

# The Man who Stood Against the Tide of History

Ramu Damodaran

## CHURCHILL AND INDIA: MANIPULATION OR BETRAYAL?

By Kishan S Rana

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Historian Ramachandra Guha has spoken of what he calls the ‘Boyle’s Laws’ of biography writing; named for their author, Goethe’s biographer Nicholas Boyle, they argue for a biography to be a logical progression to its conclusion, rather than the elaboration of a premise stated in advance; the drawing upon characters other than the principal to illuminate the narrative and extensive reference to sources other than those directly attributable to that subject. Winston Churchill’s views were congruent with Boyle’s on at least the first law; in the introduction to his maiden work, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, he writes that ‘on general grounds, I deprecate prefaces. I have always thought that if an author cannot make friends with his reader, and explain his objects, in two or three hundred pages, he is not likely to do so in fifty lines.’

Kishan Rana clearly concurs. While the title of his book *Churchill and India: Manipulation or Betrayal?* is puzzling (in that the alternatives seem scarcely in contradiction to each other) and preemptively conclusive, its narrative is not, unfolding point by seamless point towards a final set of hypotheses. That the book emerged, as the author says, from the ‘quasi isolation’ during the pandemic may explain its self-interrogatory nature, questions asked, alternative answers offered (although in the end it is ‘reader, you decide’) much in the manner, one imagines, of the discussions and debates in the Yan Jin club of young diplomats of which the author was a member when posted in China in the early sixties. And that solitude may well have contributed also to the leisured lyricism in much of the writing, compelling disagreement with the author’s assertion that ‘presented here in a paraphrased mode, Churchill’s strong, direct words lose their force; such

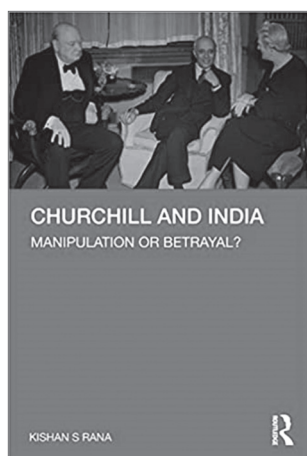
narratives must be read in the original.’ Kishan Rana’s versions soar.

The author respects Boyle’s other laws as well, allowing characters (including Churchill’s parents, friends, loves, political allies and adversaries and the vast landscape of people in India so critical to the story) to animate its pages, with extensive annotations almost anatomical, each finger of fact pointing in the direction of a defined determination while remaining organically linked to the body of the work in its whole. He sees four distinct phases in Churchill’s association with India: beginning as ‘romantic adventurer’ on his first landing on the subcontinent in 1896, continuing with ‘benign but superficial empathy’ until 1920, then two decades of ‘tempest, of extravagant, unreasoning hostility to India’, followed by his 1940-45 Prime Ministership, ‘the years of manipulation, plus attempted subversion of Indian independence’, and finally, his last twenty years, ‘mellower, but not a whit apologetic’.

Through that life, he sought reassurance in the loneliness of his oratory and his writing, including in the ‘imaginary dialogue between his father and himself, centered on (his) life achievements’, a tribute to a remote but affectionate parent whom he lost on 24 January 1895, seventy years before the day of his own death, a parent whose vision for India was everything his son’s was not, personified in Randolph Churchill’s call ‘to weld (Indians) by the influence of our knowledge, our law, and our higher civilization, in process of time, into one great, united people; and to offer to all the nations of the West the advantages of tranquility and progress in the East’.

But for Winston Churchill, as this work makes clear, all that mattered was the gallery. The supposed convictions that prompted him, in 1904, to cross the floor in Parliament, opposing a bill he said reflected racial prejudice against Jews, saw no reflection in the views he was to express on Kenya that ‘there was no question of granting electoral rights to the “naked savages of the Kikuyu and the Kavirondo”’, precursor, as Kishan Rana notes, of his ‘India ways, with imaginary, scary fiction... racist even by the norms of his times’ and his felicity in damning with barely perceptible praise, and ‘half growls’, (‘primitive but agreeable races’). In 1931, a published speech sought to exile Gandhi to a desert island arguing that the Congress wanted to replace British rule with ‘Brahmin domination which would threaten Muslims and the oppressed castes with extinction’; in 1935, he spoke of being a ‘sincere admirer...of the heroic efforts’ that Gandhi was making for India’s depressed people.

