to the Persian Gulf and Arabian sea. So it's only with Alexander the Great that the Arabian Sea (east of India) starts featuring on Greek maps.

P: Could you remind me of the dates for Alexander the Great?

O: All the campaigns happened between 334 and 324 BCE, and Alexander died the year after. For the wider chronology, Alexander the Great's life is in between the end of the Hellenistic Empire centred on Athens and the rise to prominence of Rome.

But exploration didn't only happen from Greece to the East. Exploration also happened from the East to the West: and the Chinese of the Han dynasty began to dispatch trade caravans westward along what came eventually to be called the Silk Road—the overland route from China through Central Asia to the Levant and, ultimately, the Mediterranean.

P: It's very early for the silk roads to already exist.

O: The Silk Roads have been around for a very very long time. 130 BCE. And that means that exploration overland was happening not just from West to East, but from East to West. And the sea, the maritime spaces were still very much spaces that inspired a fear of unknown dangers; boats were following the coast and there was very little knowledge about what laid further beyond the shores.

Travelling the Silk Roads was still quite reassuring, and they remained a popular route for centuries. In the 13th century the Italian Marco Polo was still following the same silk roads that Chinese traders had first opened over a thousand years earlier.

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But when did wide ranging oversea travels start in the Indian Ocean? The process of maritime explorations of the Indian Ocean was triggered by the rise of prominence of the Ottoman Empire, which controlled part of the Silk Road. However, again, it did not originate with European explorers.

The first consequent sea-journey over the Indian Ocean was the doing of Zheng He . Zheng He was Chinese, and he undertook to lead 7 formidable maritime expeditions through what he knew as the “Western Sea,” – the name of the Indian Ocean for the Chinese. He did these 7 expeditions between 1405 and 1433.

W: So what was the purpose of these ventures?

O: Part of it was exploration, but mostly these voyages were political ventures, meant to impress: the first voyage alone featured 62 strong oceangoing junks ships, and in addition to these large junks was a fleet of 225 smaller support vessels, and almost 28 000 men.

P: Okay, sorry, a junk?

O: A junk is a very large vessel which, if you picture the boats that Columbus was using on his travels across the Atlantic, the 65 largest boats that Zheng He used were 400 ft when the largest of Columbus’s three boats was 85ft long.

P: Cool.

W: So how long did these voyages last?

O: Each of the 7 voyages lasted 2 years on average, and in sum they took in destinations from Indochina to East Africa and every single coastal point in between.

By 1420 the history of the Indian Ocean was very much a Chinese history; Chinese ships and sailors had no equal in the world, and the Indian Ocean was about to become a Chinese lake



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– quite different from the image of the British Empire being the most dominant force in the Indian Ocean.

P: What about the indigenous civilisations in India and the Indian Peninsula at the time? I mean there's the Mughal Empire right?

O: They were more land based. The frontiers of the Mughal Empire in the north of the Indian peninsula did not reach the sea until decades after its foundation in 1526. But it had huge rivers, including the Indus, the Ganges and their many tributaries, and so they developed technologies to travel on the river courses. The Chinese were the dominant powers on the sea, but it is necessary to remember that they were not conquering those spaces either, they were actively trading with them and making other places recognise their political presence and power.

But things shifted very fast in the region, and 80 years after Zheng He's expeditions, in the 1500s, the Indian Ocean was actually closer to being an Arab lake, with boats and traders going around the region and having diplomatic missions and disseminating religious beliefs as well across the Indian ocean –in East Africa, South and East Asia.

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So how did Britain – or any European power really – enter the scene? How did global maritime exploration become a story of Europeans?

Does anyone know when Europeans started to look for a passage to India?

P: I know this one, but, I said it in the last episode is why... *"1492 Columbus sails the Ocean Blue."*

O: Yes, exactly, 1492, is one of the attempts to reach India. Actually, Europeans had been obsessed with finding a passage – specifically a maritime passage – to India for quite a long time. Marco Polo's travels and greater contact with the traders coming from the Silk Roads had started to create a lot of interest in Europe for the rich products of the East, while at the same time Europe was being constantly at war so it was looking for sources of precious metals and products.



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But another important factor for this search of a maritime passage to India was maybe surprisingly the end of the crusades, a series of European holy wars waged from the 11th to the 13th century.

W: So what effects did the crusades have on European trade?

O: Well actually the crusades very much increased European trade, they helped expanding cities and towns, and the consumption habits of the Europeans were transformed with rice, coffee, spices, and new fruits being brought to Europe through the crusades. The crusades meant fighting, but they also meant trading.

P: Or... stealing!

