

Dressing the Emperor

by Madhusree Mukerjee

Arthur Herman, author of *Gandhi and Churchill* (2008), has reviewed my book, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II*. The review is to be found at the website of the Churchill Centre under the title: "Without Churchill, India's Famine Would Have Been Worse." It is negative, which is fine, but I am surprised by the extent of its distortions and feel compelled to respond. Here I excerpt some portions and comment on them.

"Ms. Mukerjee, who writes for *Scientific American* and is no historian, has gotten herself entangled in three separate and contentious issues: Britain's battle with Indian nationalists like Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose; Churchill's often tempestuous views on India; and the 1943-44 Bengal famine. Out of them she attempts to build a plausible cause-and-effect narrative. All she manages is to mangle the facts regarding all three, doing a disservice to both historical and moral truth."

Indeed I am not a historian, but a journalist and scientist. My approach to history was inspired by my training as a scientist. In both cases, one discerns the facts as well as one can, and then seeks the theory that best fits the facts. If preconceptions clash with the data, it is the former that must be discarded, not the latter. As to which of us—Herman or I—have done a greater disservice to historical and moral truth, I doubt this essay will help anyone to decide that. Those who care to read my book will at least have the evidence at hand.

After this introduction, Herman lists causes of the famine: cyclone, a short crop, loss of imports due to Japanese invasion of Burma, and "other problems of India's own making. Many local officials were either absent (Bengal's governor fell ill and died), distracted by the eruption of Bose's Quit India movement; or simply too slow and corrupt to react. Bengal's Muslim majority ministry did nothing, while many of its Hindu members were making huge profits trading in rice during the shortage. Finally, the magnitude of what was happening did not reach the attention of London and Churchill until it was too late."

Bose had nothing to do with the Quit India movement, but that is a small matter. A far more serious one is that Herman ignores a key cause of the famine: hyperinflation, which derived from India's role of supplier—of grain, uniforms, ammunition and other goods—to the war effort. Part of India's expenditure was to be reimbursed after the war by the UK, but during the war goods were extracted and paid for by paper money. The resulting scarcity, accompanied by an abundance of cash in the hands of urban war suppliers, caused India's economy to crash; the famine was a symptom. There was much warning of this impending disaster. Besides, in late 1942 and early 1943 the Indian government had repeatedly warned of a severe grain

shortfall and asked for wheat shipments, which the War Cabinet had declined. Instead, Churchill insisted that India continue to export rice.

“No Churchill critic, not even Ms. Mukerjee, has yet found a way to blame Churchill for actually triggering the famine in the way that, for example, Stalin caused the Great Famine in the Ukraine or Mao the mass starvations during China's "Great Leap Forward." Instead, the claim is that Churchill callous racist attitudes, developed during his years in India in the 1890s and typical of the British imperialist ruling elite, not only blinded him to the human suffering but led him to make decisions that prolonged and aggravated the death toll. This included deliberately halting shipments of food that might have relieved the suffering, while insisting that food exports from India to Britain continue despite a famine that by mid-October 1943 was killing 2000 a month in Calcutta.”

Churchill's culpability in triggering famine is not on the same scale as that of Stalin or Mao, but it is not absent. In January 1943 Churchill withdrew 60 percent of the shipping from the Indian Ocean area, precluding any possibility of meeting the Indian government's demand for 600,000 tons of wheat by April. As a result, British officials in India realized they could not feed the army and factory workers: they could not keep the war effort going. They panicked and began purchasing rice on the open market, paying any price that the brokers demanded, and triggering a steep price rise that precipitated famine by February or March. Meanwhile, rice exports continued.

After this, Herman describes events of the war on several fronts, and asks: “How likely was it that Churchill would respond to the news of the Bengal famine—the seriousness of which was yet unrealized by his India advisers Viceroy Linlithgow and Secretary for India Leo Amery—as anything more than an unwelcome distraction?”

Thus Herman dismisses the single most important event regarding the famine: the War Cabinet meeting of August 4, 1943, in which Churchill and his advisors failed to schedule even a single shipment of grain for relieving Indian famine. Instead, Churchill ordered that the ships that were in excess after meeting the needs of the armed forces be used to build a stockpile of 170,000 tons of wheat in order to feed southeastern Europe after the war there was over. So shiploads of wheat traveled past India (probably even stopping in Bombay to refuel) on their way to be stored, not consumed—while India starved. That news of a famine was “an unwelcome distraction” to a man who shed tears when Britons lined up to buy birdseed is testimony to the profound racism that motivated, at least in part, this decision.

