

“Illuminating Churchill: His Wartime Attitude towards Gandhi, India, and the Bengal Famine”

By Neil Banerji

This essay challenges the prevalent yet slanted historiographical depiction of Winston Churchill as a racist towards Indians and anchors his wartime attitude towards India to the contemporary realities of his times. In writing it, I hope to honor my two grandfathers and the veracity of their lived experiences, trials, and sacrifices as Bengalis during the Second World War. Churchill’s appraisals of the complex and dynamic landscape of Indian politics were as far-sighted as his judgments on the other great questions of his time. The sources that I have used, which provide novel and behind-the-scenes insights into the decision-making process on wartime Indian policy at the highest levels of the British government, indicate that Churchill’s wartime views on India were not as outdated or pernicious as commonly believed.¹

In his memoirs, he praised the contribution of India to the Allied war effort, writing that “The unsurpassed bravery of Indian soldiers and officers, both Moslem and Hindu, shine forever in the annals of war.”² My paternal grandfather Dr. Bimal Chandra Banerji, one of India’s first cardiologists and a lieutenant, served as one of those officers. Traveling through the Suez Canal in Egypt, he arrived in the Italian peninsula as a doctor assigned to British general Bernard Montgomery’s Eighth Army and witnessed the hanging of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini’s body in a public plaza in Milan. In remembering this story, I regard my grandfather first and foremost as a healer, not a passive subject of empire, serving with his British comrades, whom he respected, under Churchill’s statesmanship to protect our world from the evils of Nazism and fascism.

In various public forums and outlets like Churchill College at the University of Cambridge, a vocal minority of well-known post-colonial oriented South Asians like Dr. Madhusree Mukerjee, the former high-ranking U.N. diplomat Dr. Shashi Tharoor, and University of Cambridge professor Dr. Priyamvada Gopal have publicly accused Churchill of allowing his racial biases to harm India unduly while ignoring the broader geopolitical context of the Second World War and its ramifications. For example, as a young boy, my other grandfather survived the Japanese bombing of Calcutta, an experience often overlooked in these post-colonial accounts which castigate Churchill’s dealings with wartime India in largely ahistorical terms. Gopal, for one,

¹ To ensure that perspectives from both the imperial metropole of London and the colonial periphery of India which challenge the firmly entrenched binary of the colonized v. the colonizer have been incorporated, I have consulted the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle, the Churchill Archives Centre at Cambridge, and the National Library of India in Kolkata. Due to the permission of His Majesty King Charles III, I was given access to some exclusive sources that have never been used before in this discussion: the diaries of King George VI, his correspondence with the Viceroy of India, Sir Archibald Wavell and Lord Louis Mountbatten, and Lord Mountbatten’s Governor General reports from after the Partition. The diaries of King George VI as well as most of Mountbatten’s Governor General reports can only be found in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. In comparison, it is quite striking that Madhusree Mukherjee’s book, which is widely hailed as a seminal work for her emphasis on Churchill’s role in the Bengal Famine, does not draw upon even a single documented primary source from the region.

² Winston S. Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950) p. 182.

observes that “Noting affinities between colonial and Nazi race-thinking, African and Asian leaders queried Churchill’s double standards in firmly rejecting self-determination for colonial subjects who were also fighting Hitler.”³ And yet, despite our family’s long-standing ties to the British, my grandfather maintained a close friendship with the family of one of these leaders, Subhas Chandra Bose—an Axis-aligned nationalist who cooperated with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan—but who was conversely educated at Cambridge and also hailed from an Anglocentric background. The coexistence of these relationships illustrates the deeply fractured nature of political loyalties in wartime India, challenging these orthodox yet reductive portrayals of Anglo-Indian relations as a binary struggle between a uniformly oppressive British police state led by Churchill and a uniformly oppressed Indian populace.

In distorting the historical record to advance a certain political narrative against the historic memory of the British Empire, however, these polemicists obscure and downplay the efforts of South Asian soldiers like my paternal grandfather. These brave men were independent historical actors in their own right. They should not be reduced to a state of perpetual victimhood and stripped of their agency based on a present-day political agenda any more than Churchill should be caricatured as an oppressor of Indians.

