IN DARKEST GANDHIA, 1921-35

Prologue: A Blessing to be Earned

In the 1920s, a new city of Delhi arose. It was meant as a seat of empire – and a monument to its grandeur.

But in its own magnificent way, it was a token of everything wrong about British rule.

The architecture was as Indian as Trafalgar Square.

And every so often, it put up messages in stone and metal, like school-book lessons to its people.

Here was one, and maybe the most damningly patronizing of the lot:

“Liberty Does Not Descend To a People. A People Must Raise Themselves to Liberty. It is a Blessing that Must be Earned Before it Can be Enjoyed.”

Patently false. Liberty has descended to a people more than once...

The slaves of the South in the Civil War
Germany after World War II
And Japan, even more so.

Even to England, where the people got their liberties from nobles and Parliaments, not from their own revolutions.

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1 Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 375.
But it tells everything about India, for all the promises made from London.

Liberty did not descend to a people.

I. RAJ AND SHINE? THE IMPERIAL PRESENCE

A. WHO RULED?

India – oppressed by an alien bureaucracy and a crushing public debt?

1940 – the ‘governing class” was the Indian civil service
   - 597 Indian members
   - 586 British members

Total number of British officials – about 3000
   Including judges, cops, foresters, agriculturists, civil service

Provincial governments had half a million public servants ....
   All of them were Indian.²

How about the crushing debt?

The interest, payable in Great Britain, on the Indian public debt, in 1936, was about 13 million pounds.

By 1940 it was about 6 million.

By 1943 it was next to nothing.

At its highest, Indian indebtedness to Britain never got close to the level you found in Australia

30 million pounds, Australia’s interest payments to England were, in 1930.

Yet Australia never grumbled. They got value for money, and knew it ...

The borrowing gave them railways and harbor installations
and the infrastructure a growing country needed.

And the same is true for India.

The borrowing gave it modern communications –
irrigation works –

It prevented the danger of recurrent famine.³

How about the burden of defense?

As of 1939, soldiers in service on Indian soil were 200,000
150,000 of them were Indian, 50,000 were British.

Small, poor in modern equipment.

And Britain took up the cost of mechanizing and modernizing – and didn’t start doing so till the summer of 1939.

August, as it happens.

For the naval defense of India, the British taxpayer forked the whole cost.

So India was hardly being mulcted for its own defense – overcharged and overburdened.

Indeed, in the war, British taxpayers paid four times as much for land defense of India (and we don’t even talk about naval defense here!) as Indian taxpayers gave.  

How bad WAS Indian taxation before the war?

8 shilling a year per head on the population.

In Japan, the rate was seven times that high.

Every penny raised was spent for Indian purposes.

There was NO stream of Indian taxes going back to shore up the British exchequer and pamper them.

How about trade? For a generation before WW II, India had full tariff

\footnote{W. K. Hancock, \textit{Empire in a Changing World} (New York: Penguin, 1943), 22.}
It used it – setting up tariffs that badly damaged British trade.

Look to Lancashire. Before 1914, cotton piece goods from there were exported to India – 3 billion yards a year.

By 1939 it was only 300 million yards.
That’s barely one tenth.\(^5\)

Indian cotton mills expanded their output in that period
From 1 billion yards to 4.5 billion yards.

Lancashire’s loss was India’s gain.

In the five years before 1914, India imported 61 million pounds of goods every year from Britain and exported 37 million.

By 1939, India exported 43 million pounds to England, and imported only 34.8 millions – a balance of trade in India’s favor of 8 ½ million pounds.

India by the time the war started took less than a third of her imports from Britain

She found in Britain a market for more than a third of her exports.  

By 1940, India was one of the eight leading industrial countries of the world.

Its industrial pace was very fast indeed.

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**C. INDIA – JEWEL IN THE IMPERIAL CROWN**

We may think of British rule in India as if the planners in London foresaw an end to empire, and were trying to find the slowest way to get to it.

... a very defeatist outlook – the slow retreat.

But there were some very strong reasons why Britain couldn’t and wouldn’t let India go.

– its financial importance may have declined.

– but it was every bit as important strategically as ever.

It allowed a vast stone of stability, under British supervision.

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– let it go, and the whole imperial system would fall down.  

A lot of other possessions (like Burma, f’rinstance)  
(Or like Mauritius, or St. Helena)

wouldn’t be worth keeping.

They CERTAINLY wouldn’t pay for themselves.

Nor Aden.

II. SWARAJ?

A. “Responsible Government”

Midway through the Great War, even English governors could see that India needed a looser leash.

But how loose?  
– another Dominion of Canada?  

– another South Africa?

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7 Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 276-77.
Whitehall talked of “responsible government,” but what did it mean?

Some steps to give India’s people more say in local government.

A central legislative assembly, where the lower chamber was elected democratically.

