

KARMA SUTRA CHAI TEA LATTE



A play by
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NOTE

This is written to be performed by an ensemble of South Asian actors of at least 6, playing multiple roles. Characters are gendered but the actors need not be. Anyone of any gender or type can play a character. Characters who are white must incorporate some sort physical marker that represents their whiteness. This could be a costume piece, makeup, or a prop (I like a clown nose, but they already did that in *Woza Albert!*). For the purposes of this script, I have used a WHITE MASQUERADE MASK. You can always do that.

CHARACTERS

ACT I: An Abridged History of British Colonialism in India (1615 - 1947)

ROE (he/him) — Emissary for the British East India Company in need of Emperor Jahangir's permission to open a trading post.

JAHANGIR (he/him)/**NUR JAHAN** (she/her) — The Emperor of Mughal India, 1605 - 1627. / "Light of the World." After becoming Jahangir's 20th and final wife, she became co-ruler, particularly when his alcoholic benders would make him unreliable.

ROYAL ADVISOR (he/him) — Proud and loyal, the Emperor's favorite soldier.

CLIVE — Director of the East India Company, the first British Governor of Bengal. Laid the foundations of the British Empire in India.

PANDEY — A hot-headed sepoy fed up with his treatment under the British, ready for revolution.

PALTU — A sepoy, part of Pandey and Paltu's regiment. Doesn't care about changing the way things are, usually takes the path of least resistance as long as his needs are met.

PRASAD — A sepoy, part of Pandey and Paltu's regiment. Conflicted. He knows things need to change, but thinks that violence will go too far.

BAUGH — The sepoy's english commander.

HEWSON — The sepoy's english commander.

LEELA (she/her) — A young white-passing Bengali woman. Cyril's fiancee.

CYRIL (he/him) — The "Good Guy" of the family. Leela's fiancee.

BRYCE (he/him) — A pretentious slimeball. Cyril's brother.

KENNETH (he/him) — Venomously racist patriarch.

PATRICIA (she/her) — The permissive, disengaged matriarch.

LAKSHMAN (he/him) — The servant with their own agenda.

ACT II: The Adventures of Nikhil Hunt (2021)

NIKHIL (he/him) — Was once an adopted son of a legendary British adventurer, now engaged to the treasure hunter daughter of a wealthy British magnate.

VICTORIA (she/her) — A daring and prolific treasure hunter, putting to the back of her mind any of the imperialist implications of "rescuing" ancient artifacts.

ROGER (he/him) — Victoria's father, a legendary treasure hunter and collector.

AJAY (he/him) — The son of the wealthiest man in India, trusted by the PM. Spoiled, charismatic, and a little genocidal in the pursuit of money and power.

LEKHA (she/her) — An adversarial journalist who, after embedding herself among a Maoist guerilla group, ends up joining them.

KASHVI (she/her) — A Zillennial American journalism student who looked up to Lekha and followed her into the People's Liberation Army.

"History does not repeat itself, but it does often rhyme."

— Mark Twain

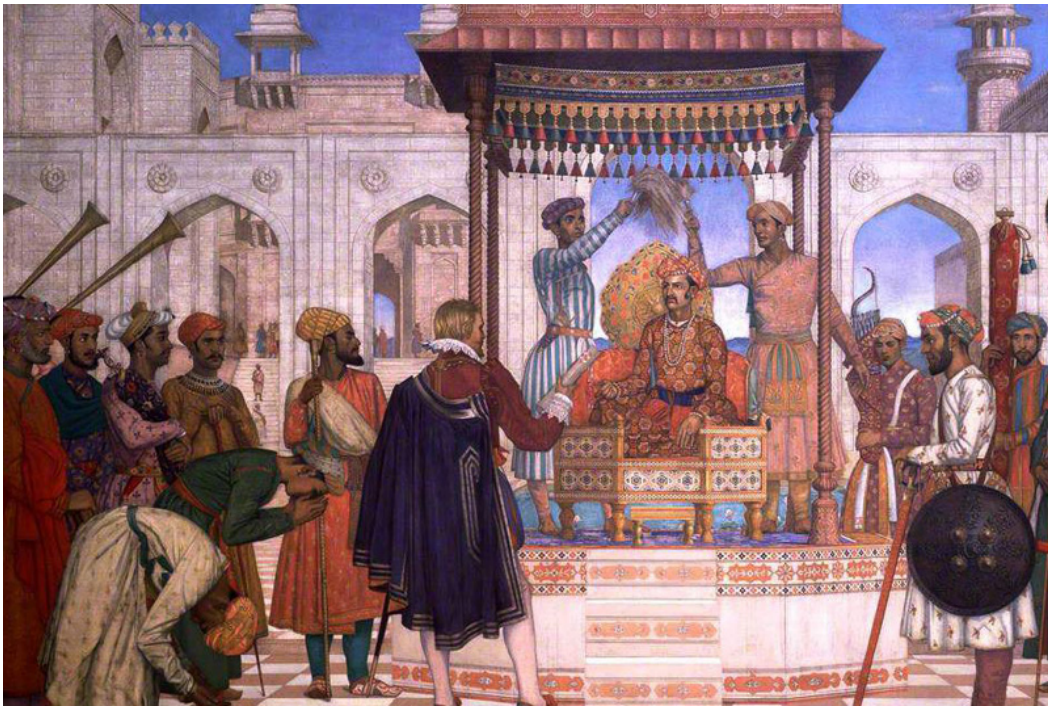
"Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."

