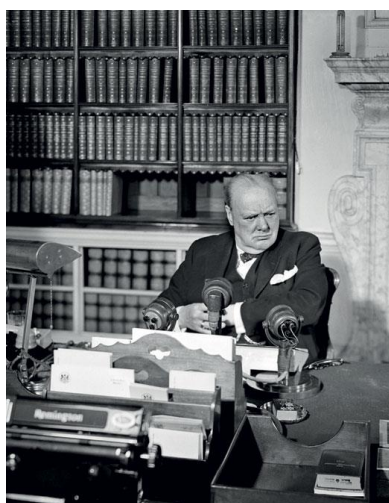


The article has been originally published at
<https://openthemagazine.com/cover-stories/unfair-play/>

OPEN Magazine
COVER STORY: FREEDOM ISSUE 2023
11 August, 2023

Unfair Play

Where was Winston Churchill's statesmanship when it came to India?



Winston Churchill (Photo: Getty Images)

WINSTON CHURCHILL, BRITAIN'S wartime Prime Minister from May 1940 to August 1945, had a huge impact on British India. Strangely, his mismanagement of the 'Jewel in the Crown', and his motivation, are under-studied. That India connection began with Churchill's three years as a cavalry subaltern, based in Bangalore from October 1896 to May 1899. He travelled widely, pursuing his passion for polo, also seeking military fame, first to the Afghan frontier in 1897 (producing the first of 40-plus books), and the next year to the Sudan War, (with another book, in two volumes). Churchill also used that time for intensive self-education, via the books his mother sent from London. That was when he framed his political vision and public affairs strategy. Remember, Churchill had no university education, going directly from Harrow to the Sandhurst Military Academy.

There is no gainsaying Churchill's crucial role in defeating Hitler's Nazi Germany during World War II. Churchill's greatness is undeniable. But it is a disservice to verity and history to

obfuscate the major dark spot in his life, his comprehensive misrule of British India in those crucial five years, 1940 to 1945, preceding Partition and the Independence of India and Pakistan.

My book *Churchill and India: Manipulation or Betrayal?* (2022), is the only one among over 2,000 oeuvres, offering a document-based, forensic, panoramic examination of those India-related actions. The task was difficult, partly owing to suppression of documentary evidence. Churchill was a notorious hoarder of papers, working assiduously to embellish his own life story. He frequently said that history would vindicate him, because he would write that history. From the late 1920s Churchill deployed a veritable ‘cottage industry’ of draft-writers, researchers, helpers, a form of collective production. Example: Churchill’s six-volume *The Second World War* (emerging sequentially, 1948 to 1954). Its base: official documents that he commandeered after his August 1945 election defeat. They were edited and rewritten, almost always aimed at self-exculpation, gilding his own role — as shown by David Reynolds in *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (2004).

I WILL START WITH addressing Churchill’s gross mishandling of the End of Empire, squandering valuable time, mid-1942 to July 1945, failing to prepare for the Partition of British India, doing nothing to reduce human suffering. Elected to Parliament in 1900 aged 25, over the next three decades Churchill held varied high ministerial appointments, none directly dealing with India. But the mounting Indian demand for autonomy, from the 1910s onwards, drew Churchill’s attention, and hostility. Throughout, Churchill clung to a Victorian vision, that India was the Empire’s ‘Crown Jewel’, on which the sun must never set. Those were half-digested lessons imbibed from his father, Lord Randolph, who died in 1895; he remained Churchill’s lifelong mentor. But Churchill failed to grasp his father’s humanity, which of itself was remarkable for those times. Remember, in the mid-1880s Randolph had asked that Britain should reach out, to understand the Indian people; he said, ‘the government knows less than nothing of the native mind’. Randolph sought termination of ruthless exploitation, also asking in vain for a parliamentary commission to examine Britain’s rule over India.

CHURCHILL RELISHED, AND exploited, the division between the Indian National Congress (INC), led by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Muslim League (ML) led by Jinnah, and anything that sharpened the Hindu-Muslim divide. Churchill called it the “bulwark” of British rule over India, hoping that this divide “would remain bitter and bloody”. That shaped his actions.

When did Churchill establish contact with Muhammad Ali Jinnah? No one knows for sure. Jinnah shifted to London after the first Round Table Conference at the end of 1930, staying there for over four years, establishing a prosperous legal practice. He told his sister that the locus of political activity had moved; his self-exile was also expedient in terms of internal ML

dissensions. From 1929-35, Churchill was fully committed to obstructing the passage of the Government of India Act of 1935. For Churchill those miniscule British concessions, partly opening provincial governance to Indian self-rule, heralded the end of Empire. Diehard opposition became his one-point agenda, in that futile revolt against his own Tory (Conservative) party. Churchill gathered a ragtag collection of ultra-nationalists; most of his political allies, even friends, deserted him. That obsession left him high and dry, out of office, till World War II broke out in September 1939.