Opposition to Indian Independence

Recent literature on Churchill and the British Empire has identified the political and social environment of nineteenth-century Victorian Britain in which Churchill was raised as being integral to his Darwinian belief in a hierarchy of civilizations.⁴ Mukherjee, along with Churchill’s other critics, suggests that Churchill’s wartime opposition to Indian independence was informed by his racial views and animosity towards Gandhi, which was not dissimilar to Hitler’s attitude, and which dated back to the inter-war period.⁵ Given the Japanese threat, however, many prominent British and Indian figures across the political aisle, including King George VI, supported Churchill’s wartime opposition to Indian independence.

The 1942 Cripps Mission led by Sir Stafford Cripps, a prominent Labour politician and one of Churchill’s political rivals, failed to deliver independence for India in exchange for Indian support for the Allied war effort because Cripps’s proposals were not far-reaching enough.⁶ On 3

³ Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (London, 2017) p. 167., pp. 184-185, pp. mentions the Bengal Famine several times but omits any reference to the Japanese attacks on India as leading to the famine; Priyamvada Gopal, “Why Can’t the British handle the truth about Winston Churchill,” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/17/why-cant-britain-handle-the-truth-about-winston-churchill> (Accessed November 14, 2025) does the same and presents a misleading portrayal of South Asian anti-colonial leaders, many of whom were educated in British institutions and were deeply conversant with British liberal thought. Their critiques were not limited to rhetorical comparisons between colonial and Nazi racial attitudes but more often grounded in a sophisticated engagement with the principles of Whig democracy. To characterize their arguments as simply ‘noting affinities’ between colonial rule and Nazism denudes the extent to which they appropriated British constitutional, liberal, and humanitarian ideals.

⁴ Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (London, 2018) pp. 40–44; L. James, *Churchill and Empire: A Portrait of an Imperialist* (London, 2013), Introduction; Richard Toye, *Churchill’s Empire: The World That Made Him and the World He Made* (London, 2010), prologue.

⁵ Mukerjee, *Churchill’s Secret War*, pp. 233–234; Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (London, 1991) pp. 495–500.

⁶ William R. Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez, and Decolonization* (London, 2006) pp. 387–400.

March 1942, King George VI wrote that, according to Churchill, in granting India Dominion status, “Many provinces wouldn’t want to join it or the Indian princes either. Many Indians still want to owe allegiance to me as King-Emperor.” Also, the premature granting of Dominion status to India would also “have bad repercussions on the Indian army” especially in relation to the Gurkhas, the army’s most feared and capable soldiers.⁷ On 21 March 1942, Churchill told the King that he regarded India as a “three legged stool,” with Pakistan and the Indian princes presumably falling secondary to the Hindu majority and needing protection by British rule.⁸ On 9 April the King wrote that Cripps had overreached himself in proposing a new formula for Indian independence before the War Cabinet could weigh in and characterized U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s intrusion into the negotiations through the involvement of one of his representatives as “most unsatisfactory.”⁹ Churchill and Roosevelt would fiercely quarrel over the status of Indian independence until the end of the war.¹⁰

Churchill approached the sweeping political and social changes transpiring throughout India as a wartime leader rather than as a strict constitutionalist. In a speech in the House of Commons on 18 July 1946, he indicated that he viewed the Cripps Mission as inopportune given a potential Japanese invasion of India.¹¹ In August 1942, King George VI commented that the Indian situation was “improving” after the government arrested Gandhi.¹² On 3 November the King wrote that one of his Indian visitors had called Gandhi a “poseur.”¹³ In a speech Churchill made after the war in 1947, he referred to the time in 1942 when Labour leader Clement Attlee, who had since become Prime Minister, showed decisiveness that helped to end Gandhi’s Quit India campaign in the wake of the Cripps Mission. Churchill stated, “I highly approved of the action... which I think was the only one possible on that occasion.”¹⁴

Churchill and Sir Archibald Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief of India, also agreed that Gandhi’s movement weakened the British army’s ability to defend India from the Japanese and to handle the famine. In a subsequent War Cabinet memorandum on 6 October 1943, Churchill noted that encouraging “the political agitation” associated with Gandhi would be “grievous” to “our war effort” and “the internal peace of India” given the “serious food shortage in some Provinces” and an “enormously swollen Indian army.”¹⁵ In a letter to the King on 8 July 1946, Wavell recalled that supporters of Congress had deliberately tried to sabotage his communications on the Burma

⁷ RA/GV/PRIV/Diary/Vol 6/pp. 503–504, The Royal Archives, Windsor Castle U.K.

