When the British government announced in 2014 that it would install a statue of Mohandas Gandhi in London’s Parliament Square, there were complaints in certain quarters that the wrong anticolonial Indian was being honored in the heart of an erstwhile empire. The statue, some said, should be not of the Mahatma—however great his status as tormentor-in-chief of the British Raj—but of Dadabhai Naoroji.

If there were many befuddled people who said “Dadabhai who?” at the time, there will be far fewer who will say so now, given the publication of “Naoroji,” by Dinyar Patel, an absorbing biography of the first Indian ever to be elected to the House of Commons. Naoroji won election as a candidate for William Gladstone’s Liberal Party in 1892. He represented Englishmen in a London borough at a time when Indians in India had no right to vote and no parliament of their own.

As struck as we may be today by the irony that the House of Commons was the only legislature for which Naoroji—a man with few rights in his own land—was entitled to run, we would also do well to note the unseemly fact that this “pioneer of Indian nationalism” is almost entirely forgotten in India.

A member of the British House of Commons at a time when Indians in India couldn’t vote, he argued that the empire was impoverishing his homeland.

By Tunku Varadarajan
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There are many reasons for Naoroji’s absence from contemporary India’s nationalist memory bank. One is an intellectual failing to which Mr. Patel draws apt attention: Historians of South Asia, he writes, “have almost reflexively shunned political elites” who do not “mesh well with the Marxist and postcolonial traditions that still dominate” the Indian academy. Naoroji was a textbook man of the elite. He was an anglicized, highly educated Parsi (or Zoroastrian), a member of a tiny ethno-religious minority that fled to India from a recently Islamized Persia in
the eighth century. The Parsis prospered greatly in their new Indian homeland, especially under the British, who favored them for their lighter skin and warmed to their embrace of Western ways, even as they remained faithful to their own tenacious religion.

The dogmatic anti-elitism of Indian historians is matched, says Mr. Patel, by their unwillingness “to accept biography as a legitimate form of scholarship.” Naoroji’s isn’t the only story to have gone largely untold by scholars, and there can be few major countries with a history as rich as India’s that have been as biographically neglectful of their prominent men and women. Luckily, Naoroji’s personal papers survive, although “forbiddingly vast,” damaged and disorganized. Mr. Patel—a Parsi himself, and now an assistant professor of history at the University of South Carolina—spent two years poring over Naoroji’s private correspondence, some 15,000 documents in all. His book grew out of eight years of study at Harvard, principally for his doctoral thesis. But the erudition of his enterprise, while everywhere evident, is never daunting.

Naoroji, born in 1825, deserves a sage biography. He was a scholar himself, becoming, at the age of 29, the first Indian to secure a full professorship at a British government university. He taught mathematics and natural philosophy at a college in Bombay, yet did so for only a year before setting sail for England in 1855 to partner in a business venture with wealthy Parsi confreres. In Europe, Mr. Patel tells us, Naoroji awakened to the gulf in prosperity between colonized India and the imperial West. He was, for instance, “simply stunned by the prosperity of the French countryside” and in London “felt the stark distance between mother country and colony.”

India now seemed, to the sensitive young Parsi, to be “the very byword for poverty and powerlessness,” and his appetite for commerce was soon dwarfed by a passion for nationalist politics. He embarked on what was to be a lifelong campaign to convince the British that they were “draining” India of its wealth. This “drain theory,” as it became known, disconcerted the British, and Naoroji developed it, Mr. Patel writes, “in an era when many Britons took it for granted that imperialism was a beneficent force and a stimulus for growth and prosperity in their colonies.” Through a “colossal assemblage of facts and figures”—mined from data made available to him by the British authorities themselves—Naoroji sought to demonstrate that imperialism was making Indians poorer by the year.

Paradoxically, it is this enterprise that may explain why Naoroji is an eclipsed figure in India today. Since Independence, most Indians have taken utterly for granted his once-radical view that the British Raj paupered India. Also working against any postcolonial celebration of Naoroji is the fact that he sought to persuade the British that their impoverishing of India was unacceptable, precisely because it fell short of Britain’s own moral values. He titled his own
magnum opus on the subject, published in 1901, “Poverty and Un-British Rule in India,” again making the point that true “Britishness” was fairness.

Although he was a founding member of the Indian National Congress political party in December 1885, his calls for India to be “a self-governing and prosperous nation” were tempered by concessions that Indians would still be “loyal to the British throne.” For all his many ties to progressive individuals and movements in India, Britain and elsewhere—and these included women suffragists, Irish nationalists (for whom he had a particular fondness), black Americans like Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. Du Bois, and workers’ unions—he was a gradualist. He preferred suasion, not boycotts, debate not defiance. He held to these views to the end of his life—he died in Bombay in 1917, at the age of 91—even as the independence movement in India became fiercely (if nonviolently) radical.

For all his fidelity to the core ideas of Indian nationalism, it is perhaps fitting that Naoroji’s election to the House of Commons—in an age when such a thing was seen as outlandish—is regarded as his most enduring political contribution. No less a personage than Lord Salisbury, the British prime minister, exclaimed at a political rally in 1888 (four years before Naoroji’s victory at the polls) that no British borough would ever elect “a black man” to Parliament. Salisbury was widely pilloried in Britain for his coarseness, which had the effect of raising Naoroji’s profile and contributing to his victory. Today around 10% of the House of Commons traces its descent to Britain’s former colonies, and the house would appear to be more welcoming of candidates from outside the age-old Britannic mainstream than India’s own parliament is of religious minorities. One has to think that Naoroji, today, would be more at home in cosmopolitan Britain than he would be in his independent—but increasingly intolerant—India.

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