



1942: When British Rule in India Was Threatened

By the time Marquess Wellesley was recalled by the East India Company in 1805, he had put a considerable part of India under the direct rule of the British as well as subsidiary alliances with most of the native rulers, allowing for British dominance in India. It kept increasing steadily, and when the British Crown took over the East India Company, the claim of the Empress of India held good for Queen Victoria of England.

India was squeezed to the maximum extent possible. An estimate for this period is that between one-fourth to one-third of the annual revenue of the Government of India was sent to England as home charges, besides sky-high salaries for British serving in India, high rates of returns from money invested in projects like Railways, and so on.

In 1921, the New York Times said, 'British Imperialism would be compelled to evacuate Great Britain itself before it would willingly evacuate India.'¹ India was tightly controlled with oppressive laws imposed via a bureaucracy whose will was forced by the police and army.

India supplied soldiers, support staff, and people for all parts of the British Empire.

During World War II, by 1942, soldiers under arms for the British were around a million¹, with more being recruited daily. Indian factories were in overdrive, producing goods for the Empire at the cost of depriving the population.

British rule in India faced 1942 as its most turbulent and challenging year since 1857 when what the British call the sepoy rebellion and what Indians consider the first War of Independence had taken place.

Let us review the British defense doctrine to understand this. The priorities given to the army were not as these exist today.

¹ By the end of the war this figure had reached around 2.5 million.

In 1933, the Garran Tribunal was set up to examine the role of the Army and its funding. The Garran Award of 1933 defined the primary role of the army as follows:

‘The duties of the army in India include the preservation of internal security in India, the covering of the lines of internal communication, and the protection of India against external attack. Though the scale of the forces is not calculated to meet an external attack by a Great Power, their duties might well comprise the *initial resistance of such an attack pending the arrival of Imperial reinforcements.*’ⁱⁱ

To put it in simple language, if India was to be attacked by the Soviet Union, which was the major British concern at this time- Indian forces were to hold the invader till assistance came from England as size, technology, and means with the Indian army were not sufficient.

Under Chatfield committee, the role of the Army defined in 1939 was:

- ‘a.To maintain law and order in India and to suppress any possible rebellion.
- b.To maintain the status quo vis-a-vis the tribes on the North West Frontier.
- c.In Cooperation with the air force and the navy, to beat off sporadic attacks by hostile naval or air force.
- d.To defend India against the attacks of a minor power like Afghanistan, and
- e. To defend the Imperial outposts in the Middle East and *Far East Area as bastions of India’s external defense.*’ⁱⁱⁱ

This highlights the priorities and goals of the army very clearly. *The army was a tool of oppression while in India and a tool to defend the British rule elsewhere. (emphasis by author)*

Throughout history, any Empire has survived only as long as it could project its power. The power could be real or imagined, but it must be believable by its subjects.

The year 1942 was when the British lost a large part of this power projection. Another event followed this- the formation of I.N.A.- that formed the basis of the eventual dismantling of the British Empire on which the sun never set.

The British war prowess in India had given them the image of being invincible. Their training methods, the discipline of the troops, and assured regular monthly payment of the salaries coupled with wins against princes and global deputations (which started in 1790) had created a mystique and aura of the British Indian Army. This aura and the army were powerful tools in controlling the population in British India, and the significant reasons, besides the police force and administration, were that a small number of Britishers could control a vast and spread-out population. The army was used to maintain control over the princely states and assist the administration in suppressing dissent.

The first dent in this aura of invincibility came when Britain itself came under threat by Luftwaffe bombing, the threat of invasion and naval blockades by U-2 Boats, and struggling for survival, lost Singapore, Malaya, Hongkong, and Burma in Asia.

The debacle of Singapore and Malaya in 1942 was a decisive loss to the British and demonstrated a poor strategy and inadequate fighting ability,

The areas from Hong Kong to Burma were very tightly linked with India when under the British.

The British officers were interchanged in these places with India.

Trade in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya, and Burma was substantially in the hands of Indian traders.

The defense of these areas was under the responsibility of the Government of India as per the Chatfield Doctrine. The British army at these places had predominantly Indian soldiers but British and Australian officers.

Malaya and Singapore had large numbers of labor and supervisory positions with Indians.

Therefore, what happened in these areas became known to people in India very quickly and also caused an impact in India.