⁸ RA/GV/PRIV/Diary/Vol 6/March 21, 1942.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

¹⁰ A. Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, O.M., 1938-1945* ed. D. Dilks (London, 1971) p. 706

¹¹ Hansard HC, 18 Jul 1946, vol 425, col 1417,

https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1946/jul/18/india-cabinet-mission#S5CV0425P0_19460718_HOC_299

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 579.

¹³ RA/GV/PRIV/ Vol 7, p. 608.

¹⁴ Hansard, HC 06 March 1947, vol. 434 col. 665

<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/mar/06/india-government-policy>

¹⁵ The National Archives, CAB 66/41, October 6, 1943,

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20231023132048mp_/http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-66-41.pdf

(accessed October 9, 2025)

front in 1942.¹⁶ In another letter on 24 February 1947, he admitted to the King that while he initially believed that constitutional progress would have been better made during the war rather than after it, his “third conclusion, which only came to me some time later, was that Mr. Gandhi was a most inveterate enemy of the British and did not desire a peaceful transfer of power; he wished the British to be finally driven from India by the force of a popular uprising. I think he still does.” He also wrote that British power in India was “dependent on prestige rather than on numbers” and that “Politically the Cripps mission in 1942 marked a stage in our retrocession from power which it was never possible to retrace.”¹⁷

Bengal and Boats

Transpiring from 1943 to 1944, the Bengal Famine led to the deaths of three million Bengali natives due, his critics allege, to Churchill’s ineptitude in handling the ongoing food shortages. Mukherjee’s first argument is that the boat denial policy, in which large amounts of food and boats were destroyed across the colonial frontier before the Japanese invasion, implemented by the Churchill War Cabinet sought to harm the province of Bengal “perhaps also because its populace was deemed treasonous.”¹⁸

Mukherjee’s analysis, however, underestimates the extent to which widespread fears of a rapid Imperial Japanese advance complicated the logistical quandary faced by the British government. In 1942, a Japanese incursion into north-eastern India through South-East Asia was quite plausible. On 13 February 1942, King George VI, commenting on the Japanese attack on Singapore, which began on 8 February, wrote that the British government should have destroyed what they could not carry.¹⁹ In a devastating blow to the shocked British forces, the Japanese seized Singapore on the fifteenth.²⁰ On 24 February Churchill told the King that, due to the lack of available shipping, he could not “see how we can reinforce any part of the world sufficiently.”²¹

By the summer of 1942, Imperial Japan had fully penetrated Allied supply lines in the Indian Ocean, which, as observers noted, had a highly damaging effect which would later contribute to the famine. As the Air Ministry stated in a telegram to Wavell on 10 May, a new offense against Japanese-occupied Burma would not be possible unless “We have control of Bay of Bengal.”²² On 14 June Wavell noted to Churchill that the Japanese were still threatening shipping in the Bay of Bengal and that he did not have enough forces to stop them or to provide for the “defence of India against seaborne attack.” Wavell’s request for additional air support was based upon four reasons, the most important of which was to “open [the] Bay of Bengal to [a] full scale of shipping with incalculable relief to Indian railways and Indian economy.”²³

¹⁶ RA/PS/PSO/GVIC/52/85

¹⁷ RA/PS/PSO/GVIC/52/89A

¹⁸ Mukherjee, *Churchill’s Secret War*, ix, p. 64, p. 71.

¹⁹ RA/GVI/PRIV/Diary/Vol. 5, p. 493.

²⁰ A. Warren, *Britain’s Greatest Defeat: Singapore 1942* (London, 2007) p. 295.

²¹ RA/GVI/PRIV/Diary/Vol. 5, p. 500.

²² Churchill Archives Centre, Wavell Papers, WVLL 1/1/9/ May 10, 1942.

²³ *Ibid.*, June 14, 1942.