At that time Churchill sought out all manner of allies, including the Indian Princely States; he considered flying out to India to muster opposition to the Government of India Act, 1935. How could he have ignored Jinnah, given their political congruence? Both, as sharp politicians, had to ensure that the connections remained hidden. What was Churchill's deeper motivation in favouring Jinnah and the ML? After the outbreak of WWII, British strategic planners concluded in 1941 that a Muslim state carved out of British India would be their long-term ally in that oil rich, Islamic region (according to Narendra Singh Sarila in *The Shadow of the Great Game*, 2005).

At the Churchill Archives (during two-month archival research in 2004, and on subsequent visits to Britain) I located correspondence dating to late 1946 between the private secretaries to Leader of the Opposition Churchill, and another leading member of the Conservative Party, 'Rab' Butler. Churchill sent him the 'file' containing his correspondence with Jinnah, which was returned a month later. But no such 'file', or substantive correspondence, exists in the papers that Churchill personally transferred to the Archives in the early 1960s. My search at the British National Archives brought up Jinnah's letter to Churchill of January 2, 1941. That is the first known, surviving, substantive message from the one to the other. It has the flavour of a continuing dialogue; Jinnah extravagantly claimed that he enjoyed the support of 90 percent 'Mussalmans' of British India. That claim was fiction, though Jinnah had gained in support, after the 1938 provincial elections, when ML barely won 23 percent of the seats reserved for Muslims, failing to gain power in a single of the 14 provinces. By the early 1940s, support for the ML had grown, partly through the indirect message to British officials via PM Churchill's patronage of Jinnah. We know from David Stafford's *Churchill and Secret Service* (2007) that Churchill was among the very first leaders to actively deploy intelligence agencies. But those British papers remain closed; India's pre-1947 Intelligence Bureau sent to London all its sensitive papers, and destroyed the remainder, before the August 1947 transfer of power.

NATURALLY, SAFEGUARDING BRITAIN through World War II, steering the Allies to victory, was Churchill's topmost priority. And we have ample evidence of his strong leadership. But his remit included Empire affairs, including management of British India, especially the insistent self-rule demands of the INC and the ML. One of Churchill's greatest WWII follies was his personal failure to initiate preparations for Partition. Though unannounced, we have proof

that Churchill had decided this by 1942. Evidence: Roosevelt's message to Churchill of May 11, 1942 (analysed in my book). Obsessed with his India hatred, he profoundly disliked that outcome. But ostrich like denial of looming reality was not governance — he abdicated responsibility. The Subcontinent paid that price.

Our historians are divided over the wisdom of the August 1942 Gandhi-Nehru 'Quit India' call (after the failure of the March- April 1942 Cripps Mission). That played into British hands. On August 8, 1942, the entire working leadership of INC was jailed, from Gandhi, Nehru, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, Maulana Azad, right down to middle ranking personalities, numbering over 70,000. The leaders were isolated, bereft of mutual consultation for nearly three years. And throughout, Jinnah was groomed as the putative Pakistan's leader, privileged, protected, 'sponsored'. But no preparation was undertaken for Partition. That was at the heart of Churchill's misgovernance.

Roosevelt's February 1943 plea for the release of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, and Azad was spurned. (FDR had addressed that request to Viceroy Linlithgow, through US representative in Delhi, William Phillips, not to Churchill). But Roosevelt had wearied of pushing Churchill on self-determination for India, failing in his repeated efforts of 1940-42, always brusquely rejected by Churchill.

IN THE PITHY language of the Chinese classics, Confucius advises: "The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name." For too long, the catastrophic famine that decimated the people of East India during World War II has been mislabelled the "Bengal Famine". That suited British India. The 1944-45 Commission of Inquiry (Woodhead Commission), excluded the starvation deaths and suffering in neighbouring provinces, Assam, Bihar, and Orissa, limiting the official death toll to 1.5 million. "The Great Famine of 1942-44" better captures that gross neglect of governance, the worst calamity in two centuries of British India rule.



A corpse removal squad in Calcutta during the 1943 Bengal Famine

The facts are straightforward. Japan's 1942 attack in South-East Asia, coincided with low rice production in East India. The customary supplies from Burma were blocked when Burma was occupied by Japan. Fearing further land attack on India and occupation, the British Indian Army destroyed private rice stocks across East India, including the food holdings of small farmers. Merchants hoarded that staple, driving prices beyond the common man's reach. The Administration's disaster management collapsed. Viceroy Linlithgow did not once visit East India, the traditional device to spur on-ground relief. British India officials endlessly begged London for extra ships for relief supplies. That had no chance; Churchill's close aide, Lord Cherwell oversaw global shipping allocations; his hatred for India was known. Those officials foolishly refused to offset food grain shipments against their regular ship allocations. Mounting starvation deaths went unheeded.