But with it, the Viceroy kept the powers of a president...

a right to veto anything he didn’t like

total control over defense and law and order and taxing and spending.

That didn’t give this parliament much to do.  

But a promise went along with it:

– this is just the first installment

– ten years from now, a commission will look into how well the reforms work, and offer more of them.

And so they did. But when the Commission was drawn up, it lacked a certain something –

namely, Hindus.

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the biggest religious group in all India
and the most politically organized, through their
Congress party.

In fact, there wasn’t a single Indian at all.9

Over the incense and the spices of India, even the least sensitive nose could
catch the smell of British hypocrisy.

Or was it the stink of death? Because already the killing had
begun, and not just by the British soldiers who
opened fire at Amritsar.

The restiveness in India built all the stronger as Ireland broke loose.

If Ireland could do it ... why not India?

And just about every year, another strand of the ties between Ireland and England
was snapped.

It was an example constantly in front of their eyes.

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9 And this was not Lord Birkenhead’s doing, throwback Tory though the Secretary of State was. It was the
Viceroy’s – Lord Irwin’s. His reasons were good ones, if taken by themselves. If you put Indians on, they would
vote with the Labour members against the Conservatives, and come up with a plan that the Conservative party in
Parliament couldn’t stomach. If you put on Hindus, Moslems would be mad – if you put on Moslems, Hindus would
be mad. If you put on both, they’d fight like tigers with each other. Besides, isn’t this a British parliamentary
commission? So, shouldn’t it only have British people on it? Andrew Roberts, “The Holy Fox”: A Biography of
Lord Halifax (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), 22. It was also pretty foolish making Sir John Simon head of
the commission, a man as cold as the Himalayas and as humorless as ... well, as Lord Irwin.
For militants in the Bengal, Ireland was an example to prove that armed struggle and terrorism worked.

Not for them the soft way of nonviolence that Gandhi favored. The educated Hindu middle classes were at the heart of the movement.

They had every qualification of English officials.

Just one thing kept them from sharing power – the color of their skin.

British stereotypes showed the Bengalis as weak, effete, effeminate.

Physical force was a way of giving the lie to it.\(^\text{10}\)

Already by 1910, the terrorists had committed hundreds of acts of violence and theft.

By the 1930s, they were carrying out assassinations –

The inspector general of the Bengal police
District magistrates

The seat of Bengali government in Calcutta.\(^\text{11}\)

Between 1930 and 1934, revolutionaries killed 9 British officials.


It took the army to drive them underground.

And what did they model themselves on? The Sinn Fein.

Their heroes: Eamon de Valera
    Michael Collins.

So clear was the link that the British outlawed any book dealing with Ireland.

They kept Irish-American newspapers out of the mail.

They censored news about Ireland from the daily press.

They confiscated pamphlets with Irish speeches in them. ¹²

And the Irish model worked the other way round, too.

The new Irish Free State had put through all kinds of repressive laws,
    to destroy the republicans.

These were a very good example, and the British used them.

... military tribunals, say, to try offenses
    and no court of appeal, when a person’s convicted

... with any penalty they please – not fixed by law
    so for anything at all, they could put a person
to death, if they so desired.

After all, the Irish Free State government was made up of terrorists.

If anybody knew the best way of crushing terrorism out, ask the man who knows.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Gandhi}

Barely five feet tall, all of 114 pounds.

Emaciated with sharp black eyes

Immaculate English, with a bit of a South African accent\textsuperscript{14}

He was approaching fifty in the terrible spring of 1919.

The son of a palace official in a tiny princedom of Porbandar, along the Arabian Sea.

Trained for the law in London

For a short time, he was as English as an Indian could be –

the high white collar
the dark suit
Learning to play the violin.

South Africa changed him.

There, an Indian firm in Durban hired him for their attorney.

There, he became the voice of Indian rights.

Not until 1914 did he find his way back to India, a spokesman for Home Rule and then for complete independence.

Gone were his English ways.

\textsuperscript{14} Jan Morris, \textit{Farewell the Trumpets}, 279.
He had become intensely Hindu
   His attire, Indian
   His diet, vegetarianism.

   He had given up sex.

   He had no interest in nature.

   And he was surrounded in virtue.

   “I cannot free myself from that subtlest of temptations,
   the desire to serve.”  

   Serene, appealing, almost hypnotic.

   His presence, one visitor wrote, was “like a good night’s
   sleep.”

   He was already being called “Mahatma” – Pure Soul – a title he
didn’t like at all.

   He was deceptively good natured.

   In some things, the purest innocent – in others calculating.  

   He had the vanity of thinking he had no vanity –

   that his ideas were not his own self-will, but some larger cosmic
   demand

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16 Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 279.
that his way of setting India free was the only way.

His pacifism was an aggressive, probing nonviolence.

