

Churchill and India



Revision of the main issues

What kind of attitude does it appear that Churchill has of India from these quotes?

- *“India is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the equator”*. Speech at Royal Albert Hall, London (18 March 1931)
- *“It is alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer of the type well-known in the East, now posing as a fakir, striding half naked up the steps of the Viceregal palace to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor”*. Comment on Gandhi's meeting with the Viceroy of India, addressing the Council of the West Essex Unionist Association (23 February 1931); as quoted in "Mr Churchill on India" in The Times (24 February 1931)

What kind of attitude does it appear that Churchill has of India from this quote?

- In an entry for September 1942 in *Leo Amery : Diaries* (1988), edited John Barnes and David Nicholson, p. 832: *‘During my talk with Winston he burst out with: "I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion.”’*

What was the Problem?

- Indian independence movement was led by Gandhi (leader of the Indian Congress Party) and his programme of 'civil disobedience'. Actions had Gandhi's 'March to the Sea' (leading thousands in protest at a tax on salt) and hunger strikes.
- Churchill had opposed the Round Table Conference (1931) on the issue of whether or not India should be given Dominion status. Churchill particularly objected to the fact that Gandhi should be present.

Source

Source B: At a mass meeting in London's Albert Hall called by the Indian Empire Society, an unrepresentative pressure group opposed to constitutional change in India, Churchill speaks against discussions about greater Indian self-government.

I am against this surrender to Gandhi. I am against these conversations and agreements between the Viceroy of India and Mr. Gandhi. Gandhi stands for the expulsion of Britain from India. Gandhi stands for the permanent exclusion of British trade from India. Gandhi stands for Brahmin domination of India. To abandon India to the rule of the Brahmins* would be an act of cruel and wicked negligence. It would shame forever those who bore its guilt. These Brahmins deny the rights of existence to nearly sixty million of their own countrymen whom they call 'untouchable'.

Speech, 18 March 1931

* Brahmins = members of the Hindu upper caste

Relations within the Conservative Party

- It didn't help Churchill's relationship with Baldwin that Churchill's meeting at which he said these things came at the time of a Conservative by-election in Westminster.
- By being at this meeting, Churchill was flouting party policy and encouraging others to do the same.
- This was very unwise of Churchill: especially as Churchill was disassociating himself from all three political parties by doing so: as the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberals had come together to try to iron out India.
- Churchill was taking on the entire political establishment.

The Indian Empire Society

- Lobbying organisation against concessions to the Indians on the subject of the Empire.
- Highly unrepresentative of British opinion.

Churchill further falls out with his party

- 1933: Government white paper proposed an elected federal government for India.
- India Defence League, founded by Churchill and supported by 57 Conservative MPs and the Daily Mail and the Morning Post.
- Little popular enthusiasm: despite Churchill trying to persuade the Lancashire public that more Indian independence would lead to India imposing restrictions on Lancashire cotton imports.
- 1935: Randolph Churchill (son of Churchill) stood as an independent Conservative on the India platform in a by-election, but he split the Conservative vote and the Labour candidate was elected. Despite Churchill's opposition to his son's standing, he still lost popularity further.

Other sources on Churchill's attitude in 1931

Source A: The Secretary of State for India supports moderate reforms in a statement to the British House of Commons.

Except in some quarters, the Government's India policy has received a good press and moderate opinion generally recognizes the value of a new situation in which all parties can cooperate to bring a new constitution. The Indian Nationalists welcome the policy and approve of the principles behind it. Muslim leaders acknowledge the Government's efforts to meet the political hopes of India and approve of the Prime Minister's guarantees for the protection of political liberties and the rights of minorities. Peaceful conditions will be created and will enable Government to implement change.

William Wedgwood Benn, speech, 26 January 1931

Other sources on Churchill's attitude in 1931

Source E: This commentator offers a defence of Churchill's opposition to self-government in India

Churchill's prophecies were not completely erratic. What would happen to the rest of the Empire, he asked rhetorically, if it lost its centerpiece, India? 'That loss', he went on, 'would mark and consummate the downfall of the British Empire. It would be final and fatal and reduce us to the scale of a minor Power.' He was right about this and also right in warning about sectarian strife and Hindu domination.

Manfred Weidhorn, Foreword to Churchill's India, a collection of his speeches on India made in 1931, published in 1990

Overall effects of India in the 1930s on Churchill

- Churchill was seen as extreme and old fashioned (especially as he had published a book about his younger days called *My Early Life* which had an account of his time as a soldier in India).
- All the three main parties were upset with him: Conservatives because of his criticism of his support for reform in India, Labour because of attitudes towards the workers and class politics, The Liberals who saw him as a renegade who left them and joined the Conservatives (although previously he had left the Conservatives to join them).

Reminder of the Government of India Act, 1935

Balfour Declaration of 1924 stated that Britain and Dominions would have equal status. This did not.

Provided for the establishment of an India Federation, separating Burma from India and setting up rival assemblies on a much wider franchise than previously. Direct elections introduced. Franchise increased from 7million to 35million. More Indian representatives in state governments.