O: Despite the religious divide, the Crusades dramatically increased maritime trade between the East and West. It basically transformed the consumption habits and created a market in Europe for Eastern goods.

Some explorers also sought new trade routes to the Indian Ocean because they wanted to avoid dealing with the Muslim middlemen of the Ottoman Empire, in order to maximise profit. Their initial goal was to have access to the 'Spice Islands' in eastern Indonesia, known as the Spice Islands because of the nutmeg, mace and cloves they grew.

This search for a passage to India also happened in a background of growing religious intolerance in Europe, especially after the final removal of Muslim presence in Western Europe with the end of the Reconquista in Spain in Portugal.

P: So we have Europeans searching for route to Asia through the oceans, we have the *Reconquista* happening in Spain and Portugal to kick out former Muslim invaders, and we have increased demand from the European for eastern goods for big market and big chance of big profits.



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O: Exactly, so there are these three factors : religious intolerance, economic and consumer changes in Europe, and then you have the desire to find new profitable trade routes in order to maximize profit.

In this story it is Portugal who took the lead for European exploration. Even though the Portuguese did not rule over an immense territory, they had already a good control of the sea routes because they had already conquered islands in the Atlantic and off the coast of Africa.

We all know the story of Christopher Columbus who sailed West across the Atlantic, he sailed West because he was hoping to find a Westward passage to India - but instead he landed on Haiti, and later the coast of central America and actually never made it to North America in his lifetime.

P: And yet still, they celebrate Columbus day, for some reason.

O: Well, historical accuracy is not often the thing of national celebrations.

P: Indigenous Heritage Day! *Controversial*.

O: Passage Westward to India was only achieved in 1520 when Magellan went around the southern tip of the Americas, at Cape Horn.

But before that, there was a passage eastward was found in 1488 – even before Columbus stumbled upon the Caribbean.

Two portugese caravels commanded by Bartolomeu Dias accidentally dropped anchor about 230 miles East of what is now Cape Town, in South Africa.

The thing is that at the time most people believed that the Indian Ocean was a closed sea – that it was impossible to enter it without having to cross some stretch of land. So Dias went all the way around the African continent without noticing that he was doing so, entering for the first time the Indian Ocean by sea from Europe.

There was a little bit of a lag between the discovery of this passage eastward and the confirmation that it was an actual route to India. Columbus' landing in Haiti had postponed other exploration missions for some time because people truly believed that he had landed in India or in East Asia at least.



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A second in 1497 journey by Vasco de Gama changed that: it was no longer a voyage of discovery but an armed embassy – in part because there was a realization that the American continent was definitely not India.

W: So when does Britain enter the scene?

The English, again, were pretty late in the game, and Britain is only part of a much wider story of travels, explorations, and failed attempts to find sea routes.

The English only entered the scene some 100 years later, when Queen Elizabeth 1st encouraged maritime expansion to:

- First, Defend Protestant England against the Catholics of Europe; Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands had had a head start and it was time to catch up on those explorations and conquests.
 - Expansion seemed profitable – England had already for decades pirated Spanish ships full of silver and gold – presence on the sea was very profitable for the English economy.
-

P: Yeah, pirates were always profitable for England.

O: Always, Piracy is just another ‘odd’ way to do business.

- And Finally, Elizabeth I wanted England to have an in on these colonies and conquests, and she focused a lot more on the English navy.

One of the latest projects of the reign of Elizabeth was to find a way for England to trade directly with India and the Spice Islands, through the newly chartered East India Company.

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P: The famous East India Company. When is this, 1600?

O: Yes 1600s is when the EIC received its charter from Elizabeth I.



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The East India Company was founded for trade purposes, but it ended up planting the seeds of what would grow into significant British activity in another and very distant part of the world – the Indian sub-continent initially, and the wider Indian Ocean region in the 19th century. Its royal charter granted it a monopoly of all trade east of the Cape of Good Hope.

It also fuelled Britain's competition with the Dutch and the Portuguese, the then dominant power in the region.

The EIC is a good example of how the history of Empire is paved with consequences, because the company was formed with the intent of trading with the 'East Indies' (as opposed to the West Indies, the Caribbean) but it ended up becoming the dominant presence on the subcontinent which lay to the north.

The EIC ended up being a ruling body, but rule was always exercised with the assistance of indigenous political elites

- most pre-colonial,
- some were created by the British,
- some were powerful,
- some were weak
- and there were also a large network of indigenous employees.

It is often remarked that India was ruled by a small group of British civil servants—around about a thousand— but what is more rarely mentioned is that the Government of India employed about a million Indians to assist them in the enterprise.