Once a poisonous snake crawled up his pant cuff.
With a flick of his leg he twitched it off onto the ground

... and was consumed with guilt that at heart, this
proved he wasn’t nonviolent, after all.

He toyed with the idea of advising his followers to eat fruit only
if it had fallen from the tree

Plucking it off a tree was really a form of violence.\(^\text{17}\)

The weapon he chose was satyagraha – “truth-force,” literally.

It wasn’t the force of guns and laws.
It came from within.

One conquered one’s opponent “by suffering in one’s person.”

To call it passive resistance or nonviolence is far too simple.

It REQUIRES some form of suffering.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^\text{17}\) John Gunther, \textit{Inside Asia}, 366.

\(^\text{18}\) Jan Morris, \textit{Farewell the Trumpets}, 281.
Indians thought of Gandhi as a possible divinity.

They believed he could fly or vanish or do miracles.

He inspired women to become passionate nationalists, and multitudes of children, the so-called Monkey Army, worked for the independence movement as errand boys and messengers and scavengers.\(^{19}\)

This doesn’t mean that they understood him, or he them.

They certainly didn’t understand *satyagraha*.

Nonviolence wasn’t how you win revolutions, and they weren’t going to stick to passive resistance.

When Gandhi called a satyagraha, it always meant nationwide protests ...

mobbing...

looting...

killing.

Again and again, you see the same pattern:

Gandhi will call for striking a blow at the government.

And always, it was a peaceful one:

\(^{19}\) Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 281.
– Indians, turn in your medals and decorations
– civil servants, walk off the job
– boycott all British cloth

Learn to spin.

Make your own!

– close down all your shops in protest

And always with the same result, bloodletting and riots.

And a regular, systematic campaign of physical intimidation of those Indians who wouldn’t go along.

Shopkeepers might not close down. Other Indians would attack them.

Their stores would be firebombed.

Within days, Europeans would be getting killed.

Rioters would be looting every shop in town.

The bloodletting wasn’t just against the conqueror.

It was Indians against Indians.

Let’s say the Prince of Wales visits Bombay.

Gandhi calls on people to close their shops and hold a general strike.
But the Parsees won’t go along.

Nor will the Jews.

Before you know it, liquor shops are being wrecked
autos are set on fire

cops are killed

busses are overturned

Stores are ransacked for foreign cloth, and
it’s being burned.

... and it’s all done by crowds shouting, “Long live Mahatma Gandhi.”

Always Gandhi deplored it. Sometimes he called off the strike, because the people weren’t ready.

But he never learned. Before long, there’d be another call for a peaceful protest — and the same violence.

In fact, the Congress party, the people behind Gandhi, had no interest in satyagraha.

You don’t win by taking the punishment on yourself.

You make other people fear and make other people suffer.

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There were even attempts to kill the Viceroy when he was riding in his train.²¹

And terrorists opened fire in the legislature, shooting revolvers at the members and throwing two bombs.²²

²¹ It broke a few windows. But since it went off between cars, that was about all that happened. “It could never have succeeded,” an Indian writer concluded. “We are too incompetent to make good terrorists. They used the wrong type of bomb.” Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, later wrote his father, “It went off about three coaches in front of me when I was sitting in my saloon reading Challoner. I heard the noise and thought to myself, ‘that must be a bomb.’... I then smelt all the smoke which came down the train and concluded that it was a bomb; but, as nothing happened, I went on reading Challoner till someone came along.” Andrew Roberts, *The Holy Fox*: A Biography of Lord Halifax, 31.

²² Nobody was killed. Hindu terrorists just didn’t have the knack.
**The Salt March**

The most famous incident tells the story best –

The Government had licensed salt-making for years.

Makers had a monopoly. Any salt sold paid a tax.

Every citizen paid it, because everybody used salt.

The tax was about half the retail price.

It was a minuscule tax. 23

Gandhi’s plan was to defy the salt tax, by having the people of India each produce his own salt.

And to give it a symbol, he would make some himself, out of sea water.

The Indian people then could follow his example.

So on March 12, 1930, he headed out from Ahmedabad on the Salt March to the Indian Ocean, 250 miles off at Dandi on the Gujerati coast.

It took him 24 days to get there — and turned into a pilgrimage with thousands of followers.

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23 Two rupees and 8 annas per maund. The lowness was one reason everybody paid it. There was no profit in evading it. Andrew Roberts, *The Holy Fox*: A Biography of Lord Halifax, 33.
78 began the journey with him, all of them clad in white homespun.

The numbers grew fast.

Many walked; others followed in cars, and boys on bikes and crowds of minstrels and of locals.

As he passed, farmers knelt beside the road.

Women left their homes to offer him food and rest.

At every village, Gandhi would stop to tell the people what he was about and why it mattered; and when he started on his way again, the elders of the village would have joined him – 400 Village headmen in all, before the trip was over.