Leo Amery was the cabinet minister handling India affairs throughout Churchill's first premiership. A Harrow-mate, senior in school to Churchill by a few years, his daily diary is a revealing resource, deserving close study by Indian historians. Other key players have written of the Churchill-Amery 'frenemy' relationship, and spectacular fights at Cabinet meetings. What do we learn from those accounts? One: the first time Churchill discussed a strategy for dealing with India was in 1945; he detested dealing with India. Two: Amery's first mention of the Great Famine was on December 24, 1942. Later: "... the Cabinet generally treated the matter as a bluff on India's part..." (August 4, 1943). "Winston was prepared to admit that something should be done but very strong on the point that Indians are not the only people who are starving in this war...it is just as important to get food to Greece..." (September 24, 1943). "My statement (in Parliament) that perhaps a million may have died from famine or its indirect consequences in Bengal made no stir..." (January 20, 1944). Three: Churchill corresponded directly with Viceroy Linlithgow, with Amery left out, evidently via the secret services. None of this is available. Four: on his final fast in early 1944, when Gandhi came close to dying, Churchill saw this as farce, claiming Gandhi dined better than he did. Five: for all their rancour, Amery makes no reference to Churchill's dialog with Jinnah, safeguarding that secrecy.

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Churchill's personal responsibility? He ignored disaster relief; not a single of his famous directives ('Action This Day'), was issued. The Viceroy downwards, the British India administration remained conspicuously maladroit; Churchill ignored that gross failure. Field Marshal Wavell, commanding the Indian Army, took charge as Viceroy in August 1943. He promptly went to Bengal to spur relief, the very first Viceregal journey to the disaster zone. Viceroy Wavell said: London treated India with "neglect...sometimes even hostility and

contempt”. Churchill’s refrain: the Greeks needed food grains more than the Bengalis, “who were half starved anyway”. Most Churchill biographers have skated lightly over these facts. Churchill scholar Piers Brendon writes: “It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Churchill’s reluctance to alleviate the Bengal Famine stemmed, at least in part, from a racist animus.”

FROM THE 1920s onwards, Churchill had but one formula to deal with India’s demand for self- governance: extern Gandhi, out of India. Days after August 8, 1942, when 70,000+ INC leaders and middle rankers were arrested, Churchill’s Cabinet instructed Viceroy Linlithgow to shift Gandhi to Aden, and other top leaders to East Africa. The Labour leaders in the Cabinet, supposedly friends of INC, did not dissent. But the otherwise spineless Linlithgow balked; he and his 12-member Executive Council unanimously refused. They understood how such actions would set India on fire.

Commencing around 1926, Churchill constantly abused Gandhi, Hindus and India, with singularly nasty language, full of invective. “Half-naked fakir” was his epithet for Gandhi that stuck. Churchill could not grasp the political calculation and ‘image branding’ behind Gandhi’s choice of attire. Gandhi’s response? Attending the 1930 Second Round Table Meeting in London, Gandhi sought a meeting, to no avail. In 1935 and 1936, Gandhi sent two emissaries to meet Churchill, with olive branches, even thanking Churchill for his concerns for India’s poor. Churchill graciously received GD Birla, major industrialist, and Mira Behn, formerly Madeleine Slade, daughter of a British Admiral. But beyond nice, empty words, Churchill did not move an iota.

That raw animosity in Churchill’s hatred for Hindus remains inexplicable. His direct 1896-99 experiences, dealing with Indians were confined to the typical servants of British subalterns, and local merchants at the periphery of cantonments, especially the Hindu moneylenders, to whom Churchill took frequent recourse. The polo-playing princes and their retinue, with whom he consorted in his passion for that game, did not figure in his ‘Hindu’ typology. Strangely, it was Katherine Mayo’s venomous *Mother India* (1927) that gave him the vocabulary for Hindu hatred, weaponising latent hostility. There is a surfeit of evidence for Churchill’s racist venom. Did that anger partly owe to his obsessive, futile five-year campaign against the Government of India Act, 1935, which so badly damaged his own political career?

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SHORTLY AFTER RELEASE from 33 months of prison, Gandhi wrote to Churchill, his only direct communication. After a self-deprecating reference to a “naked fakir” he said: “I approach you then as such and ask you to trust and use me for the sake of your people and mine and through them those of the world.” That was an extraordinary act, overcoming rancour, to cope with the looming turmoil of the Partition. Churlishly, Churchill did not respond, later claiming he never received the letter (though sent through the Viceroy’s Office in New Delhi). Where was Churchill’s statesmanship, or fair play?

As Indians we should know our past. History is too important to be confined to simplified textbooks, learnt by rote at school, and then forgotten, save in stylised images. Nor should we treat history as a political football, as happens easily in our social media age, when we enjoy ubiquitous access to global audiences through smartphones, and quick soundbites. Without deeper Indian research, how shall we tell our story to the world at large?

Churchill was correct that understanding the past deepens our capacity to anticipate the future, though he did not live up to that adage. History helps us understand ourselves, the world around us. It enriches our lives.

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