Britain kept overall control and did not consult India when war was declared (by India-under the Viceroy).

There were issues over this and the *Atlantic Charter* which discussed the right to self determination for all nations. It was agreed between Churchill and Roosevelt.

Indian National Congress did form local governments with British and other Indian parties until 1939.

India after 1939

- 1940: Churchill as PM was not concerned with plans for constitutional changes in India.
- The Cabinet rejected Congress demands for a constitution in India after the war, and Gandhi's party resigned from all provisional governments.
- Churchill was concerned that self-government for the Indians would mean the end of Indian troops fighting for the British.

The Cripps Mission

- 1942 required concessions Attlee (Deputy PM) proposed a post war constitution to stop a revolt in India and please America.
- Churchill sent Sir Stafford Cripps over to discuss giving control of most of the administration of India to the Indians. Churchill didn't support Cripps views, however, and got the Cabinet to reject an agreement negotiated by Cripps about Indian control of defence (although Cripps had refused to concede to the Indians control over the military).
- Congress took up a "Quit India" campaign, and were rewarded by being made illegal, Gandhi being arrested, unrest and civil disobedience requiring substantial British military presence.
- Churchill's view was that there should be "no apology, no quitting, no idea of weakening or scuttling"

A Source that refers to Cripps

Source C: An Imperial expert writes about Churchill's policies towards India. The writer was the Deputy Controller of the British Empire during the First World War and subsequently founder of the English Speaking Union and editor of the British political magazine, *The Spectator*.

Churchill's Indian policy in the inter-war years has often puzzled me. The man who could show deep sympathy with oppressed peoples now joined hands with the extremists. Had he but realized the fact, the granting of Dominion status in 1931 would have prevented many years of struggle with the Congress Party. Gandhi confirmed this to me when I visited him in 1941. In 1942, however, Churchill made a generous offer to India. I was present in New Delhi when Sir Stafford Cripps made known the momentous proposal that the Indian government was to have the right to withdraw from the Commonwealth should it so desire. Many leading Indians admitted to me that the refusal of this offer was a blunder.

Sir Evelyn Wrench, Churchill and the Empire, 1953

The Bengal Famine, 1942-43

- Bad harvests, fungus, a cyclone, a scorched earth policy (the Japanese were in Burma and might attack Bengal), and an influx of Burmese refugees combined to create the famine. 3 million lives lost.
- Wavell (Viceroy), Leo Amery (Secretary of State for India) were critical of the Churchill government's failure to send enough relief.
- Some blamed the administration in Bengal itself, others said people in Bengal were hoarding grain and still others claimed there was plenty of food available and people should share it.
- Churchill was criticised for being indifferent to the famine.

Why didn't Britain help more?

- The Battle of the Atlantic was at its peak from mid-1942 to mid-1943, with submarine wolf packs sinking so many ships that the Allies were on the verge of defeat, so shipping could not be spared for India. Also, the Japanese were covering the Bay of Bengal, railways were overstretched sending men and equipment to war zones (Burma) and not set up for sending stocks of food anyway.
- By August 1943 Churchill refused to release shipping to send food to India. Initially during the famine he was more concerned with the civilians of Nazi occupied Greece (who were also suffering from a famine) compared with the Bengalis.

Evidence

Source D: This Indian journalist looks back to Churchill's wartime policy towards India, believing it to have alienated his family's loyalty to Britain.

We were a professional middle-class family not particularly given to Indian nationalist enthusiasms. We never thought much of Gandhi. Nevertheless, the famine in Bengal of 1942 did intrude into our comfortable world. Entire villages ceased to exist. It was largely a man-made event, caused not by a decline in the food available but by the inadequacy of the response. The problem, it seems, was Winston Churchill's attitude. Churchill failed to recognize that India had given two million fighting men for Britain's war effort. Our family took a very different attitude to Britain after this.

Gurcharan Das, India Unbound, 2000

More Evidence

Wavell's Diary October 1943.

Winston saw me alone. He produced a directive which was utterly meaningless, e.g. it exhorted me to get on with the war, to improve the lot of the Indians, to make peace between Hindu and Muslim. Amery on reading it said 'you are wafted to India on a wave of hot air'. PM was menacing and unpleasant when I saw him and indicated the only over his dead body would any approach to Gandhi take place. He fears a split in parliament over any political advance in India.

More Evidence

Amery's Diary, 10 November 1943

Cabinet, at which I brought up again my earnest demand for more shipping. I did not press for India's demand for 50,000 tons a month for 12 months but concentrated on asking for 150,000 tons over December, January and February. Winston, after a preliminary flourish on Indians breeding like rabbits and being paid a million a day for doing nothing, asked Leathers (the minister in charge of shipping) for his view. He said he could manage 50,000 tons in January and February (1944). Winston agreed with this and I had to be content. I raised a point that Canada had telegraphed to say a ship was ready to load on the 12th and they proposed to fill it with wheat (for India). Leathers and Winston were vehement against this.