Herman acknowledges this racism, and excuses it: “Churchill held views on Indians and other non-whites that are very far from our thinking today... Yet the truth runs more deeply against Mukerjee than she is

willing to admit. Her evidence of Churchill's intransigence on India stems mainly from Leo Amery's diary, where he recorded every one of the Prime Minister's furious outbursts whenever Amery brought up the famine in the War Cabinet-whether Churchill meant what he said or not."

On the contrary, my indictment of Churchill's actions is based not on what he said but on what he did. The key sources I used were the Ministry of War Transport papers and the Cherwell papers. But what he said, as recorded by Amery and others, is useful in understanding why he did what he did.

Herman notes that Amery (the Secretary of State for India) was so frustrated by Churchill's rants on India that he compared Churchill to Hitler. "This invidious comparison of Churchill with Hitler is the thematic hinge of the book. Unfortunately for the author, the actual record contradicts her account at almost every point... When the War Cabinet became fully aware of the extent of the famine, on 24 September 1943, it agreed to send 200,000 tons of grain to India by the end of the year. Far from seeking to starve India, Churchill and his cabinet sought every way to alleviate the suffering without undermining the war effort. The war-not starving Indians or beating them into submission-remained the principal concern."

In late July, Viceroy Linlithgow had asked for half a million tons of wheat by year-end, not for feeding famine victims but for provisioning the army and war workers until the next harvest. News of large shipments would cause prices to fall and indirectly help famine sufferers. In response, the War Cabinet ultimately sent 80,000 tons of wheat and 130,000 tons of barley. Such quantities, Linlithgow lamented, "will go nowhere in meeting our essential demands." (Barley was useless for relieving famine because it had no impact on food prices.) Churchill wanted to conserve wheat for European use; the shipments to the Mediterranean stockpile continued. Had the War Cabinet instead ordered substantial relief in August, it would have reached in September, greatly alleviating the suffering and saving many lives. As it is, the first of these meager shipments reached in November. All the while the army continued to eat local wheat and rice, taking it away from famine relief. By the end of December, Bengal was harvesting its own rice crop and the famine was largely over, though deaths from disease continued.

Where is the evidence to back up the claim that "Churchill and his cabinet sought every way to alleviate the suffering without undermining the war effort"? The stockpile was for use *after* the war—such vast quantities could only have been delivered after Germany was defeated. It was of little use to the war effort as such.

"Even Amery had to admit, during the Quebec Conference, that the case against diverting vital war shipping to India was 'unassailable.' Far from a racist conspiracy to break the country, the viceroy noted that 'all the Dominion Governments are doing their best to help.' While Churchill and the War Cabinet vetoed a Canadian proposal to send 100,000 tons of wheat to India, they did push for Australia to fulfill that commitment."

Amery had to go by what he was told by shipping officials, who were not sympathetic to India. Lord Leathers, the Minister of War Transport, was a Churchill appointee and provided ships only for such purposes as Churchill desired. In any case, it wasn't necessary to divert "vital war shipping." Simply doing away with the Balkan stockpile, or allowing the United Kingdom's stockpile to be reduced, would have released ships. The UK stockpile of food and raw materials reached a record 18.5 million tons by the end of 1943—far higher than necessary for meeting wartime needs. Dominion governments did try to help, but were thwarted because all the merchant shipping, including their own, was under the War Cabinet's control. I have made no charge of a general racist conspiracy. There was indeed immense hostility toward Indians among Churchill and his close advisors Cherwell, Grigg, Leathers and Bracken; but these sentiments did not extend much beyond this circle.

"The greatest irony of all is that it was Churchill who appointed, in October 1943, the viceroy who would halt the famine in its tracks: General Archibald Wavell immediately commandeered the army to move rice and grain from areas where it was plentiful to where it was not, and begged Churchill to send what help he could. On 14 February 1944 Churchill called an emergency meeting of the War Cabinet to see if a way to send more aid could be found that would not wreck plans for the coming Normandy invasion. "I will certainly help you all I can," Churchill telegraphed Wavell on the 14th, "but you must not ask the impossible."

