

### A Canoe Sails to America!

Sir Winston Churchill and Mohandas Gandhi--two venerable men who transformed the world. Taking inspiration from the epic and intellectual film, "The Big Lebowski," one could refer to Churchill as, "Her Majesty's Dude," and Gandhi as, "The Raj's Dude."

Karamchand was a 40-year old chief counselor to the ruling prince of Porbandar, a province in British India. He was a tall and distinguished looking man with a new bride 25 years younger; it was his fourth marriage. His previous two wives had died during childbirth, and his third had died soon after marriage of a terminal illness.

Karamchand's house stood 3 stories tall near the center of town, one that had been purchased by his grandfather 80 years earlier. The original deed was witnessed by the then Raj of the province and sealed with a swastika as was customary---a long-standing Indian traditional sign of good luck that the Nazis would later reverse and use for evil purposes. His wife, on October 2, 1869, would retire to a small room in the home to give birth to her fifth and last child. A priest astrologer was immediately brought in to cast his horoscope. It was favorable, and out of the letters he recommended as most auspicious, his parents formed a name: Mohandas. He would be his mother's favorite, the youngest child in a large, pious household. His mother prayed daily that her Mohandas would become a hero among heroes. Even she could never have guessed what a hero he would become, or how.

Five years later, another baby was born on the other side of the world. Winston Churchill was also born in his grandfather's house, but on a far grander scale---it was the largest private home in England at the time. Surrounded by 3000 acres of green lawns and shining water, banks of laurel and fern, groves of oak and cedar, fountains and islands, Blenheim Palace boasted 187 rooms. In a drafty bedroom on the first floor, Jennie Churchill gave birth to their first child, Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill. "Dark eyes and hair" was how the 25-year-old Randolph Churchill described his son to Jennie's mother.

If the Gandhis were unknown outside their tiny Indian province, the Churchill name was steeped in history. John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough, had been Europe's most acclaimed general and the most powerful man in Britain after a series of victories over France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As the power and wealth of England expanded to unimagined heights over the next century, that of the Churchills steadily declined. The Duke's successors squandered his wealth to the point of monumental debt. Randolph's grandfather had already turned Blenheim into a public museum, charging visitors one shilling for admission. The family sold off gem collections, a 18,000-volume library and priceless paintings including an equestrian portrait of King Charles I, the latter still being the largest painting in the National Gallery. Faced with a bankrupt inheritance, Randolph knew that he must cut his own way into the world, just as his son would later. And both chose the same path: politics.

Randolph aspired to 10 Downing Street and campaigned to become the master of Indian politics, propelling himself to political prominence as Secretary of State for India, the jewel of the crown. Young Winston would be part of his father's journey, which formed his background for the issues that would pit him later against Gandhi. Winston remembered his father's vital lesson---while Britain was essential to India, India was also essential to Britain. Randolph remarked often on how India's vast import market mattered more than Europe or America because it kept British manufacturers in business. "India," he would say, "is the only free foreign market we have." That connection supported 2.5 Million Brits, including 60,000 seamen and 100,000 salaried men in India. Losing India would not only be a strategic blunder and a devastating blow to British prestige, it would also tip Britain into economic chaos. As Winston Churchill put it years later, the loss of India would be "final and fatal to us." In 1885, his father warned, "Without India, England would cease to be a nation." Winston dedicated his life to preventing that from happening even as another man would dedicate his life to making it come true.

Karamchand, Gandhi's father, moved from his small province to become chief counselor for another prince in a larger more affluent province known as Rajkot. It

was here that the young Gandhi was exposed to the English, where a British quarter existed with neat white houses and streets running in straight right angles, and an Indian quarter, with dark winding alleyways and 15,000 people crammed into 137 acres of living space. As the Chief Counselor, Karamchand attended official meetings when the governors of larger cities visited Rajkot causing upheaval in his household. Gandhi recalled the disgust on his father's face as he put his legs and feet into stockings and ill-fitting uncomfortable boots. At home or at work, his father never wore anything but soft leather slippers. The ordeal of wearing boots was the price he had to pay for becoming a cog in the wheels of British power. Gandhi himself would be schooled in Western-style education at a local school, where he learned grammar, arithmetic, penmanship and geography in English. In his later years, Gandhi quipped "The tyranny of the English was so great that even Sanskrit had to be learned through English rather than through his mother tongue." Before the early death of Gandhi's father at 56, the family discussed sending Mohandas to London's Inns of Court to train as a barrister. Even the proud Karamchand realized that an English education and knowledge of British law was the path to success in his profession. When it came time to depart in 1888, going to England meant making a momentous break with Gandhi's culture, his past life, his family, and even his marriage as his wife would stay behind in India while he was studying in London.

