

British-Punjabi film blames Churchill for Partition

Required Annotations	Student-Created Annotations	Summary / Questions / Reflection
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Comprehension	Stems: hyper-above, over; hypo-under, below. (Not in this article)	Comments
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A new feature film on the Partition based on goings-on at Viceroy's House (now Rashtrapati Bhavan) in Delhi and the tragedy of Punjab blames Sir Winston Churchill, Britain's prime minister during World War II, for the vivisection of the country.

The movie, *Viceroy's House*, made by British Indian director Gurinder Chadha of *Bend it like Beckham* fame, premiered at the Berlin Film Festival on Sunday night. It releases commercially in Britain next month and India in August — to coincide with the 70th anniversary of Indian Independence.

Chadha, whose mother was caught in the chaos of Partition — having to hurriedly migrate as a child from Jhelum in Pakistan to India and spend months in a refugee camp — described her effort as a “British-Punjabi film”.

Churchill, a Conservative, was no longer prime minister — the Labour party's Clement Attlee had succeeded him — when transfer of power occurred in 1947. But the former is cited as the culprit for having prepared a partition plan in 1945, while he was still in power, which Attlee approved.

The audio-visual essay does not overlook the fact that the British wanted to cut and run in the face of **sectarian** riots and mutinies in the ranks of the armed forces. But it lends **currency** to the view that Partition was a long, premeditated British plot to serve their own interests rather than the requirements of India.

The film is an adaptation from Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre's *Freedom at Midnight* and Narendra Singh Sarila's *The Shadow of the Great Game*. It is from the second book that Chadha derived her theory that Churchill was primarily guilty.

Sarila, who was an **ADC** to the last British Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten, and later an Indian diplomat, claimed in his book that a secret plan was drawn up by the latter's predecessor Lord Archibald Wavell at Churchill's **behest** to divide India. The war-time prime minister, who otherwise

fiercely opposed the **concession** of freedom to India, analysed Jawaharlal Nehru as being pro-Soviet Union and therefore likely to give the Communist power access to the warm water port of Karachi and consequently an easy passage to the Middle East. In contrast, he assessed the Muslim leadership demanding Pakistan as being pro-West and therefore likely to be resistant to Moscow.

Many years later, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, an unabashed admirer of Churchill, famously **lauded** Pakistan dictator General Zia-ul-Haq as “a **bulwark** against Soviet expansionism” after Leonid Brezhnev intervened in neighbouring Afghanistan in 1979.

In the “great game” of carving out spheres of influence between Britain and the Soviet Union, Churchill was attempting to checkmate what he perceived to be the United Kingdom’s post-war, Cold War rival; but at a heavy cost to the people of India.

The fact is access to the waters of the Arabian Sea through Pakistan has been denied to Russia to date. But if Churchill’s objective was to thwart communist enlargement and **hegemony**, he has failed, for China is comfortably **ensconced** not merely in Karachi, but in Gwadar, which is even closer to the Gulf.

The film begins with the arrival of the Mountbattens — played by Hugh Bonneville, who has distinguished himself in *Downton Abbey*, and Gillian Anderson, who has been starring in *The X Files* — in India to implement the granting of Independence to India. Michael Gambon acts as Mountbatten’s slightly **Machiavellian** chief of staff, Lord Hastings Ismay.

The Indian characters are led by a fictional young couple, one a Hindu and the other a Muslim, employed at Viceroy’s House and in love. Manish Dayal, who shot to attention in *The Hundred Foot Journey*, and Huma Qureshi, perhaps best known in India for her performance in *Gangs of Wasseypur*, bring romantic relief amid tense **tripartite** talks between the British, the Congress and the Muslim League.

Questions

1. Understanding this article requires a fair amount of background knowledge. Make a list of the items in the article that you feel an educated adult would likely understand as background knowledge but that you do not understand.
2. This film is about something called the Partition, or simply Partition. It’s clear that the author assumes readers don’t know what this is. Based solely on reading this article, what do you think Partition is?
3. How does the picture help you understand what this film about?’
4. This is a film made in India. What language do you think is dialogue is in? Why?
5. How do you think this presentation of Churchill’s role in Indian affairs differs from the prevailing understanding of the past?
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