

Hidden narratives of torture

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Letter from directors of the East India Company ordering an inquiry into the allegations of torture raised in a recent parliamentary debate. Credit: Parliamentary Archives Ref: HL/PO/JO/10/9/259 file 918, 26 July 1854

Allegations of torture by government officials are emerging daily from countries caught up in the struggle for democracy. Derek Elliott, a researcher in Cambridge's Faculty of History, is looking at governmental torture and violence in colonial India and has uncovered surprising links with modern states.

In April 2011 the [British government](#) released to the public the first set of documents from its hidden archive of decolonisation, a lengthy

process that saw most of Britain's extensive colonies gradually gain their independence. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office had claimed that the archive did not exist, and later that the documents had been simply 'lost' or 'misplaced'. It is highly likely, however, that these records were deliberately hidden away in Hanslope Park, a high security government communications facility in Buckinghamshire, in order to protect government and its agents from litigation and embarrassment.

This massive archive charts the end of British colonialism and details the brutality that often accompanied the closing chapters of the British Empire when colonies' independence movements were quashed by force. The most notorious clashes took place when the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya was violently suppressed by the colonial government during the 1950s. The massacres and abuses that took place led to a group of Kenyans last year claiming the right to sue the British government for the systematic torture they had experienced. It was these claims that resulted in the 'discovery' of the lost archive.

Beneath London's streets in the basement stacks of the British Library's India Office Collection lies another story of brutality and torture in colonial times. The substantial archive of the East India Company spans a period of over two and a half centuries, from the Company's foundation by Royal Charter by Elizabeth I in 1600 to its dissolution by Parliament in 1858. Its records – which cross three oceans and four continents, and contain documents pertaining to maritime commerce, wars of conquest and all branches of governance – have never been concealed. But many of the narratives contained in the archive have remained largely undisturbed. Among them are the Madras torture [allegations](#) of the mid-19th century.

Though little known today, officials of the East India Company were subject to a scandal that hit the headlines, and shocked Britain and India alike. In the summer of 1854 Parliament ordered the East India

Company conduct an investigation into allegations that torture was being used to extract tax payments from subjects in the Madras Presidency of India, one of the three main administrative bodies of Company-controlled India subservient to the Governor-General in the capital, Calcutta. At this time, the East India Company was at the height of its territorial and administrative powers in India, having recently annexed vast sections of central India and renewed its charter with the British government, continuing Company rule indefinitely. In the House of Commons, Company chairman Sir James W Hogg vehemently denied the allegations, claiming that they were completely ‘unsupported by proof’.

The charges of torture were brought to the attention of Parliament as a result of petitions from the Madras Native Association. This organisation had been established by a leading Madras political activist and merchant named Gazulu Lakshminarasu Chetty to advocate for government reform and speak out about injustices during the run-up to the Company’s 1853 Charter renewal. The allegations of torture, publicly made in the House of Commons, stirred debate in the English and Indian press, both of which condemned the ‘despotic rule’ of the Company.

In the spring of 1855, the investigation was published and released to the public in what has become know as the Madras Torture Report. The report found that the use of torture was widespread in India and encompassed not only revenue matters but also police activities, and had been occurring for decades under Company rule. Initially dismissive of allegations of abuse, the directors of the Company could no longer deny the overwhelming evidence that torture was taking place. The Company undertook to put measures into place that would put a stop to practices of using physical force. However, the outbreak of the 1857 Indian Rebellion, and the subsequent dissolution of the East India Company, quickly overshadowed the Torture Report’s findings, which have largely been forgotten.

“I first came across the investigation into torture in the work of other scholars who made passing reference to it and I began to look closely at the records of the East India Company’s Torture Report,” explained Elliott. “In the short three months in 1855 that the three Company-appointed investigators operated from an office in the Madras Polytechnic College, they received a total of 1,959 individual testimonies from Indians complaining of torture being inflicted upon them. Some even travelled 400 miles to prefer their charges against the Company in person. The victims complained of a wide range of abuses suffered, from beatings, being tied up and left in the tropical sun, to being suspended from trees, pinched, placed in a sack of chillies, sodomy – the list went on and on.”