— Karl Marx

ACT I

AN ABRIDGED HISTORY OF BRITISH COLONIALISM IN INDIA

(1615 - 1947)



1



FOOTNOTE enters.

Projected onto them is an ANCIENT MAP OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT.

FOOTNOTE

You know this land now as India. We are now, as I speak to you, at time not too far from when the shape of such a place, especially as a "nation" was not so clear. There is a history before this moment and a history after. This was once a great ancient civilization of the Indus Valley, existing alongside Egypt and Mesopotamea. Its most famous city, Mohenjo-daro, was its largest known settlement and the most advanced city of its time. Floods and drought eventually sent people from city centers to villages, spreading out from what you know as Pakistan and Afghanistan into the Punjab region. Smaller communities turned into larger ones, then into states. Then into empires.

A quick succession of MAPS FROM VARIOUS ERAS.

And then the 16th century brought the Mughal Empire, which is where you find me today.

A MAP OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE.

The empire united large parts of the subcontinent, from Afghanistan to Kashmir to Bengal to the uplands of the Deccan plateau. The Mughals came from what you know as "Central Asia." Babur, the first of the emperors, was said to be a descendent of Timur the Great.

Some English playwright wrote about him? He changed the name to Tamburlaine and played a bit loosely with the facts (something that we would never do in this play!). In any case, we begin our story at this point in history, because this is when things would take a turn, when the foundations of the world we know would be laid, here, on this land, by a new frightening power. Well, they weren't so frightening yet.

2

Lights up on SIR THOMAS ROE, alone in his quarters. Over his eyes, a white masquerade mask.

FOOTNOTE

Mughal India, 1615. Sir Thomas Roe, an Englishman representing the East India Company, waits for his audience with the current Mughal Emperor, Jahangir to form a trade agreement. He clasps an english miniature of his beloved back home, one Lady Huntington. An object of the object of his desires.

ROE

We've finally made it, my love. Indya! How could I describe to you the grandiosity, the opulence of this place. Yes, I know these quarters are cramped. No bigger than an oven, no light but the door, so little the goods of two carts could fill them. They didn't even give me a time for my audience, not even a two-hour window! We get no respect these days, Englishmen. So we're not the largest Empire. So the Spanish and the Portugese and the DUTCH surpass us in trade and piracy. Are we not a noble people? Are we not owed some basic respect? We're young, we're scrappy, we're hungry! But this will be the day. This will be the day I finally seal this deal. My shot! Yes, I'm going to shake the Mughal Emperor's hand and the East India Company will be the greatest money-making force on the face of the earth! All will bow down to Great Britain! I will return a hero. And you, my Lady Huntington, will become a most powerful lady, a most influential lady. Greater than the Berentons or the Coupmanthorpps! When we enter a room, every head will turn. Turn to us. You will never again entertain a proposal from Sir Hundmanby. You will say "No! I am taken by Sir! Thomas! Roe!"

The ROYAL ADVISOR blows on a long curved horn.

ROYAL ADVISOR

Sir Thomas Roe! The Emperor is ready to see you!

ROE

Good God! How long have you been standing there?!