This was only one in a conundrum of contradictions that informs the many perceptions Kishan Rana diligently gleans. That ‘Churchill did not seek out any Indian intellectual, even as a casual interlocutor, much less for serious discourse on the life questions that deeply engaged him’; had he done so, ‘he might have seen



another India, one that he had never imagined'. That he was hostage to 'superficial, outdated, half-understood concepts, buttressed neither by a study of facts nor subsequent revisits to his own assumptions, much less checking these against ground realities.' And, yet, that Churchill 'insightfully assessed (the ability of Indians) to adapt and thrive in the environment

of different lands' in which the author sees 'perhaps one of the earliest British tributes to the Indian diaspora... prescient anticipation of today's "globalization", future competition in the Western world through "Asiatic commercial ambition".'

The larger commercial argument, the author suggests, 'deserves more attention than it has usually received'. While India was a 'captive market', Churchill purported to see the Empire as essential to the wellbeing of the governed as much as the governing; in his 1931 phrase, had Britain addressed itself 'to the moral and material problems that are at the root of Indian life...it would have been much better for the working folk of Burnley and Bombay, of Oldham and Ahmedabad'.

'Today,' Kishan Rana notes, 'we would call these good governance concepts. But the problem was that Churchill clutched at anything that served his political purposes. His interest in improved colonial management was shallow. He never reverted to these arguments or developed them into policy recommendations. Worse, later as Prime Minister, determining colonial policy, these humanitarian and good governance concerns did not tinge or guide Churchill's actions.'

What their profession did do was help shape his spoken and written word, which gave indication of the person he might have proven to be, courageous and coolheaded, drawing upon the metaphor of his first ventures into battle as a soldier, which were invariably combined with journalistic reporting from the battlefield, harbinger to the intertwined lives he led as a leader and a historian, each action determined as much by the immediacy of its impact as much as its measure by a reader distant in time and geography; in the end, and in his life, affirming the truth that all seemed to coalesce around the quotation from Shakespeare's *King John* with which he opened *Malakand*.

*According to the fair play of the world  
Let me have an audience.*

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## How Ideas Shape Policies and Laws

Jitendra Kumar

### IDEAS MATTER: DEBATING THE IMPACT OF BRITISH RULE ON INDIA

By Peter Robb

Primus Books, Delhi, 2020, pp. 305, ₹ 1050.00

Peter Robb's *Ideas Matter: Debating the Impact of British Rule on India* attempts in nine chapters to present a scenario on the debates regarding the impact of British rule on Indian society, economy, culture and politics. The long-debated introduction titled 'Changing Governance, Agriculture and Identities', highlights various colonial themes. The author starts with an analysis of the relationship between India and Britain and argues that 'both countries would be different today' without British rule in India. The author then surveys the British legacy and the nature of economic change which made the British dominant in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He also cites an example of 'great divergence' by Kenneth Pomeranz. The introduction also talks about the starting point of revenue administration in India, with some examples from the *mansabdari* and *jagirdari* systems of the Mughal empire.

Furthermore, Robb defines variant meanings of agriculture and argues that 'agriculture is undertaken for different purposes: for example, for food, profit or status'. He takes the arguments of Morris D Morris, Tapan Raychaudhuri and Tirthankar Roy on the impact of British rule and puts forward his views. He says that 'Raychaudhuri agreed that there was patchy commercial development and increase in agricultural output in the nineteenth century, but stressed the lack of regional and sectoral balance, and the unfair distribution of profits. He blamed British laws and policies and moneylenders...'. However, 'there are long-term features of the Indian economy that should be examined' Robb argues, 'and that, even under the British, there was much Indian agency in determining the ways people lived, worked and traded'. He further argues that 'my criticism was not based on evidence showing increasing productivity nor was I denying the many problems with colonial political, revenue and development policies... . My argument was merely that these questions are immensely complex and the connection with particular colonial policies hard to prove.' The introduction also covers the British relationship with workers, Dalits, and women, their identity and rights.

'New Directions in South Asian History' discusses