It was more like a pilgrimage, and Gandhi himself looked the great leader – never greater than here, head bowed, staff in hand.24

The Government could have stopped it; but it never tried.

On April 5th, the crowds reached the mosque and Hindu temple of Dandi, moving along a path half under water and deep in mud.

Reporters and cameramen from America were on hand.

Sightseers had made the little fishing village many times its normal size; crowds camped on the salty ground around Dandi.

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Gandhi never got to the sea itself; but he scooped sea-water from the mud of the tidal flats, where the waters had receded.\textsuperscript{25}

It made a dark, unappetizing salt when it evaporated, but it WAS salt.\textsuperscript{26}

A month after that – well after the nick of time – the police arrested him, without charge, to hold him without trial.

And it’s worth seeing why. Because the march was nothing – a stunt.

The real story began afterwards: riots, bloodshed and an attack on army depots.

In Peshawar, 30 rioters were killed.

Conditions were so bad that the mobs drove the army out of town and spent ten days looting stores and killing anyone they pleased.

It would take four months before the shooting stopped.\textsuperscript{27}

And while Gandhi waited in custody, the people made salt any way they could

gave it away to crowds

dug it from the earth
auctioned it.

\textsuperscript{26} Malcolm Muggeridge, \textit{The Sun Never Sets}, 84-85.

\textsuperscript{27} Andrew Roberts, \textit{“The Holy Fox”}, 34-35.
There were riots over salt.

Newspapers were banned because of the salt uprising.

There were mutinies among the soldiers and professors took their classes to the seashore to collect salt.

There were raids on the government salt depots – revolutionary governments set up locally.\(^\text{28}\)

Mobs set fire to police stations.

As usual, the fight quickly turned into religious war.

Muslim cops were grabbed by the mob in Bombay, tied together, soaked in gasoline and burned to death.\(^\text{29}\)

Of course you could let the protestors alone.

But it would mean a bloodbath, one that Gandhi couldn’t control, and most of the victims would be Indians, killing Indians.

So, naturally, there had to be a British crackdown.

The government sent out the cops and arrested without stint.

\[^{28}\text{Jan Morris, } \textit{Farewell the Trumpets}, 290.\]

\[^{29}\text{Andrew Roberts, } \text{“The Holy Fox”}, 35.\]
They rounded up just about every leader of Congress.

In fact, by May 1931, over 100,000 protestors were behind bars.

**Taking Tea with Treason**

It was an uncomfortable situation, and very bad P. R. for the Raj.

Worldwide response was very unfavorable.

But the outcome tells us something important:

Gandhi’s methods of nonviolence worked, not just because they set off violence that it was pesky to control –

But because they were dealing with an Empire that was based on notions of fair play.

Imagine what a Mussolini would have done to satyagraha!

Could you do a several-week fast and bring Adolf Hitler to terms?

Gandhi won because Britain *lacked the will* to really crack down.

What’s more, its Viceroy was on record, publicly and privately, to give India exactly what India never imagined it would get –
full Dominion status.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Lord Irwin, last of God’s Vicars}
The Viceroy was Lord Irwin – later to be called Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary in the

\textsuperscript{30} And he had been on record since the early 1920s. It was not in the slightest a tactical maneuver. Roberts, “\textit{The Holy Fox}”, 27-30.
last days of appeasement.\textsuperscript{31}

He was a tall, grave and imposing man – with a withered, handless left arm.

(born that way).\textsuperscript{32}

... very rich

... very stingy with himself and generous with others

... and one of the most convoluted speakers of all time.

One sentence began: “I should have thought that one might say that it could be reasonably held that ....”

A man like that was made for politics.

\textsuperscript{31} No, not hereditary nobility. He was born plain Edward Wood in Devon in 1881, a well to do family that provided merchants and justices of the peace and then had the luck to find a rich coal seam – the very deepest and best in all England – on their lands. Edward’s grandfather was Charles Wood, who became Secretary of State for India and Chancellor of the Exchequer and was made viscount in 1866. His son Charles married an earl’s daughter and became the most vigorous voice among the laity on behalf of the High Church end of Anglicanism (from 1866 to 1920 he was president of the English Church Union). You can see the links to Edward. Andrew Roberts, “The Holy Fox”, 4-5.

\textsuperscript{32} He wore a clenched fist with a thumb on a spring. It allowed him to do things like opening gates with one hand while holding the reins of his horse and his hunting horn in the other; Edward Wood loved fox hunting. Roberts, “The Holy Fox”, 6.
And, with a grandfather who’d been Secretary of State for India, for the Raj.\textsuperscript{33}

His religion was as deep as Gandhi’s, though in his case it was High Anglican.

He was a Fellow of All Souls.

He had written a biography of John Keble, the theologian.

Others sometimes thought that there wasn’t much there – except ectoplasm.