FOOTNOTE

Jahangir's Court is revealed! A lavish, vibrant, decadent throne room draped in textiles, gold, jewels—and in the center, a throne, on which the Mughal Emperor JAHANGIR reclines.

JAHANGIR

(yawning)

Ok, it's nap time.

ROYAL ADVISOR

Oh, My Lord Jahangir, I know how tired you must be from your busy days of weighing the matters of our land—

JAHANGIR

And drinking.

ROYAL ADVISOR

Come now, My Lord.

JAHANGIR

I have a headache.

ROYAL ADVISOR

One more audience, My Lord, and then your day will be concluded.

JAHANGIR

Fine.

ROYAL ADVISOR

It's Sir Thomas Roe, from England. They have brought gifts.

JAHANGIR

Gifts, eh? Fine. Let them enter.

ROYAL ADVISOR

Yes, my lord.

(For the benefit of the court:)

Your Majesty welcomes Sir Thomas Roe of England!

ROE bows.

ROE

Great Emperor Jahangir, I thank you for taking this time to meet with me in your no-doubt busy day. I come once again on the long journey from the Kingdom of England to—

JAHANGIR

England? Where's England again?

ROE

Where? Oh, it's—

JAHANGIR

Not you.

ROYAL ADVISOR whispers in his ear.

Uh huh...huh...ohhh...

3



SIR ROBERT CLIVE takes the stage.

CLIVE

We are in. We are in, my friends. We are finally in. *IN*-dia! Not just the tip of our pikes! Plums-deep! Our bells in her flue. Our bungler in her nest! Our kicky-wicky in her whim-wham! The path now open to her chapel of ease, we will plough her garden, my boys! The East India Company has arrived! But is our work done? Is that all you have? Come on, boys, dig down into your tumblers! That's right. That's right, my boys. Our work is never done. Our work is *NEVER* done. We are on a pilgrimage. We are on a mission handed down to us by God Himself! Britain may be small, but we are mighty. The Britons have a grand destiny ahead of them, and it will be the East India Company that leads the charge. We will not rest until every inch of God's earth has our name on it. Every galleon, every building, every shipping box, every blade of grass! They say all kinds of things about us. About me. Let them talk. A Great Man of history need not be a Good One. And what is "Good"? What use is it? "Good." "Evil." They don't mean anything. What matters is the objective and its achievement. "Success" or "Failure." In my life, I do not accept "Failure." The winners write history. The losers can cry all they want. So I'm an "Evil Man." A "stain on Britain's history." Me? Besmirch Britain? I made Britain. Her crucible was Bengal and I won it for Her. More than a hundred years under the Mughal's foot, begging permission for every act. The Europeans squabbling amongst ourselves while the Mughals reigned undefeated. Never would we even suggest that the Empire would weaken, or even fall. I got us power. I did what no one else could.

And when I went back to England our illustrious Parliament welcomed me with open arms and greasy palms. They were pleased with our profits, and they were willing to do anything to keep the river flowing. And you all benefit from the dirty work, whether you admit it or not. I'm still on your curry box! "Clive of India." "Of India." You know I always hated India? The oppressive heat, humid and slimy. It's halfway to Hell. Only something savage, demonic could thrive here. But I waited, and I waited. We would poke the bear ever so slightly. And when the opportunity came: we struck. I went to work, and yes, we plundered! The savages toiled and we reaped the profits. And before anyone interjects, yes, there was a "famine" in 1770, millions of Bengalis died, and so on and so forth, but I left in '64! I wasn't even there! I was merely managing affairs from our little shop in England. And yes, there was another famine in 1942, but you can't really blame me for that one. Anyway, there were some wars, some trumped-up "corruption charges" back in Britain that went nowhere. We were, of course, Too Big to Fail. By 1858 we basically had our whole run the place. Nothing happened without our input. And the rest, as they say...is history! And hasn't everyone gotten something out of all of this? Imagine a world without The Beatles. Imagine if you didn't have BIPOC Shakespeare productions and James Bonds to write "think-pieces" about. You think you're pulling those old codgers in for This Asian Life? Who would you cast to play Americans on your television shows? American actors? Please. Think about this: would you be able to tell the Queen from any other woman walking down the street if not for the stolen Indian diamond upon her head? And yet so many of you would like to erase it. You see what they do. They're trying to silence us! A coward's morality, to wish for the harvest without the plow. You may do what you like with my memory. Write your polemics, spit on my likeness. You cannot exorcise me. You will be left with nothing.