The second dent was the return of troops from Burma and the information coming from there about the treatment of British officers of their Indian troops, along with the inability to face the Japanese. The British had constantly underrated the Japanese and their fighting ability without paying close attention and placing enough value on Samurai Ethos and the Bushido code of the warrior.

When the Japanese took over Burma, tired, dejected, and defeated, almost 100,000 British army soldiers came to India. Some were evacuated by air, some by motor vehicles or ships others, mostly Indians, walked through the dense jungles of Assam. Further, almost 400,000 civilians crossed over to India, many dying due to harsh terrain and indifferent evacuation arrangements.

Burma, till 1937, was part of India and managed from Calcutta. Even in 1942, Rangoon and Mandalay had regular ferry service from Calcutta and a large number of Indians in trade and labor.

Another factor was that the British pooled resources. Each place had resources unique to that place, which were collectively exploited. If Hong Kong was the traditional trading point with China, then Singapore was the point where about 25% of the Empire's trade passed and was a

major naval center. Malaya produced most of the tin and rubber for the Empire, and Burma was a significant source of Oil and Rice.².

As there were Indian traders and also workmen everywhere, events of one place necessarily impacted another. Linked to all of them was India, where the people living in these places still maintained active links and often loyalty as well.

The third dent was when the Japanese bombed the Indian cities of Calcutta, Madras, Vizag, and Kakinada. Many Ships were sunk while in the harbor. Evacuation started from Coastal Cities, and ports on the Eastern side were closed for shipping.

After the Bombing of Madras, the British started to make plans to even evacuate from India, worried that the Japanese attack might come into full force. Because of focus on Northwest area for defense of India, the British were simply not organized for meeting an onslaught from Northeast.

At the same time, to continue with British rule, the British strategy was to offer Indians increased involvement in administration, and Sir Stafford Cripps was sent to India.

The failure of this mission, loss of membership of Congress, and being ignored by the British after the provincial government resignations gave rise to the Congress party launching a do-or-die agitation, later named as 'Quit India.'

This became the fourth dent when the Congress party launched its agitation and protest in August '42.

Thus, as never before, India's British rule came under external and internal threats.

The common person in India was amazed at these happenings and found one surprise after another during this year.

The Japanese threat of naval blockade or further bombing of India was over when Japan suffered setbacks in the Pacific.

The monsoon stopped the possibility of a land invasion of India from Burma.

The August '42 agitation of Congress was suppressed with brutal repression within two months of launch.

Thus, things were beginning to change in favor of the British by the end of the year. However, Malaya, Singapore, Hongkong, and Burma did not return to British control till '45.

² Burma was the second-largest exporter of Rice in the world at that time.

The fifth dent, which eventually became the fatal blow to the Empire, was Subhas Bose, who had escaped from India and formed the Indian National Army in Germany, followed by the formation of the Indian National Army in Southeast Asia in '42. Later, when Subhas Chandra Bose took over this army, he energized the soldiers and increased their inspiration and commitment to nationalism, which became legendary.

The Indian National Army became the slow fuse that exploded the gunpowder of dissent and suppression in and ignited the whole of India in '45-'46 and forced Britain to leave India. Soon, one by one, countries forming the Empire had to be vacated, and in the next twenty years, the Empire was over.

The seed of British rule's collapse in India and the British empire was sown with the events of 1942, and this book traces that.

ⁱ As cited in Tunzelmann, Indian, P 48

ⁱⁱ Prasad, Expansion, PP 9,10

ⁱⁱⁱ As Cited in Prasad, Expansion PP 12,13

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From Amazon Reviews:

'It's a well-researched, eye-opening read that introduces readers to unsung heroes and significant events, providing a comprehensive understanding of the era. A must-read for history enthusiasts and anyone interested in the nuanced aspects of British rule in India'.

'Accurate, detailed, and easy to read. History writing has a terrible habit of being boring. A professor once explained to me that it was supposed to be that way. This is not that way.'

'I find this book so rewarding to read. It's written more like an interesting story or like watching a riveting movie - the words and events make sense. History, in my earlier experiences of reading it, have been difficult to relate to - they never seemed to be written for the layperson. I desire to know more about recent history like this and love the way this is written. I'll be looking for more in the series. Highly recommended read.'

'The most striking aspect of the book is how he weaves together these multifarious strands - from Gandhi's faltering steps to Bose's swashbuckling campaign - to depict a country at one of the most crucial junctures in its history. 1942 was when the future course of India's freedom struggle was being decided.'