David Lloyd-George in later years would take a friend through his orchard, and point out one tree:

but bears no fruit. I call this tree Halifax.\textsuperscript{34}

In this case, it bore very impressive fruit.

He was gentle and genteel, and there would be no massacres in India, if he could help it.

The arrests, club-swinging police actions and decrees of martial law weren’t working. He could see that as plainly as anyone could.

His religion somehow reached out to Gandhi’s.\textsuperscript{35}

Tiresome, this Hindu rebel? Yes, but “some people found Our Lord very tiresome,” Lord Irwin allowed.

\textsuperscript{34} Of course Lloyd-George had cause to feel bitter. He was turned out as Prime Minister by a Conservative rebellion, and one of those in the center of the conspiracy was Edward Wood, Undersecretary for the Colonies. Andrew Roberts, \textit{The Holy Fox}, 15.

\textsuperscript{35} Jan Morris, \textit{Farewell the Trumpets}, 291.
But we’d better not kid ourselves about ‘Great Souls’ meeting.

What followed was the down-to-earth negotiations of two hard-nosed, practical politicians, looking for practical solutions, and looking over their shoulders to their constituencies.\textsuperscript{36}

So in January 1931, he set Gandhi free and invited him to Delhi, to talk out a settlement.

It was the first of eight such meetings in the west wing of the spanking new Viceroy’s spanking new palace.

It also meant something. This was not the Viceroy giving an important Indian subject an audience – it was like a peace conference

\textsuperscript{36} Andrew Roberts, \textit{“The Holy Fox”}, 38.
between national rulers.\(^{37}\)

The agreement that came out of it hardly matters.

By giving anything at all, it gave away more to a lawbreaker than English imperialists at home thought that it should have.

“Taking tea with treason,” they called it.

Winston Churchill in particular was appalled at “the nauseating and humiliating spectacle of this one-time Inner Temple lawyer now turned seditious fakir, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceroy’s palace ... to negotiate and parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor.”\(^{38}\)

By giving so little, it irritated most Indian nationalists as a poor submission.

What it did was end the uprisings; and set the pattern to follow.\(^{39}\)


\(^{38}\) Robert Rhodes James, *Churchill: A Study in Failure, 1900-1939* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), 224. The comment was made to the Council of the West Essex Unionist Association. It wasn’t much more inflammatory than quite a few other remarks that he made characterizing Gandhi, either.

\(^{39}\) Penderel Moon, *Gandhi and Modern India* (New York: Norton, 1969), 168-69. Under the agreement, Gandhi suspended civil disobedience in every form, and arranged to have the Congress take part in future sessions of the Round-Table conference. In return, Congress would have the power to write up a federal constitution on the
basis of self-government, with safeguards thrown in. The Viceroy, on his side, would drop all the ordinances for repressing civil disobedience and set the prisoners under those laws free.
Gandhi would have to be negotiated with – not dictated to.

**The Fakir in London**

Gandhi came out of the disturbances a world figure.

When he visited England for the Round Table Conference, he moved through the land a positive celebrity.

He met with George Bernard Shaw and Charlie Chaplin.\(^\text{40}\)

Children honored his birthday by giving him two dogs and three pink candles.

The London Vegetarian Society threw him a lunch.

Indian students rounded up 200 goats to greet him, but the Government wouldn’t allow it –

much to Gandhi’s regret.\(^\text{41}\)

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According to one story, on leaving Chaplin, after a talk, Gandhi asked, “Who was that delightful man?” He had never heard of Chaplin. John Gunther, *Inside Asia*, 366. In fact, it would seem that Gandhi knew who Chaplin was by the time the two of them met, and they got into an argument over whether machinery was a good or a bad thing. See Payne, *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*, 414-15.

No paper could do without a snap of the toothless old man in his Indian blankets and sandals, mingling with overdressed officious officials.

Didn’t he find it uncomfortable being so garbed for an audience with His Majesty, George V, he was asked.

“It was quite all right,” said Gandhi. “The King had enough on for both of us.”

The King can hardly have enjoyed it.

Secretly he may have wished that Churchill’s notion had been carried out, and Gandhi had been bound hand and foot, laid in the dust outside the gates of Delhi and been trampled on by the Viceroy’s elephant, with the Viceroy riding in the Howdah at the top.

“What! Have this rebel fakir in the palace?” he exclaimed, when the idea was first mentioned.

But whatever else George was, he had his father’s good manners.

He gave him a welcome, some tea, and a bit of a lecture.

“Remember, Mr. Gandhi,” he said. “I can’t have any attacks on my Indian Empire.”

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42 Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 294.
Gandhi might have suggested that the Indian Empire belonged to somebody quite different – or 300 million somebodies.

But he knew something about manners, too.

And back in India, he had plenty of the qualities of a king.

Such, as for instance, letters.