FOOTNOTE returns, clad in black, and lassoes Clive.

What is this supposed to be?

FOOTNOTE pulls.

No! You will not! No! Noooo!

Finally, he falls.

ACT II

THE ADVENTURES OF NIKHIL HUNT (PRESENT)



1

We are back in the same darkness from the end of Act I. This time, we see A MAN. A YOUNG INDIAN MAN. He looks out at us, frightened. He screams.

Lights up.

VICTORIA enters.

VICTORIA

Are you nervous?

NIKHIL

(Calmly)

No.

Present day.

Outside the front door of the Cross Estate, the mansion of a collector of rare Asian artifacts.

VICTORIA

You sure?

NIKHL

Why would I be nervous?

VICTORIA

Come on.

Pause.

NIKHIL

I'm not.

VICTORIA

Ok, I believe you.

NIKHIL

This is going to be a lovely evening with my future father-in-law.

VICTORIA

You're right.

NIKHIL

Are you nervous?

VICTORIA

I'm never nervous.

NIKHIL

I believe you, mostly.

VICTORIA

You see me and that's why I love you.

NIKHIL

Oh, is that why?

Beat.

VICTORIA

What do you mean by that?

The door opens, revealing ROGER, Victoria's father.

ROGER

My jewel!

VICTORIA

Daddy!

They embrace.

ROGER

It's good to have you home. Now.

(To NIKHIL)

Is this the legendary Nikhil Hunt in front of me?

NIKHIL

It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Sir.

A firm, confident handshake.

ROGER

We all loved your Father, even his rivals. I'm sorry I couldn't make the service. I was tied up in South America at the time. Literally.

NIKHIL

We live a demanding life. It was a proper send-off.

ROGER

I would expect no less.

Beat.

I'm sorry, I've already ruined the mood.

NIKHIL

Not at all.

ROGER

Seeing you made me a little bit nostalgic for the old days. Ok, let's get us a drink. Whisky?

NIKHIL

Well, sure!

ROGER

You know Indian whisky is barely whisky at all? Maybe about 10 or 12 percent. It's mainly fermented molasses. Much cheaper to make, but the EU won't let them use the name there.

NIKHIL

I think I'll take a scotch.

ROGER

A man of taste. Right away.

VICTORIA

(whispering)

Are you ok?

NIKHIL

(whispering)

Yeah.

VICTORIA

(whispering)

Ok. Just let me know.

NIKHIL

(whispering)

I'm fine.

VICTORIA

(whispering)

I'm just trying to be here for you.

NIKHIL

(whispering)

You're doing everything right.

VICTORIA

(whispering)

That's not what I mean.

NIKHIL

(whispering)

Vicky. It's ok. Relax.

VICTORIA

(whispering)

I'm always relaxed.

ROGER

You must forgive me, I gave our bartender a few days off. There's been some trouble back home for him.

VICTORIA

Cambodia?

ROGER

The Phillipines. I think? Not Indonesia.

VICTORIA

Vietnam?

ROGER

No it was definitely the Phillipines.

VICTORIA

What's going on there?

ROGER

Dictator something or other. I'll check The Economist. Anyway, it's sort of a blessing in disguise. I used to tend bar back in the day.

NIKHIL

Did you now?

ROGER

Yes! At gunpoint. You see, I became sort of the ward of a pirate crew on the Ivory Coast. But that's a longer story. It's been so long, I thought it could be fun to slum it a bit don't you think? This is a special occasion.

VICTORIA

Just don't go light like you used to.

ROGER

Sweetie, you're a grown woman now. You could probably drink me under the table.

VICTORIA

Don't be modest. But let's not test that theory.

ROGER

You say that now.

NIKHIL

She can keep pace with me, at least.

ROGER

My boy! That's the spirit. Are you going to take that lying down, Vicky?

VICTORIA

I will take my drink, please, Daddy, Father, Papa.

NIKHIL

Remember Sri Lanka?

VICTORIA

Not at all! That's what I'm afraid of.

NIKHIL

She outdrank a warlord.

ROGER

Well. Aren't they all children over there?

VICTORIA

Father! My God.

NIKHIL

Oh the child soldiers were out by round 2.

VICTORIA

Nicky!

NIKHIL

Then once he was under the table, Victoria was standing on top of it.