Claiming that Churchill falsely accused Gandhi of pro-Axis sympathies, Mukherjee ignores the fact that the Congress Party's sabotage undermined the British war effort against the Japanese, which included the necessary transportation infrastructure for famine relief.²⁴ Telegrams from Wavell to Churchill on 5 and 6 October 1942 both mentioned the problems of "Congress sabotage."²⁵ Contrary to Mukherjee's assertion, the boat denial policy was implemented because of widespread concerns regarding the perceived closeness of the Japanese threat to India, which was indirectly assisted by Gandhi's movement.

The Beginning of the Famine

Regarding the later period of 1943, Mukherjee writes that "The War Cabinet's shipping assignments made in August 1943, shortly after [Secretary of State for India Leo] Amery had pleaded for famine relief, show Australian wheat flour travelling to Ceylon, the Middle East, and Southern Africa—everywhere in the Indian Ocean but to India. Those assignments show a will to punish."²⁶ To substantiate the allegation that Churchill's racism exacerbated the famine in its beginning stages, however, Mukherjee and other critics have selectively cited certain portions of the historical record while ignoring other passages that provide important context. A passage in a letter written on 26 January by the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, to Amery that Churchill's detractors routinely cite in criticizing his handling of the Bengal famine reads: "Mindful of our difficulties about food I told [the Premier of Bengal, A. K. Fazlul Huq] that he simply must produce some more rice out of Bengal for Ceylon even if Bengal itself went short! He was by no means unsympathetic, and it is possible that I may in the result screw a little out of them. The Chief [Churchill] continues to press me most strongly about both rice and labour for Ceylon."²⁷ The most crucial part of the letter, however, is conveniently overlooked. In the passage preceding the infamous one about Ceylon, the Viceroy also wrote that "I was encouraged to find that the wheat price" had reached "a reasonable level" due to the "substantial imports of wheat" that the British government was expected to provide.²⁸

However, the British government did ultimately not need to deliver the supplies that were promised. A War Cabinet document from the 4 August meeting states that the "The Minister of War Transport reminded the War Cabinet that in January 1943 a demand had been made for an additional 600,000 tons of wheat, but in the result it had not been necessary to ship anything approaching this quantity. He expected that much the same would happen on this occasion."²⁹

Also, on 5 January 1943, *The Statesman*, Calcutta's leading English-language newspaper, published a letter by the Government of India which indicated that exports out of India

²⁴ Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War*, p. 71, pp. 78–79.

²⁵ Churchill Archives Centre, Wavell Papers, WVLL 1/1/9/ October 5, 1942 and October 6, 1942.

²⁶ Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War*, p. 273.

²⁷ Churchill Archives Centre, Amery Papers, GBR/0014/AMEL/2/3/29/January 26, 1943; Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War*, p. 129.

²⁸ Churchill Archives Centre, Amery Papers, GBR/0014/AMEL/2/3/29/January 26, 1943

²⁹ TNA, CAB 65/35, August 4, 1943

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20231023131523mp_/http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-65-35.pdf

represented only a small portion of India's total production in food and other materials.³⁰ This addresses Mukherjee's accusation regarding shipments from India being allocated for the Allied war efforts during the midst of the famine as the War Cabinet had already been misled once and was not aware of the full severity of the situation until it was too late.³¹

Mukherjee erroneously states that Churchill had "slashed the number of ships operating" solely in the Indian ocean in January 1943 and that, in March 1943, "[he] was reluctant to release vessels to carry grain to the colony...because his hostility to Indians was escalating."³² Those shipping cuts, however, were also implemented for the Middle East, and the War Cabinet had asked the Government of India for their opinion on the consequences of those cuts. A War Cabinet document from 5 January states that "the Prime Minister had decided that the cargo ship programme to the Middle East and India should be reduced by 25%." Furthermore, due "to the stringency of the shipping situation, it was felt that the February shipments must be reduced from 46 to 40 ships, and inviting the comments of the authorities in the Middle East and in India as to the items on which this cut should be imposed, together with a short statement as to what effect the imposition of these further cuts might be expected to have."³³

