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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Bias and bigotry shaped Churchill’s politics in South Asia

‘Churchill and India: Manipulation or Betrayal?’ by Kishan S Rana (Routledge, Oxford, 2023)

Winston Churchill looms large in British and European narratives of the 20th century, as also in the history of the Indian sub-continent. But, while in the West he is celebrated as leader and hero, his role in India's political trajectory is less known.

This gap in our knowledge and understanding of our own history has now been bridged by the Indian diplomat and scholar, Kishan Rana. With deep study of archival material and secondary sources, Rana has provided a comprehensive and lucid presentation of Churchill's central role in shaping events that culminated in the partition of the sub-continent and the widespread disruption and killings that accompanied it. The implications of this toxic legacy continue to reverberate across South Asia.

Churchill spent three years in India (1896-99) as a young subaltern. He never returned to India after this tour. But these three years imparted to Churchill the mindset—and prejudices—that remained with him for the rest of his life.

These included: a firm belief in empire and Britain's civilising mission among the "primitive but agreeable races" that peopled its far-flung dominions. His limited encounters with natives in the sub-continent instilled in him a life-long animosity for Hindus and, in contrast, a certain empathy for and even affection towards Muslims—he contrasted the mean-spirited Hindu money-lender with the brave, even chivalrous, Pathan warriors he had seen in action.

Britain's civilising mission grew out of the sense of racial superiority that animated most western people at that time. But in Churchill's case this deep-seated racism remained throughout his life, even when it had got diluted among many of his compatriots. This commitment to the responsibility "imposed on the imperial race", coloured his approach to India and made him an inveterate foe of Indian aspirations to throw off the colonial yoke.

Churchill viewed the Congress as intent on pursuing religious and caste interests to secure "Brahmin domination" after Britain's departure. Churchill was particularly hostile to Gandhiji; he referred to him as a "fanatic" and a "fakir-type" typical of the East; Churchill popularised the term "naked fakir". He also loathed Nehru as a "Communist revolutionary" and the worst of Britain's enemies in India.

In contrast, Churchill had very cordial ties with Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the head of the Muslim League, and consistently highlighted Jinnah's concerns relating to the interests of Muslims in India. In this regard, Churchill was not averse to serious misrepresentation of facts and figures to support his prejudices. In the 1930s, he said that India had 80 million Hindus and the same number of Muslims, while the correct figure was 240 million Hindus.

Churchill also told US president Roosevelt, then pushing for constitutional reform, that Muslims, then 100 million strong in the country, provided the "main fighting part" of the Indian army—again, a falsehood: Hindus in the armed forces were 41 percent, while Muslims were 35 percent.

Churchill viewed Jinnah's championing of Muslim interests as strengthening Britain's "divide-and-rule" agenda in India, while Jinnah obtained powerful support for his own political game-plan; thus, the interests of these two stalwarts converged. Churchill's interest, as Rana says, was to continue the British Empire for a few more generations. But, if independence of India became inevitable, then Churchill saw much merit in Jinnah's "two-nation" project, seeing in Muslim Pakistan a long-term strategic asset to serve western interests in South, West and Central Asia in the emerging divided world order.

Thus, after delaying constitutional reform in India for many years, Churchill played a significant, perhaps crucial role in achieving the partition of the country on communal basis in 1947.

The archives suggest that Jinnah's first contact with Churchill was in 1941. However, Rana has convincingly argued that their ties possibly went back to the early 1930s, when in 1931-34 Jinnah had temporarily moved his residence to London. Later, throughout Churchill's tenure as prime minister (1941-45), Jinnah maintained a regular interaction with his patron.

This relationship proved crucial for the interests of both sides when, in January 1937, about 35 million Indians voted in provincial elections: Congress won in eight of the 11 provinces, while the Muslim League won only 108 out of 485 seats reserved for Muslims and did not get a majority in any province. Despite this debacle, Churchill's support ensured that Jinnah came to be accepted as the "sole spokesman" of all Indian Muslims and obtained a virtual veto over all subsequent constitutional initiatives.

Though Churchill ceased to be prime minister in 1945, Jinnah's position by then was unassailable since, under Churchill's tutelage, he had garnered support for his partition agenda from several British officials and, very likely, from the powerful Intelligence Bureau. Churchill can, therefore, be held responsible for personally backing Jinnah politically and giving life to the "Pakistan" project, despite the results of the 1937 elections.

There is another failure. During his prime ministership, Churchill refused to countenance any plans for India's independence; hence, not surprisingly, the British government, both in London and Delhi, was totally ill-prepared for the mass two-way exodus across the Punjab and Bengal borders and the wanton killings that accompanied this large scale displacement.

This failure cannot but be placed at Churchill's doorstep, who, with his blinkered, communal vision, racism and intellectual obduracy, entirely failed to instill in his officials the need to organise the country for the inevitable parting of ways.

Churchill's toxic legacy lives on in the domestic and cross-border communal confrontations that continue to animate politics in South Asia 75 years after independence and partition.

Rana's book deepens our understanding of the complex events that have led to this situation and calls us to make every effort to correct this inheritance with a new vision that celebrates a richer, more diverse and more eclectic heritage of the Indian subcontinent.

Talmiz Ahmad *is a former Indian diplomat. He holds the Ram Sathe Chair for International Studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune, India.*

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