

BOOK REVIEW: HISTORY

Bias and bigotry shaped Churchill's politics in South Asia

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

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TALMIZ AHMAD

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.

Shaping of the imperialist

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



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

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.

Communal prejudice and bias

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 Gandhi; 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 championship 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.

Churchill's legacy

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.

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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Around the world in bookstores

'Bookshops: long-established and the most fashionable' by Markus Sebastian Braun (ed.) (Braun, 2013)

RAANA HAIDER

This coffee-table book is a bibliophile's output in passion and patience. "The classical and comfortable, the modern and innovative, small shops and large enterprises all have their places in this collection. Each shop is a paradise for the book lover." In hand is a remarkably immersive page-turner, prompting one to target a city, on the basis of the book shop covered in this global literary survey. The trek or track within an urban setting is located for the hard-core bibliophile. An Index of shops is available with snapshot, address and website. Travel destinations can take on a literary focus; as it may for iconic sights, culinary delights, sporting spots, water or mountain attractions or wellness being locales. Mentioned bookstores could be discovered gems in one's travel trail, providing instant pleasure and the release of pent-up wanderlust.

The introductory chapter traces the history of writing, books, publishing and a closing paragraph: "Whether one speaks in culturally pessimistic tones of the 'death of the classical book trade or whether and how books and the retail bookshops in conjunction with the new reading media



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

airports and railway stations globally. It was WH Smith which introduced the internationally recognized ISBN book numbering system. In 1903, the Foyles book chain opened in London. In Paris, Shakespeare and Company opened in 1961. Such matters included in the introductory chapter are nuggets of information for book lovers. Coincidentally, in September 2022, I happened to step into WH Smith and Foyles in London. In Paris, standing before the Notre Dame cathedral while taking in the sky-seeking twin towers and its magnificent frontage; one could only feel sadness and a sense of loss at the devastation of the April 2019 fire which destroyed its roof and spire. Across the River Seine on the Left Bank, I caught a glimpse of a favourite Parisian literary haunt—Shakespeare and Company. Time did not permit a visit, another loss. I managed the WH Smith bookstore on Rue de Rivoli near the Place de la Concorde in Paris. I have frequented this bookstore since childhood. Windows carried portraits of the recently deceased Her Majesty

Queen Elizabeth. These remain meaningful literary destinations.

The editor's selection may be divided into the 'Olde World' genre of conventional and traditional bookstores and those that are uniquely modern. Midway are some with osmosis of the new and classic setup. China and the United States host most bookstores, with six cities each featuring chosen locations. Chinese cities host most of the cutting edges in interior design. 'Apodón' in Xiamen appears stunning with its curved and slanting off-white bookshelves with trailing foliage dropping from top shelves. Beijing hosts 'Kubrick' where books appear in boxes and shelves, all in a colour palette of green and black. All remain stunning canvases in an innovative perspective. A paradise of play and learning, a riot of shapes and colour and unstructured space is 'Kids Republic'.

New York city has the most entries regarding coveted inclusion in North America. The Rizzoli Bookstore opened in 1964 in midtown Manhattan. It carries the

classic charm of traditional book stores; wooden facades, shelves, columns and tables. Opening in 1927, is the legendary literary outlet Strand Bookstore which holds 29 kilometres of books on four levels. I think I did pay a quick visit some decades back. The Last Bookstore in Los Angeles is housed in a building constructed in 1914. Its appeal lies in its leather-worn sofas, more tables as display units than shelving and even gramophones occupying aesthetic space. To the contrary, Project Space in Vancouver, Canada offers "an artist-run center operating as a project space, bookshop, publisher, programming space and studio, examines, challenges and supports this redefinition process."

Spectacular is the bookstore in Buenos Aires El Ateneo Grand Splendid; a former opera house built in 1903 and now shelved with books in a massive remodelling exercise. The image alone leaves one speechless. To the contrary, Livraria Cultura in Sao Paulo offers contemporary technology and traditional books within a

4,200 square metre floor area. Its sighting is more akin to a museum than a bookstore with its "sinuous wooden sculpture snaking through the air, a checkerboard floor and colorful; beanbags ensure that no customer will ever be bored."

Beyond belief and sublime is the conversion of a 13th century Gothic church into a bookstore in 2006. At my first look at accompanying images, I did exclaim: "Oh My God!" In its centuries' long history, the Church in the centre of Maastricht, The Netherlands lost its ecclesiastical function in 1796 and served variously as a stable for horses, a concert hall and a Christmas market. The Selexyz Dominicanan stocks some 40,000 books. At the other end of the architectural spectrum, a skyscraper in Innsbruck, Austria houses Haymon Bookstore. Its multi-tilt windows highlight the books from a distance—all within a stark black frame. The Academic bookstore in Helsinki, Finland interior is clean and uncluttered. And there I spot *The Good Muslim* by Tahmima Anam amongst a panorama of 'New Titles'.

I picked up this bargain buy in a split second in the spring of 2022. Originally priced at USD 29.99, this book in mint condition was on sale at USD 9.99 at Half Price Book Shops in Berkeley, California. Maybe Angela Davis, the leading civil rights movement activist or Joan Baez or Bob Dylan (folk singers) or anti-Vietnam War dissidents in the 1960s had frequented this massive warehouse of reading material in the vicinity of the University of California at Berkeley, a socially progressive university in the United States. Those were the years when student activism led to hot-beds of dissent. Rapid social changes propelled civic unrest and political upheaval. This was the heyday of liberal activism and the Free Speech Movement. The Hippie culture supported LSD and drugs and the song 'California Dreamin' by The Mamas & the Papas contributed to the state's counter-culture. The site held as much attraction as the bought item. Easily succumbing to temptation, I quickly slipped the literary gem into my bag. I needed to deflect any comment on "More books? What about weight?"

Raana Haider is a browser of second-hand books.

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and the online trade can survive remains to be seen.' Any bibliophile reading this review will well ponder over these lines.

Looking backwards, London opened in 1828 the WH Smith chain of bookshops. Back in 1848, the firm set up its first railroad station bookshop and today operates at