In a public statement, however, Amery deemed that the situation in Bengal had not risen to the point of famine at the very beginning of 1943. In his speech to the House of Commons on 28 January, he stated that "the Government of India have published a statement giving as their opinion that if hoarded stocks can be got on the market and fairly distributed there is little danger of the people having to go seriously short. There is no famine and no widespread prevalence of acute shortage, though a large part of the urban population is doubtless affected."³⁴ Mukherjee presents Amery as the "one person who emerges from the famine with remarkably clean hands," but Amery's contemporaries felt the exact opposite.³⁵ On 13 January 1944, *The Statesman* reported that Mr. Amery's leadership regarding India was criticized by Mr. John Davies of the Liberal Party, who noted that Amery had declared that there was no famine situation in India in 1943.³⁶ Another report by *The Statesman* on 26 January 1944 observed that speakers at an India Week conference "urged the removal of Mr. Amery from the post of Secretary of State for India." For example, a Dr. D. R. Prem stated that "Amery was the man most responsible in Parliament for the India situation."³⁷ As the famine reached a crisis point, government officials in India identified local maladministration as the chief contributing factor. In a letter to Amery on 4th May, Linlithgow stated "I am still very uneasy about the rice position, and the Bengal position

³⁰ *The Statesman*, January 5, 1943, [Letter by the Government of India], National Library of India, Kolkata.

³¹ Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War*, pp. 112–14.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 103, p. 110.

³³ TNA, CAB 65/33, January 25, 1943

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20231023131256mp_/http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-65-33.pdf

³⁴ Hansard HC, 28 January 1943, vol 386 col. 598

<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1943/jan/28/food-situation-relief-measures>

³⁵ Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War*, p. 275.

³⁶ *The Statesman*, January 13, 1944, [Criticism of Amery].

³⁷ *The Statesman*, January 26, 1944, "Mr. Amery Criticized."

in particular is most unsatisfactory... The local officials “have been extremely slow in getting any sort of organization together for dealing with it.”³⁸

Mukherjee suggests that Churchill refused to divert shipments to Bengal in August 1943. Documents from the War Cabinet meeting of 4 August, however, reveal extenuating circumstances, stating that “In January last a serious shortage had shown itself, and a request had been made for food grains to be imported into India. Later, however, the harvest had proved better than anticipated, and it had been found possible to discontinue the import of grain.” While Mukherjee suggests that the War Cabinet dismissed the possibility of further food imports, the War Cabinet’s actual view was that “the shortage of grain in India was not the result of physical deficiency but of hoarding, due to inflationary conditions. There was general agreement that the situation could not be dealt with simply by the importation of grain and that it must be attacked by a number of different methods.”³⁹

Tellingly, local and senior government officials in India agreed with the War Cabinet’s assessment of the Bengal famine as primarily being an economic crisis rather than one of food scarcity. For example, *The Statesman*’s reporting on 25 February corroborated the War Cabinet’s assertion from the August meeting as one member from the European Group of the Bengal Parliament deemed that the Centre’s demands for increased taxation to improve Bengal’s revenues and to combat inflation were justifiable even if the “remedy must come from the outside.”⁴⁰ In another letter to Amery on 10 August to Amery, the Viceroy noted “Bad Administration is of particular importance in connection with food... As the provisional government was not taking any steps to ameliorate the crisis and instead depending on the goodwill of the Centre.”⁴¹ He attached a note by Jeremy Raisman, the finance member of the Bengal committee, which stated that “War conditions have admittedly imposed a heavy burden on their finances... But whereas other Provinces have taken adequate steps to augment their revenues as and when necessary, Bengal have, for political reasons, persistently adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude... At the same time they have, again for political reasons, virtually refused to cooperate in our anti-inflationary drive, even in areas where money is admittedly flowing freely.”⁴²

Mukherjee also downplays another reason why shipments to Bengal were impractical along with the lack of available shipping: the danger of Axis shipping attacks. At a later meeting devoted to famine relief on 24 September 1943, the Minister of War Transport stated that although “the shipping situation generally had been eased by the recent diminution in sinkings, this did not make it easier to relieve India’s immediate needs.” Given the previous occurrence in January (in which the War Cabinet did not need to ultimately ship anything), it decided to review the

³⁸ Churchill Archives Centre, Amery Papers, GBR/0014/AMEL 2/3/29/May 4, 1943

³⁹ TNA, CAB 65/35, August 4, 1943

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20231023131523mp_/http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-65-35.pdf

⁴⁰ *The Statesman*, “Supplementary Budget Demand,” February 25, 1944

⁴¹ Churchill Archives Centre, Amery Papers, GBR/0014/AMEL 2/3/29/August 10, 1943

⁴² *Ibid.*

situation again in light of the Indian harvests.⁴³ In her recounting of the comments at the meeting, Mukherjee notes that “Although ships were more available to the British Empire, “it would not be possible to work additional ships into positions from which they could lift grain for delivery before the next Indian harvest.”⁴⁴ Mukherjee’s paraphrased statement at the beginning of the sentence, however, conveniently fails to mention the Minister’s reason for why more ships were available (i.e. the “recent diminution in sinkings”).

