

Review of Kishan S. Rana's *Churchill and India: Manipulation or Betrayal?*: No friend of the subcontinent

Churchill did nothing to prevent partition when he could have, argues a veteran diplomat

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British Prime Minister Winston Churchill at his desk. | Photo Credit: Getty Images



CHURCHILL AND INDIA

MANIPULATION OR BETRAYAL?

KISHAN S RANA



The worldview of Churchill as a great statesman is shaped by his spectacular success during World War II, when he led the Allies to victory against Nazi Germany. But that extraordinary achievement eclipsed from public memory some of Churchill's failings. The veteran diplomat, ambassador Kishan Singh Rana's scholarly book *Churchill and India: Manipulation or Betrayal?* attempts to bring to the surface Churchill's miscalculations in the British endgame, drawing conclusions from a swathe of archival documents, correspondence, letters, and conversations.

The depiction of Churchill's personality as being opportunistic and manipulative, behind his cigar-smoking relaxed demeanour and a wry sense of humour, is

backed by undeniable facts. It is revealing how Churchill used every pretext to deny self-rule to India and perpetuate British rule. He saw the perceived threat from Germany, the religious feud in India, Jinnah and the Muslim League as opportunities to divide and derail the Indian national movement. Indian princes were used to sabotage discussions on 'India Bill' under the Round Table Conferences from 1930-1932. During his first stint as Prime Minister from May 1940 to July 1945, prominent Congress leaders were locked up in jails to weaken the national movement. This primal nature of Churchill is not hard to contextualise, it is borne out of his strong belief in an Empire on which the sun never sets. India was the crown jewel in the Empire and the idea of self-rule for India was incomprehensible for Churchill.

A prejudiced view

Churchill's racism stands out in two painful indelible incidents: His shifting stance on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre from open condemnation to a comprehensive support for the



Winston Churchill | Photo Credit: Getty Images



The Bengal famine of 1943. | Photo Credit: special arrangement

British government's actions and the other during the Bengal famine tragedy in 1943, when he preferred to shift food grain to fight wars abroad rather than save millions from dying. The author argues that independent India's failure to set up its own enquiry while traumatic memories were still fresh may have been out of a misplaced sense of fair play. Raising a memorial for the victims would have been appropriate, and is perhaps, not too late.

Churchill's prejudicial Victorian vision may have blindsided him to notice India's civilisational wisdom. Rana observes that this lacuna made it hard for him to connect with Indian leaders; nor could he understand how Gandhi, ridiculed as a 'half naked fakir' connected with rural masses in a simple, yet powerful way. Why invaders were attracted to India's spirituality and mixed seamlessly in its cultural cauldron was missing in Churchill's understanding but it's a point duly recognised by contemporary historians. Robert Byron aptly put it that "India had a genius for disintegration but also re-integration in its own fashion as a living and evolving cultural entity."

The end of 200 years of British colonial rule in India amounts to plunder, negligence and destruction of a pre-existing quasi equilibrium, as in most colonised lands in Asia and Africa by European powers. In its climax, Rana holds Churchill's inaction squarely responsible for partition. During those crucial years he displayed no statesmanship to reason out why disparate groups in the subcontinent peacefully coexisting for centuries



A statue of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in Parliament Square, London. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

required to be regrouped on religious identity. This neglect amounts to Churchill's betrayal of India. Perhaps, it may be morally upright for the U.K. to offer an apology for its colonial neglect. It will not undo historical wrongs, but with an apology, the British can reclaim their honour, decency and courage.

The book contributes to a better understanding of history; it also urges leaders to draw lessons from the past while moving forward.

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