The Indian population was about 100 million in 1500. Under the Mughal Empire, the population rose to 160 million in 1700. In addition to the Mughals, there were approximately six hundred semi-autonomous kingdoms, or “princely states” across the subcontinent.

P: So what was India like before? What were the cultures, and the communities and the empires which existed in the subcontinent before the EIC made its way in?

O: What we know as India today was a collection of kingdoms and princely states, maharajas and emperors : in the South the Sultan of Mysore, at the centre the Mahrattas Confederacy, in the North the powerful Mughal and Sikh Empires – a variety of political rules and systems, but also a great diversity of religions and cultures.

At its most basic level, what we consider to be the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent at this time was very much a collection of trading ports and independent territories that had



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very little to do with each other but which Britain linked together conceptually by talking of a generic “India.”

It is also a time when we can start talking about Britain, since the Union of England and Scotland had been achieved at the death of Elizabeth I.

This was an age of company rule, for Britain but also for other European powers: it is a very different form of imperialism, which also shows that colonisation was first a matter of business and capital.

P: I seem to recall there being a Dutch East India Company, a French, and English one, so clearly this is very heavily populated by various trading countries at this time.

O: The 1600s and the 1700s are very much the age of the companies. Across the whole Indian Ocean region we can find European trading companies with the support or approbation of the government of their own countries, who had semi official functions in these areas, sometimes fulfilling diplomatic roles, sometimes acquiring lands on behalf of their country. They often waged wars on behalf of their governments without it being officially Britain, France, Spain or the Netherlands officially conquering those spaces.

The East India Company was a monopolistic trading body, formed for the exploitation in the place of England and later Britain of the trade with East and Southeast Asia and India. It became involved in politics and was an agent of British imperialism in India from the early 18th century to the mid-19th century when it was finally dismantled.

So 1600s is when the EIC comes in, 1850s is when the EIC is fully dismantled, but it actually loses control from the 1800s onwards, just as the British government starts being increasingly and more directly involved.

W: And where was it based?

O: The East India Company operated from several main trading settlements in Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), and Madras (Chennai), shipping goods from Asia worth up to one million pounds a year: the trade of the EIC with India had become more and more central to the British Economy.

- In Bengal (NE of modern-day India) the company traded under the protection of a local dynasty which it came increasingly to control;



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- the Madras presidency (East coast), where Britain had purchased land for forts and factories in the 1630s, and expanded inland;
- and in Bombay (West Coast) where they came into conflict with the powerful Maratha princely estates surrounding it.

As a result, the East India Company became entangled in Indian politics, and attempted to exploit its position to further its own ends and frustra the rival companies. The EIC gave military aid to friendly states in return for trade concessions.

In the process states in the South of India and elsewhere became British puppets.

P: A really good example of just how much opportunity this created for individuals in England is the example of a man called Robert Palk. He came from Wadham College here at Oxford and he would originally join as a naval chaplain on an East India Company trading ship, around 1750. Over time when he arrived in India, he made good friends with a lot of the traders and a lot of the people in power, who put deals his way and he ended up getting involved in trade himself, and made quite a small fortune. which the East India Company wasn't too happy about and they ordered him to limit himself to his 'religious duties' in fact. He actually renounces his clerical vows and is given the post of Governor of Madras which allows him to expand his trade incredibly and greatly enlarge his personal wealth. So Palk goes from this relatively unknown naval chaplain to the governor of a huge part of territory and is later named a baron by King George the third in recognition of his advancements. And still today the strait between Sri Lanka and India is named after him - the Palk Strait. So there's a really strong amount of political opportunity, material opportunity, economic advancement available for individuals who enter the companies at this time, no matter what their background.

O: Yes, can you imagine embarking on a ship to work in trade and ending up having political power in another part of the world? That sounds crazy but it was pretty much what was happening time and again at the time both in British and other European colonies. You had traders who ended up gaining political power in foreign land.

In Bengal (NE), the British were fighting with the Indian rulers, who were called the nawabs, who were resisting British encroachments, and were themselves weakened by the extent of British penetration in their territories.

- The most famous conflict happened in 1756-7 – culminating with the battle of Plassey. For context England is at war in Europe but also in North America, but it is also at war in India, so it starts showing how global the presence of Britain starts being. In 1757, the British defeated the Nawab of Bengal (Siraj-ad-Daula) at the battle of Plassey – with the help of a conspiracy of court members and bankers. They also defeated the French, and removed them from the peninsula.



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□ This conflict was the culmination of the company's attempts to gain trade concessions. After 1756, succeeding nawabs were removed from their political positions when they failed to meet East India Company demands and Bengal became much more like a British colony.