Anywhere in the world you could send it, addressed, “Gandhi, India,” or “His Excellency, President Gandhi,”

and the postal service would always know where to send...
In America, Cole Porter’s song “You’re the Top” would rhyme:

You’re the top – you’re Mahatma Gandhi.
You’re the top – you’re Napoleon Brandy....

44 Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 295.

45 And it goes on...
You’re the purple light of a summer night in Spain!
You’re the National Gall’ry,
You’re Garbo’s salary,
You’re cellophane!
You’re sublime,
You’re a turkey dinner;
You’re the time
Of the Derby winner.
I’m a toy balloon
That’s fated soon to pop!
But if, Baby, I’m the bottom, you’re the top!
III. LETTING GO

A. EXIT HURRIEDLY, PURSUED BY A BEAR?

In fact, Gandhi was a more limited monarch than George V was.

His moral influence was tremendous.
His power to make trouble was almost without limit.

But there were some miracles even a saint couldn’t perform, and they were the very miracles India needed most.

An independent India – that was easy enough to make.

But making one, without wading through rivers of blood – that was where the problem came in.

Because there was no one India for Britain to give up.

There was a patchwork of land in the subcontinent ... spattered over with princely states, well over 600 of them.

They had never been one “India.”

One person in four on the subcontinent lived under their sway

Nawabs
Akoondhs
Maharajahs

When the British resident coughed, it’s very true, they were all ears.

But the whole idea of “paramountcy” meant that he had to cough to get them to do anything; and a prince didn’t hear that cough every day.

No, they couldn’t make treaties with foreign powers.

When Britain went to war, they went to war.

They were under oversight and control, where peace and internal order were involved.

All the same, their thrones were their own.

not to mention their motor cars
   palaces
   concubines
   titles and trinkets

Most of the critics said, if only Britain could sweep away the princes, there would be one India.

Weren’t they saying: Britain WASN’T BEHAVING ENOUGH LIKE AN EMPIRE?

That it should have really made a thorough job of annexation and conquest....
obliterated all borders

annexed the whole country.

But the simple fact was, they hadn’t.

The princes could cause trouble.

And that kind of localism was just one token of a much bigger problem.

**The diversity of India.**

India isn’t like a country. It’s more like Europe. Or the Lower East Side.

Many languages – many cultures – many heritages – many religions.

The juridical unification didn’t fit the deep cultural cleavages.

All-India Radio had to broadcast in 12 different languages.

In Hindu society, the class cleavages were much deeper than in Europe.

The hierarchy of caste

51 ½ millions of untouchables or “depressed” at the bottom.

... the so-called “Scheduled Castes:”

What was to Gandhi’s interest wasn’t to theirs.
B. FIGHTING FAITHS

The worst division was between Moslem and Hindu.

For the Hindus, God was the Creator. So, too, for Islam.

But to Islam, He was separate from the things he made.

For Hindus, he was part and parcel of it. Creator and creation were one. They could not be divided up.

So God appeared in all things and everything.

Hindus worshipped God in any form at all ... as ancestors, spirits, natural forces, animals, snakes, divine incarnations, phalluses, water, fire, planets and stars.

There were 3 ½ million divinities to choose from to worship.

You could go with Brahma the creator
Or with Shiva the Destroyer
Or with Vishnu the Preserver

Or goddesses for the seasons
Or goddesses for the weather
Or Mariamman, the smallpox goddess

Moslems declared that there was just one God, Allah.
The Koran forbade his representation in any shape or form.

They had no idols, no paintings or statues of Allah.
To do so was blasphemy.
Mosques were spare and solemn, with only abstract designs for their decorations, and repeated representations of the 99 names of God.

Hindu temples were full of idols, and their shrines and temples filled with goddesses with snakes coiling from heads and with elephants with wings flying and dancing maidens and cheery little monkeys.

Beyond that and worse, was the social barrier of Hindu to Moslem.

Hinduism set up the caste system.

These were divine in their inspiration.
They enslaved on the basis of color the dark, Dravidian population, to do Aryans’ will.

So the “untouchables,” at the bottom, were among the darkest of the people in India.

There were 5000 sub-castes out of 5 major castes.

Brahmans had 1,886 subcastes among themselves.

Every occupation had its caste.
There a person was condemned to work, till he died.
He lived, ate, married, in his caste.

An iron smelter was in one caste, an ironsmith in another.

All social inequities were made sacred by the caste system.
They were the will of the Creator.
The humble must accept their lot, and expect to be reincarnated in a better caste in the next life.

But Moslems saw no castes. All who held the faith were equals.

Naturally, this drew most among the Untouchables.

Hindus believed and continued to believe, that most Moslems began as untouchables – or the descendants of untouchables, which was the same thing.

A Caste Hindu could not even touch food in a Moslem’s presence.

A Moslem entering a Hindu kithcen simply polluted it.