The Root Cause of the Bengal Famine

Mukherjee argues that the Famine Inquiry Commission attempted to excuse the British government’s lackluster response retroactively by shifting blame to the local Bengal government.⁴⁵ Like many of Churchill’s critics, she also cites Amery’s recollection of Churchill’s bigoted comments about Indians “breeding like rabbits” as proof of his indifference to the famine.⁴⁶ The evidence from the period of the Famine, however, does identify the inefficiency of the local Muslim-majority Bengal government and overpopulation as the main reasons behind it. Furthermore, additional food imports, which Churchill is widely criticized for not delivering, only had the tangential effect of bolstering public morale and stemming inflation, not preventing actual food scarcity. All the sources from the time period uniformly agree with the respected Indian economist Amartya Sen’s claim that the “Indeed, contrary to the conclusion of the official report on the Bengal famine and the often-asserted description of it as arising from a decline of over-all food supply in Bengal, ‘food availability decline’ seems to fail altogether in explaining the famine.”⁴⁷

For his part, Churchill believed that the root causes of famine were systemic ones, stating in a letter to Wavell, who had succeeded Linlithgow as Viceroy, that “The contrast between wealth and poverty in India, the incidence of corrective taxation and the relations prevailing between land-owner and tenant or labourer, or between factory owner and employee, require searching reexamination.”⁴⁸ Wavell characterized the letter as “meaningless,” but the two men agreed on more than what is commonly acknowledged.⁴⁹

The British army, which was praised for ending the famine in the fall of 1943, was useful because under its direction supplies were efficiently circulated, which suggests that poor

⁴³ TNA, CAB 65/35, September 24, 1943

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20231023131523mp_/http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-65-35.pdf

⁴⁴ Mukherjee, *Churchill’s Secret War*, p. 195.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 266

⁴⁶ Richard M. Langworth, *Winston Churchill, Myth and Reality: What He Actually Did and Said* (Jefferson, 2017) p. 153.

⁴⁷ A. Sen, “Starvation and exchange entitlements: a general approach and its application to the great Bengal famine,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1977), p.55

<http://www.regionalclimateperspectives.com/uploads/4/4/2/5/44250401/sen1977thecausesoffamine.pdf>

⁴⁸ Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill Papers, CHUR 23/11/October 8, 1943.

⁴⁹ A. Wavell, *Wavell: The Viceroy’s Journal* (Oxford, 1997) p. 23.

administration caused the widespread hoarding and heavy inflation responsible for the famine.⁵⁰ In his letter to the King in September 1947, Lord Mountbatten, then Governor-General of India, commented on another potential recurrence of famine when he stated, “As regards emergency distribution, the Army will hardly be able to help this time, as it did in Bengal in 1943. Casey, who was then Governor of Bengal, told me that almost the whole credit for arresting the full impact of that disaster, and preventing widespread disease must be given to the Army, which released reserve foodstuffs, and provided transport and medical units.”⁵¹

Even Wavell and Amery acknowledged that miscommunication from the Bengal government had hindered the British response. On 7 December 1943, Amery wrote Wavell that “I have had difficulty in Parliament over food and economic position owing to absence of official information on matters reported by Press and there are signs that India Office is regarded as not adequately in touch. . . . I am grateful to you for directing that weekly food reports should be fuller but I am apprehensive lest Indian members should overlook or even discourage practice of keeping me informed unless and until action by me is required.”⁵² In a telegram to Amery on 10 December, Wavell acknowledged that the “incompleteness of information about Bengal was due to Centre itself being inadequately informed. . . . I hope that I have improved matters and that fortnightly telegrams and health and improved food telegrams when introduced will give you what you want. . . . There is no question of Indian members discouraging supply of information.”⁵³

