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Churchill and India: manipulation or betrayal

by Kishan S. Rana, London, Routledge, 2023, xxii+192 pp., $136 (hardback), ISBN 9781032467399

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Kishan Rana's *Churchill and India* unmasks Winston Churchill, the celebrated war hero of the 'blood, toil, tears, and sweat' fame, and tracks the making of the mindset of a die-hard imperialist through a meticulous analysis of four phases of his life. The book builds on two core ideas. The first narrates the critical role that India played in the former British prime minister's life. The second holds out an 'idea of India' which is the antithesis of that which underpinned the *weltanschauung* of Winston Churchill. The interplay of these two Indias – Churchill's and Rana's – and how this was causal in Churchill's journey from a young subaltern in the 4th Hussars, posted in Bangalore, to a conservative curmudgeon in London, forms the *leitmotiv* of this book.

Churchill and India is a study in counterfactual history. Rana spells this out in Chapter five, with its suggestive title: 'If and perhaps: A conclusion'. The juxtaposition of the two concepts – Churchill's 'Orientalist construction of India' – he saw the colony as a passive recipient of imperial 'progress', essentially a triptych of domination, exploitation, and ideological transformation – against India as a pre-modern polity in a state of dynamic equilibrium prior to colonial rule, gives this book its edge over the numerous volumes on Churchill's life, ranging between the unabashedly hagiographic to the uncritically dismissive.

In Churchill's imagination, India – the 'Jewel in the Crown' – was the crucial cog in the imperial wheel. Like imperialists of his genre and era, he saw the colony as both a lucrative opportunity but also a potential threat to imperial rule. Rana makes this point through his analysis of the four phases of Churchill's career. During the first segment, (1896–1920), Churchill's view of India was marked by '*sympathy and ignorance*' (p. 161, emphasis in the original). As an ambitious officer in the British Indian army, solicitously attended to by

Indian servants, young Churchill showed a general sympathy towards the less privileged. To make up for his lack of higher education, he undertook prodigious amounts of readings in European culture but felt no need to delve into the classics of India's indigenous scholarship. That gap in deeper knowledge of India might explain why, under the pressure of rising Indian nationalism during the years 1929–39, he turned into a diehard opponent of constitutional reform and incremental transfer of power to Indian hands. This, he argued, would turn the country to an adversary, led by the upper caste, Hindu-dominated Congress party, which could not be trusted to stand by the Empire.

Between 1939 and 1945 – the Second World War catapulted him to the pinnacle of power as the prime minister – Churchill's obduracy turned into '*active sabotage*' (p. 162, emphasis in original), with terrible consequences for India. Two of the most prominent examples of this were first, the Bengal famine, which cost three million lives and, second, Britain's total abnegation of responsibility in the last phase of imperial rule leading to the terrible violence of the Partition. In addition, thanks to the Atlantic Charter, which Churchill played an important role in drafting, India was also denied a seat at the high table of diplomacy (pp. 97–99). From 1945 till the end, Churchill continued to be the unreconstructed imperialist, his personal bitterness about the loss of India remained undiminished.

No domination can be complete, however, without the collusion – explicit or implicit – between the oppressor and the oppressed. Rana's narrative extends beyond an analysis of Churchill to also relentlessly showcase the stooges of Empire. He spares neither its willing collaborators nor its unwitting accomplices. The photo of a jolly Nehru in 1949 (p. 153, also on the book's cover), the freshly anointed prime minister of post-colonial India, cheerfully ensconced in British high society under the hawk-like glare of Churchill, shows the resilience of the collective mindset, seamlessly passed down with the transfer of power in 1947 from the colonisers to their post-colonial successors.

A picture tells a thousand stories. A cannier politician like Gandhi or Patel would have seen through Churchill's imperial charade, with the former British prime minister going through the motions of contrition, while in the background British diplomats were hard at work, undermining the position of India in the United Nations Security Council on the issue of Kashmir. Rana takes the Congress leadership to task for their lack of a grand strategy. He is one of the few historians to draw attention to the utter absence of a tactical sense in the Congress High Command which virtually elected itself out of the mainstream of Indian politics during the crucial years 1942-45 by failing to engage with the British rulers (p. 83, 134, 162), leaving the field wide open to Jinnah and the Muslim League.

Churchill and India could also be read as a *victim's guide to imperial rule and the making of an imperial mindset,* thanks to its devastating dissection of the ways and means through which one society captures the levers of power and the intellectual means of self-definition of another, to the point of becoming, to use Nandy's term, its 'intimate enemy'. A distinguished diplomat, at home in the West and the East with an abiding interest in Kautilya whose *Arthashastra* provided a complete theory of the state and a social contract between the King and the citizens, Rana suggests an alternative narrative that analyses India's evolution in terms of 'what if'. He draws attention to the civilizational basis of the pre-modern Indian state. India's imperial rulers could construe the country only in terms of their own Westphalian mindset which could not grasp the dynamic equilibrium of Indian society that sprang from the deep roots of Indian culture and pre-modern polity. Rana's allusion to these emergent forces of 'unity in diversity' – he astutely notes how different India is in this respect from Europe – makes the subtext of this book highly relevant to the crosscurrents of Indian politics today.

Rana concludes: 'Churchill never understood India. But then he had no interest in the real India. The Empire was his lodestar' (p. 178). The diminished and all-too-human Churchill who emerges from Rana's analysis is as a true and unapologetic believer in British imperialism until the end. A gifted raconteur, Rana speaks directly to the reader in the tone of a senior statesman, with deep empathy for the main *dramatis personae* and a subtle appreciation of the historical context in which they operated.

Rana's new book, finely balanced between historical narrative and personal anecdotes, skilfully connects India's colonial past to the present and looks beyond to a feasible and self-conscious future. Far from being a text based on currently fashionable anti-imperialist ranting, *Churchill and India* is a closely reasoned, meticulous analysis of primary and secondary sources, archival resources, and previously unknown facts gleaned from fellow diplomats. That makes this book an eminently readable treasure-trove for the general reader, a required reading for those seriously interested in the making of imperialism, and a valuable handbook for the movers and shakers of the Global South.