To shake hands ... that would force hours of ritual ablutions for its purification again.

Towns had Moslems in them, and Hindus. But they lived in separate areas, usually divided by a path called the Middle Way.

Hindus would never live on the Moslem side, Moslems never on the Hindu side.

They did not intermarrry, ever.

They took water from separate wells.

No Hindu would dream of drinking from a Moslem well.

In the Punjab, Hindu children learned from the village pandit, and were taught in Punjabi.
Moslem children there learned from the sheikh, and they learned it in Urdu.

Let’s talk of the veneration of the cow.

From Biblical times this had gone on.

Then, when people migrating were pastoral, a tribe lived or died by how its herds happened to do.

For these reasons, rabbis in ancient Judea forbade pig flesh to their people, to protect them from trichinosis.

So the sadhus of ancient India proclaimed the cow sacred, to save it from slaughter in times of famine, when this week’s need would wipe out countless years of future survival.

Consequence: by 1947, India had 200 million cattle

One head for each two people in India

More cattle than there were people in the United States.

Forty million of them cows

And yet from them, sacred beings as they were, the average of less than a pint of milk a day.

Most of them were sterile, useless, allowed to roam wherever they chose in and out of fields, villages, cities, eating the food that could have saved ten million Indians from starving.

It was lunatic, and yet religion insisted on no slaughter.
Better than Indians starve than the cattle die.

Moslems had no truck with worshipping an animals.  
It was hideous nonsense to them.

They were pleased to drive herds of cows past Hindu temple, on the way to slaughterhouses, just for the impact.

... which very often was a riot, with many people killed.

**Jinnah**

The father of Pakistan to be.

By the early 1930s, he was the foremost Moslem politician in India.

He had not begun as a separatist.

He began very much where Gandhi ended up – urging Hindu-Moslem unity.

Like Gandhi he came to London and had gone into law.

But he returned from England English in style...

the monocle.  
The linen suit – which he changed 3 times a day, to look cool and calm in the heat of Bombay

A passion for oysters and champagne and
brandy and Bordeaux

Indeed, you would never find a less Moslem Moslem.

He drank.
He ate pork.
He shaved his beard each morning – but he also never went to the mosque for worship on Fridays.

God and the Koran were strangers to his world-vision.

Indeed, Gandhi certainly knew more verses of the Koran than he.

And he had no more than a few sentences of Urdu.

Absolutely honest and incorruptible.

He had a passion for sound law and sound procedure.

He had a very orderly garden of phlox and petunias.

His only reading – newspapers and law books.

Newspapers from all over the world, mailed to him.
He cut them up, wrote notes in the margins pasted them in scrapbooks.

One person called him “the last of the Victorians.”

As a lawyer, he made a very high mark.
It carried him into politics.

For a decade, he worked to unite Hindus and Moslems in the Congress party, against British oppression.
But as Gandhi rose in importance, Jinnah moved away.
   Was it jealousy?
   Was it the snobbery of English values?
   Was it vanity – of which he had far more than his share?

Or was it a contempt for popular movements?
   For the common people in general, he had irritation, even scorn.
      He had a distaste for dirt and heat and crowds.

   When he went by rail, he went first-class.

Gandhi showed simplicity. Jinnah loved panoply and spender –
   his visits to Moslem cities were princely processions
   riding under victory arches, with silver harnessed elephants
      ahead of him and a band playing “god save the king.”

He was no easy man to like.
   Indeed, he had followers – not friends.

   He had no disciples, just associates.

   His family mattered to him hardly at all.

6 feet tall and a bare 120 pounds, gaunt, with silver grey hair and
   absolutely terrible teeth ... which, considering that his sister
      was a dentist seems a mistake.

   Stern and never upset – but always frail, sick, a chain smoker,
      living on whiskey, cigarettes and will power.
By the mid-1930s he was the voice of the Moslems of India.

What did it? Two things.

1. he ran the Moslem League, absolutely and completely.

   And as long as he did, there would be no compromise – no deal.

   Other underlings were more open to reason. Not he.
   And they didn’t dare get out of line. What he said, went.

2. political savvy and will power

   His single mindedness was his main strength.

Put all these considerations together, and you can see what independence, under Gandhi and the Congress Party would mean.

It would mean an India run by a Hindu majority.

In provinces with Moslem majorities, it would mean men of an alien religion to govern them.

You couldn’t ask a better scenario for riots or outright civil war.
It would make the Irish Civil War look like a coming-out party!

If the Raj was to last, it would have to cut the legs from under the nationalists.

The way to do that was give them some of what they wanted, enough so that the rest wouldn’t be worth their fighting for.

The real peril to the British wasn’t unrest. It was the *kind* of unrest.

Princes and localists – that the Empire could handle.

You play the Prince of Raja-poop-tila against the Prince of Marzipan.