While Wavell disapproved of Churchill’s attitude to the famine, he assigned the most responsibility to the poor state of Bengal’s administrative and social structure. In his letter to the King on 4 January 1944, Wavell wrote that “the shock was provided by the Japanese successes in” Southeast Asia and “by the loss of Burma rice” which in turn led to “small producers to hold a higher proportion than usual of their grain. . . there were a good many people who were determined to make a profit out of the shortage, regardless of the misery caused to others, and did so by speculation and hoarding on a large scale.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, he observed that, given the lack of administrative staff in Bengal, the “information about conditions in the rural areas is difficult to obtain or too belated to be of real value.”⁵⁵ While the British army had relieved the crisis for the time being, Wavell expressed some concern “that we may have a repetition of this disaster this year, unless the Bengal administration bestirs itself to take more active measures to secure the surplus of the present abundant harvest and to keep prices under control. . . we are hampered everywhere by the weakness of the administrative machine in Bengal and the lack of a real public spirit.”⁵⁶ In a letter to Amery on 12 January Wavell acknowledged the “shortcomings of the Bengal Ministry in matters of food and public health administration” as well as “the risk we assume of the possibility of the crop going underground irretrievably through weak handling during the next few weeks.” He also wrote that “India had been lightly administered. . . due to

⁵⁰ *The Statesman*, 19 February 1944; “The Famine Inquiry Commission,” p. 62

<https://www.indiaofthepast.org/sites/indiaofthepast.org/files/pdf/1940s/bengalfamine/ficreportpart1.pdf> (Accessed 14 November 2025)

⁵¹ RA/PSO/GVI/C/52/98/Appendix II.

⁵² Churchill Archives Centre, Amery Papers, GBR/0014/AMEL/1/6/14/December 7, 1943.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10 December 1943.

⁵⁴ RA/PSO/GVI/C/52/64

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

provincial autonomy and other changes in the last 20 years,” and that a sufficient level of imports would be necessary to impose price controls given that indigenous reserves were not enough by themselves.⁵⁷

Even Bengali witnesses shared concerns about the capabilities of the Bengal government and the Government of India to handle the crisis under Amery’s leadership. On 25 January 1944, *The Statesman* reported that a Congress party representative in the Bengal parliament, criticizing the local Bengal government, condemned the “Government’s handling of the food problem. They had failed in spite of their huge expenditure on it. There was a good deal of extravagance in the Civil Supplies Department besides nepotism.”⁵⁸ In a letter to Amery on 8 February, Wavell characterized food imports “as absolutely vital for the whole economy of India.” Amery replied that his information indicated that “it would be out of the question to find shipping [for] 1.5 million tons for India” and that Churchill noted that “for four years ending 1941/2 average consumption was 2.5 million tons less than the figure” that Wavell proposed for food imports.⁵⁹

Churchill’s figures regarding food consumption and the relative usefulness of food imports were affirmed by observations from Bengal. On 25 February *The Statesman* reported that the Government of India “had no information about the total number of deaths in Calcutta and other districts of Bengal due to the food crisis.”⁶⁰ On 11 March *The Statesman* reported that a member of the Bengal parliament stated that “there was no scarcity of foodgrains in Bengal, actually the situation was otherwise. The Government of India from the very beginning had not dealt with the situation in a serious way.”⁶¹ On the same day, Amery wrote to Wavell that his chief problem was one of procurement, “caused by loss of public confidence... quantities of rice proposed to be exported are very small in relation to Indian production,” but the “visible resumption of exports of rice, despite its abundance, will set back any revival of confidence in a country recently smitten by famine.”⁶² This observation by Amery suggests that imports were more of a face-saving measure to shore up “public confidence” rather than a necessity in preventing food scarcity.

Wavell, who was the most proactive in addressing the famine, identified the Bengal Administration as its chief cause and further imports primarily as a means of imposing price controls given the lackluster social and administrative state. On 17 April 1944, he wrote to the King that the zamindars, who were the local landlords, were not really invested in the agricultural output of their land, but he did “think Bengal will avoid a repetition of the famine.” He also mentioned, however, that rampant inflation continued to be a problem and that food imports would be very useful in curbing prices.⁶³ He was widely respected for his assessments of the administrative situation in Bengal. According to one diary entry by the King in the earlier part of the year of 1944, General Sir Claude Auchinleck stated that Wavell was a good choice for

⁵⁷ Churchill Archives Centre, Amery Papers, GBR/0014/AMEL/1/6/14/January 12, 1944.