Two incidents (far from the worst) serve as a glimpse into the contents of the report. In early 1854, one Annish Pillay was severely abused by the police. His brother Subapathy told the investigators that ‘they tied his legs, hung him up with his head downwards, put powdered chilly in his nostrils’ in order to elicit a confession from him for a crime that he did not commit. In another case, a woman identified only as Baulambal told how she was first tied up and ‘slapped...on the head’. Her account continues, ‘[a] rope suspended to a beam was then passed behind the rope which tied my arms, and I was hung up about a foot from the ground.’ She was abused in other ways until she passed out; she was then raped. Stories like these fill the over 300 pages of the Torture Report, and can be found scattered throughout the Company archive.

As a researcher into systems of governance, Elliott is interested in the ways in which a regime that was outwardly liberal espoused torture. By the 1850s the East India Company had ruled most of India, either directly or indirectly for almost a century and had outgrown its 17th-century maritime and trading origins to become a government in its own right, ruling over foreign peoples many times more numerous than the population of Britain. The Company came to view itself as an

enlightened alternative to the ‘oriental despotism’ of its Mughal predecessors and India had even served as the laboratory for the utilitarian ideals of governance proposed by the social reformer Jeremy Bentham.

To the British and to the Company, torture was, as the President of Madras, George (3rd Lord) Harris wrote in September 1854, a ‘matter so deeply affecting the honour of the British nation, and so utterly repugnant to its principles of government’, yet it was carried out by agents of the state for years. Elliott said: “In this manner, the 1855 Madras torture revelations were similar to the 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal. This incident exposed US agents acting in ways that were damaging to the image of nation, one that prides itself on liberal democratic values.”

What interests Elliott is how self-professed ‘good’ states make use of ‘bad’ practices to serve their own ends and, moreover, what specific mechanisms are used to employ, justify, rationalise and evade detection. “The current, almost daily exposure of the use of torture committed by the Assad government in Syria or in Libya under Gaddafi surprises almost no-one; crimes against humanity under such regimes are almost expected to occur,” he said. “Liberal democracies, like Canada and Britain, are also being charged by human rights groups of being complicit in torture by deporting individuals to countries with poor human rights records. The US has gone furthest by legalising enhanced interrogation techniques supposedly to serve the greater good of protecting liberal democratic values and way of life.”

In 19th-century India, torture was employed to serve the fiscal demands of the state. Committed by low-level Indian agents of the state to serve those ends, tortuous acts were excused by Company officials as ‘native barbarity’ that would naturally diminish as the liberal imperial project brought the fruits of civilisation, modernity and morality to India – another form of the greater good. Elliott cautioned: “Comparisons

between Company India and current states should not be too closely made, but parallels certainly exist concerning the use of [violence](#) and torture among liberal imperial and liberal democratic systems.”

The reason the issue of torture under the East India Company has not yet been fully examined is partly due to the fact that evidence for it is scattered throughout the archival record. Mentions of torture are found across committees and departments, within the Company’s six kilometre-long records. Moreover, the issue needs to be examined in conjunction with other contemporary sources such as archived private papers, family collections and missionary reports and records, newspapers and parliamentary proceedings. A close reading of all these sources is required to grasp the extent to which torture prevailed in India. The Parliamentary Archives, housed in the Victoria Tower of the Palace of Westminster also provide useful, yet under-researched, insights into the way in which the torture allegations were debated and considered by its members at the time, and into the relationship between Whitehall and India under the Company.

“Given the substantial amount of research into torture and ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ taking place in today’s world, surprisingly little scholarly research has been undertaken to provide any kind of useful comparisons or arguments for continuity or disjuncture in how states and governments have developed in their relation to corporeal [torture](#). I hope that my research will make a contribution to this understanding,” said Elliott.

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Provided by University of Cambridge

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