You can play sectional interests against each other – or regional or local ones.

But when you have the All-India Congress, speaking for all of India... that’s a lot harder to control.

The cure is a FEDERAL state – with lots of control at the local and provincial level.

Then the people who run THIS area or THAT have a vested interest in keeping the imperial system going.
Throw it out, and they lose their control over their home turf.


The Government of India act was the longest single act of legislation that Parliament ever put through.

473 clauses
16 schedules

“A gigantic quilt of jumbled crochet work,” Churchill exclaimed.

In fact, it was one step towards some level of Indian self-government.

The British would dominate the central government.

The provincial governments would run themselves.
And Indians would have a chance at parliamentary responsibility.

There would be elections.

Provincial governments would come into office.

And they had greater powers than ever before.
Was this a step towards democracy?

Well, yes and no.

You certainly were letting Bengalis rule Bengal.

But the trade-off would be that the Congress party would be as far as ever from Indians ruling India.

Farther, actually!

The more power you hand out locally, the more ambitious men will go into local or provincial politics – not All-India politics.

Where the carrion is, there the vultures shall gather, right?

Where the spoils and the powers are, that’s where men with an eye on power are going to concentrate their energies.

That drains the brain-power and force from the All-India Congress. 46

Local issues would be handled completely apart from imperial questions.

Britain handles the second, the states handle the first.

Do that, and most Indians would have no beef with the Imperial authority. What they care about is the drains in the village or the local tax rate.

46 Darwin, “Imperialism in Decline?” Historical Journal, 674-76.
Give them this much, and they will let the British run the army and external relations and public security.

And the more local power you handed out, the more people there were who would join to demand one India, run by Indians, over their dead bodies -- or -- more likely -- over the dead bodies of everybody else.

By devolving power, it gave the princes MORE power to obstruct proceedings and say no to any action -- and know that they could get away with it.

By giving Moslems local control in some places, it gave them all the more reason to say no to a country run by Hindus that would take those rights away.

So maybe -- just maybe -- the Empire had bought itself time.

This sounds very cynical. If so, it was cynicism taking a trip through Fantasyland.

It didn’t have to be the first move in “some downward slurge,” as Churchill phrased it. 47

47 Because, let’s face it: the Robert Rhodes Jameses and the Baldwins were wrong, and the Churchills, while not completely right, were righter than we think.

They argued that the system was unworkable. It was.
They pointed out that the more democracy India had, the more Indians would be at each others’ throats over religious divisions. And that is just what happened.
They warned that what happened to India wasn’t just a matter of British rule there, but that it would jeopardize all empire, taking away the reason for being, that most of the other British possessions east and west of Suez had. And this, too, proved the case.
The step was towards the dismantling of an empire that most of its sponsors deluded themselves into thinking would remain safe and secure.

But the other part of the story we may get wrong is when we think that Churchill’s bitter-ender stance hurt
But – any bets?

If you went into the Raj, you wouldn’t find any takers!

By 1935, only some 500 British people were still working for the Indian Civil Service.

Nor could more be recruited from at home; they simply wouldn’t come.

To many of them, it looked like a job that wouldn’t last long.

Why come, only to go?

No, the real reason why England built the machinery the way it did was the...
mess – I won’t say ungodly mess – let’s say much-too-godly mess

that was sure to follow if they gave Gandhi’s Hindu followers a free hand.

Because you couldn’t get away from that key problem –
how to safeguard those people who had NO wish to live in a much more
Hindu Hindustan.

Local control just might be the solution.

It was aimed to create a federalist India – with room for Muslims and
Hindus both, and for all the many princely states, each of
which a separate treaty bound to the Empire.

As for the central government, with so few powers all its own, the Government
of India act riggled it.

Moslems would have about a third of the seats in the legislature.

... which was only fair, considering how many Moslems
there were

But Hindu nationalists would only have about a third.

The princes had the rest.

That was a big, fat bribe to make the princes play along with
the Government of India Act.

But it also was a safety-cap on the bottle.
It would take incredible sweeps at the polls for the Congress party to get a working majority.

As long as they couldn’t do that, the Moslems would be in no danger.

**The Great Indian Vanishing-Act**

It took three years to get the Government of India act through Parliament.

... 1,951 speeches were delivered on it

15.5 million words
Over 4,000 pages in Hansard.⁴⁸

Never did so few do so much work to give so much to so many – and to so little purpose!

Those who wanted a scheme that would actually work didn’t get it.

The whole scheme couldn’t happen until the princes bought into it.

And even before the bill passed, the princes had made clear that they would never buy into it.

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There wasn’t going to be any federation.

It never happened.

Those who only wanted a dodge – a bait & switch – an empty alternative to something much worse....

outright independence ....

would live to see their handiwork fall apart.

In just a dozen years, India would be independent.

And a new state would be launched, on a sea of blood.