The appointment of Wavell is the only way that Herman can think of in which Churchill alleviated, rather than aggravated, the famine. Herman does not mention that Wavell was able to extract grain shipments from the War Cabinet only by threatening to resign his position of viceroy if he did not get what he needed. India did receive sufficient wheat in 1944, thanks to the efforts of Wavell and Amery, as well as the military chiefs Brooke, Auchinleck and Mountbatten, who ceded space on military ships to carry grain to India. Herman selectively uses quotes without noting the vast gulf between what Churchill said and what Churchill did.

"Another irony: the harvest of 1943 was one of the largest in India's history. Claims of starvation and civil unrest seemed, from the fastness of 5000 miles away, far-fetched, as they did in Washington."

The wheat harvest was indeed large, but prices of wheat remained high because of vast purchases by the Indian government for feeding the 2-million-strong army, in India and abroad. The rice shortage was 3.5 million tons (including export and army requirements) as estimated by the government of India. The overall cereal shortage was about a million tons. If claims of starvation seemed far-fetched in London, that was because Churchill chose to ignore the viceroy of India and the secretary of state for India, choosing instead to rely on the dubious advice of his friend, Lord Cherwell.

"Of all the people who ignored the Bengal famine, perhaps the most curious case is Ms. Mukerjee's hero,

Mohandas Gandhi. For all his reputation as a humanitarian, Gandhi did remarkably little about the emergency. The issue barely comes up in his letters, except as another grievance against the Raj—which, in peacetime, had always handled famines with efficiency.”

Gandhi was incarcerated from August 1942 to May 1944—the entire period of famine and more. What could he have done? And although by the 20th century the British Raj had indeed acquired much experience with famine, that it “had always handled famines with efficiency” is a stretch. Read *Late Victorian Holocausts* by Mike Davis.

“Gandhi felt free to conduct his private “fast unto death” in order to force the British out, even as the rest of India starved, because he felt he was playing for far bigger stakes. As was Winston Churchill.”

As *Churchill’s Secret War* goes to great pains to demonstrate, relieving famine would have caused no discernible disruption to the war effort. It is certainly true that Churchill was absorbed in the war to the exclusion of other matters—including a famine that would kill millions.

While I am about it, I might as well point out a couple of key errors in Herman’s own book, *Gandhi & Churchill*. The historian praises British rule in India, for instance, by saying that “average life expectancy rose from twenty-one years to thirty-two.” This comment is sourced from Niall Ferguson’s *Empire*. The corresponding footnote in Ferguson’s book—where it is also used to uphold the assertion that the British Raj benefited Indians—states that between 1820 and 1950 life expectancy in India increased from 21 years to 32. No source is cited.

Indian life expectancy can be calculated with some reliability only after 1871, when the first nationwide census took place. Perhaps in some locality life expectancy was 21 in 1820, but the figure cannot be extrapolated to the entire country. And even if life expectancies were 21 in 1820 and 11 years higher in 1950, that would not point to an improvement during British rule because that was not the span of British rule. The East India Company was already a reality of life in India in 1820. Wars of accession were laying waste to entire districts and kingdoms, and life expectancy was no doubt low. To judge whether British rule helped rather than hurt Indians, one would have to gauge life expectancy during 1750 or thereabouts—before the Battle of Plassey—and compare it with life expectancy around 1940 or 1950. That these apocryphal figures, which prove nothing at all, should have been invoked not once but twice show how difficult it is to get hold of any data that point to British rule having economically benefited Indians.

Another of Herman’s main points in *Gandhi & Churchill* is that Gandhi was to blame for the rejection of the Cripps offer by Congress. As a result, he goes on to argue, Gandhi was also responsible for the Quit India

movement and the repression that followed. Herman completely fails to mention the role played by Colonel Johnson, Roosevelt's personal representative, who helped Cripps negotiate an agreement with the Congress that Churchill and Amery finally stymied. Gandhi was absent from these negotiations.

Herman also blames Gandhi for the slaughter of partition: "His decade and a half defiance of the law through civil disobedience had bred an atmosphere of contempt for social order, a celebration of recklessness and militancy." An extraordinary claim, given the spiritual discipline that Gandhi imposed on himself and his followers. The areas of India in which Gandhi's followers were predominant (such as Midnapore, where my book is grounded) saw none of the random violence that caused and resulted from partition. In my book I offer rather different explanations for the carnage: the legacy of war and famine, British divide-and-rule policies, and a breakdown in law and order that was inevitable when the government emptied its jails of criminals to make room for freedom fighters.

Herman is the established historian—not I. Sometimes it takes a rank outsider to point out that the emperor wears no clothes.