It means that before 1756 there was a little bit of cooperation or diplomacy between the nawabs and the EIC, but after that date it is a lot more straightforward: the British, represented by the EIC, acting as a bully.

P: So the British did a very good job then of using the already intrinsic divisions that existed between the different states and peoples across the Indian subcontinent, for their own benefit, first for their allies working with them to defeat others and then by later taking full control and basically betraying the allies they had established.

O: Exactly: first, cultivating the divisions, and then, creating a situation in which, basically, the only possible outcome was to agree to whatever the British were asking, for the sake of not being removed from power.

The symbol of this change of relationship happened when the Nawab of Bengal granted the company *diwani*, which is the right to raise revenue and administer finances, and this happened in 1765 – so at this point, the EIC was raising revenue, and was managing the finances, in Bengal, as if it was a ruling government or state.

Bengal became a stepping stone for further expansion — even though further expansion was expressly forbidden by London – since the British government was very busy with other wars at the time, in particular the Seven Years War, and the run up to the American War of Independence. In this context of political upheaval, Westminster was a bit worried about other potential sources of conflict in the Indian subcontinent.

Britain's representatives on the ground (Robert Clive and Warren Hastings in particular), were prepared to take the offensive to start a battle on flimsy pretexts. The EIC was seeking to establish its own supremacy and defeat potential rivals. The actions of the East India Company men illustrate the power of the man on the spot to make an empire, even in defiance of the metropole.

P: You get a taste of hunger and it just keeps growing.



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O: To some extent, it is the story of different individuals, their choices and the power they gained from them; this is instrumental in setting the structure for British influence in India and more official British rule in India; and they were pretty much making a colony out of the Indian subcontinent, even though it was in defiance of the metropole.

As a result, the East India Company men and their proxies were operating in India generations before Britain controlled anything beyond tiny coastal enclaves.

- ▣ However, this hunger for land-grabbing and for wealth meant that the EIC became locked into a cycle of conquest followed by financial crisis resulting in further conquest – you know, to solve the lack of money, and the revenue was ruthlessly run to ground. Although the company was bringing over £1M to Britain each year, this advantage was no longer offsetting the costs. In the 1770s and 1780s it needed financial help from the British government, which in return imposed stricter controls upon it, beginning the company's transition from a private business into a branch of the imperial state.

P: So they get incorporated then into this larger apparatus of British Imperial power. And does that mean some of their company controls get taken away as well?

O: Yes, so the company control is starting to go to Governors of India appointed directly by the British government and by the Kings and Queens of England. One of the first governors of India is Charles Cornwallis, who had had a career in the British Army during the American Revolution – he actually lost the decisive battle of Yorktown – but this shows how an imperial system was starting to emerge across continents and oceans.

This also very much illustrates the transition from first trade, then company rule to finally formal rule in India.

If we take a step back to look at the wider history, how did the British Imperial project evolve over time? With the expansion in the Indian Ocean, and the more and more formal control over Britain's diverse territories – which again, do not represent India as a whole, we can witness a transition:

From the 'First' British Empire...

- Which was founded in the 17th century
- Which was based on the large migration of settlers to the American colonies
- Which witnessed the development of the sugar plantation colonies in the West Indies.
- And more or less ends after the American Independence in 1783 – even though there are still lingering effects of Empire in the American continent.



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We can see a transition, with the limits imposed on company rule in India to the 'Second' British Empire

- Emerges in the 17th century as well: chain of trading ports and naval bases controlled by the company.
 - Which further expands inland: control of a large number of natives, especially in India.
 - With a lot less settlers than in the Americas and mostly administrators.
-

P: So a transition more or less, from people from within the British Isles that go out and do stuff in an empire, to the British state sending individuals and having full control.

O: Exactly. From the individual to the political – to some extent.

And this happened in the context of constant wars and battles and conflicts with other European powers – war is more the norm than the exception, both in Europe and across colonies. And that meant an acute need for money and resources, and territorial competition beyond Europe.

This is a very brief introduction to exploration and early colonization in the Indian Ocean, and it is by no means hoping to address all the intricacies and nuances of the early British rule in India.

A turning point is the occupation of the Cape of Good Hope by the British in 1806, which secured passage to the Indian Ocean for British traders and the British Army and Navy.

In the 19th century, India eventually became the base for further expansion in other regions of the Indian Ocean: ships sailed directly from the Indian peninsula and not from Britain.

P: Thank you for coming and listening to our Very Brief Introduction to the British Empire Podcast. This was our third episode on the Indian Ocean Region, please join us for the next one in two weeks time on the Pacific Ocean Region.

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