⁵⁸ *The Statesman*, January 25, 1944.

⁵⁹ Churchill Archives Centre, Amery Papers, GBR/0014/AMEL/1/6/14/February 8, 1944.

⁶⁰ *The Statesman*, February 25, 1944.

⁶¹ *The Statesman*, 11 March 1944.

⁶² Churchill Archives Centre, Amery Papers, GBR/0014/AMEL/1/6/14/March 11, 1944.

⁶³ RA/PSO/GVI/C/52/65

the Viceroyship because he was “unorthodox” in his administrative methods of handling.⁶⁴ In April 1944, the King stated that the Viceroy’s Minister of Defence, Firox Khan Noon, “is pleasantly surprised at the way Wavell has begun his Viceroyalty. He has a good grasp of things & worked out the relief policy from famine in Bengal very well.”⁶⁵ On 1 August, Wavell detailed that Section 93 of the 1935 Government of India Act, which allowed the British government to suspend any governor’s province during a state of emergency, should have been implemented “when Bengal was in a state of famine” the preceding year but because of the highly polarized state of Bengali politics, “vital needs of administration had suffered.”⁶⁶

In Wavell’s final opinion, famine was an omnipresent risk in India because of the deep-rooted issues of poor administrative and agricultural methods. In his last letter to the King, at the end of his tenure as Viceroy in February 1947, Wavell wrote that “We have been on the knife-edge of famine during the whole of these three and a half years. India is permanently under-fed, we have had no reserve.”

Wavell’s discussion of the famine stressed a key reason for the outbreak in 1943: “the fertility of the land to keep pace with or outstrip the fertility of the population.” Furthermore, according to Wavell, “To improve methods of farming would also greatly increase production; but here the human factor comes in. It is easy enough to see what should be done: better seed, more manuring, slaughter of useless cattle, mechanization and so forth. But the main obstacles are religion, immemorial custom, and the natural conservatism of the peasant. They will take a long time to overcome.”⁶⁷ Although Wavell and Churchill had clashed on Indian policy, they both agreed that overpopulation was an underlying problem.⁶⁸

Conclusion

According to Lord Moran, Churchill eventually admitted that he regretted his stance on India, thus demonstrating that he could adapt his mindset due to newfound circumstances.⁶⁹ In considering this, perhaps people should recall the thoughts Churchill spoke in his magisterial eulogy for his discredited predecessor, Neville Chamberlain:

History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days... In one phase men seem to have been right, in another they seem to have been wrong. Then again, a few years later, when the perspective of time has lengthened, all stands in a different setting. There is a new proportion. There is another scale of values. What is the worth of all this? The only guide to a man is his conscience; the only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ RA/GVI/PRIV/Diary/ Vol. 8, p. 792.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 810.

⁶⁶ RA/PS/PSO/GVI/C/52/67

⁶⁷ RA/PSO/GVI/C/52/89/A

⁶⁸ R. A. Callahan, “Great Contemporaries: Archibald Wavell, Man of Silences (Part 1),” <https://winstonchurchill.hilldale.edu/wavell-great-contemporary/> (Accessed 13 October 2025)

⁶⁹ Charles W. Moran, *Churchill, The Struggle for Survival: Taken from the Diaries of Lord Moran* (London, 1966) p. 195.

⁷⁰ Andrew Roberts, “History Reclaimed: “You Can’t Cancel Winston Churchill,”” <https://winstonchurchill.hilldale.edu/churchill-history-reclaimed-2/> (Accessed 13 October 2025).

Deriving inspiration from these words, we should remember Churchill as a fellow human being, outfitted with all the vast complexities, quirks, and contradictions symbolic of our politics, species, and times, rather than as another mythologized great man.

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He wishes to dedicate this article to his grandfathers Pronob Bhattacharjee and Bimal Banerji as well as to the late Anthony Dolan, a devout Churchillian, friend, and mentor, who inspired his interest in Winston Churchill while Neil was a White House intern in 2019.