In London, Gandhi joined a society of thought leaders centered on a magazine called The New Age. Gandhi became friends with many New Age figures including Josiah Oldfield, leader of the Esoteric Christian Union, who taught Gandhi the unity of all religions and explained that the true realm of religion is the mind and heart of the individual. He met Annie Besant, the estranged wife of an Anglican clergyman, whose life would become strongly intertwined with his over the years, both in England and in India. A powerful role model, although later a bitter rival, she organized the first great display of the power of mass disobedience--a huge demonstration in Trafalgar Square against British rule in Ireland. It took 1500 policeman to disperse a crowd numbering in the tens of thousands, killing hundreds. The day was remembered as "Bloody Sunday." The young Gandhi's experiences in England shaped his thinking.

Like Gandhi's years in New Age London, Churchill's spent his youth in India experiencing an intellectual awakening. In India, Churchill first discovered who he was, what he could do, and who he wanted to be. In 1896, the troopship *Britannia*, carrying the 21-year-old Lieutenant Winston Churchill pulled into Bombay harbor on their way to Bangalore. As Lieutenant Churchill moved out of the landing skiff and reached for the handhold on the seawall, he lost his footing and wrenched his shoulder. The injury haunted him for the rest of his life. When swimming or taking a book off the shelf or even making a sudden gesture in the House of Commons, his shoulder would suddenly go out of joint. The conquest of pain, like his other conquests, became another test of his growing confidence in his own self-will.

Churchill's days in India were filled with plentiful obsequious servants, daily tours of the stables, paperwork, luncheons followed by two-hour siestas--a habit that he would keep the rest of his life. He also loved afternoon polo matches, a sport in which he was highly proficient. The game fascinated him all his life. It had everything he loved: speed, strategy, aggressive competition and emotional exhilaration combined with physical danger, as well as ancient rituals and tradition. With hours of leisure time during which he reflected, "the desire for learning came upon me." Before India, he showed no interest in books. He set off on a crash reading program including Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Henry Hallam's *Constitutional History*, William Lecky's *Rise and Influence of Rationalism*, Plato, Darwin and Pascal. Churchill wrote to his family that he "read three to four books at a time to avoid tedium." His family was astonished since they had never seen him read a single book. Churchill's belief in England's civilizing mission was reinforced by Gibbon's verdict that Rome's weakness allowed barbarism and superstition to defeat civilization. Four decades later, he would see the new barbarism in figures like Hitler and Stalin, who seemed to be reincarnated evil in a terribly modern way representing society's slide back into violence and the worship of power.

Both Churchill and Gandhi found themselves affiliated with South Africa at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their respective experiences raised their prominence. Churchill, a Member of Parliament, ultimately crossed party lines, from the Tories to the Liberal Party with impeccable timing since it was one of the most decisive elections in British history when the Liberals patched their differences over Ireland and struck an alliance with the Labor party. Three quarters of the seats in the House of Commons went their way. The new head of the Colonial Office, Lord Elgin, had been Viceroy of India during Churchill's time in India, and he chose Churchill to become his undersecretary. Elgin had a sick wife in Scotland, allowing Churchill's characteristic drive and energy to make clear who was really running the Colonial office, whose span of authority included South Africa.

After spending a few years practicing law in India, Gandhi took a position as a lawyer with an Indian business firm based in South Africa. He witnessed the local South African Dutch colonists, operating under the British Empire, brutally repressing Black Africans and Indian immigrants. As one of the most well educated and prominently active voices in the Indian immigrant community fighting on behalf of the British in the second Boer War, Gandhi became a key figure and spokesman. His central issue in his words was the Indians' "inability to enjoy the ordinary rights of a British subject or even a human being in a civilized country."

In 1906, Gandhi traveled to London to plead his case to the British Colonial Office, and specifically, to urge them to reject a new registration law in South Africa. He said, "Indians accepted the principle of immigration restrictions" that ruled South Africa. But Indians were ready to go to jail, he said, rather than submit to being finger printed and registered like common criminals. "If the Colonies persist in this policy," Gandhi told the *London Times*, "they will force the mother country to confront a serious issue." By "mother country," he meant India, where partition efforts aroused riots and agitation. England might not be able to hold India any longer, Gandhi suggested, if its people were "insulted and degraded." The truth was that Indians "had an ancient civilization behind them," Gandhi said, even more

ancient than England's, and were perfectly capable of enjoying full rights as citizens. Gandhi did not seek an end to racism or class distinctions in South Africa. He wanted instead British justice, what Churchill had said was "the foundation stone of British rule" in India. Gandhi was determined to find out how committed Churchill and the Colonial Office were to that exalted standard in South Africa.

Powerful friends, white and non-white, supported Gandhi's delegation. Among them were the Indian members of Parliament, Naoroji, who sat for the London suburb of Central Finsbury, and Sir Bhownagree, the founding member of the Indian National Congress. The delegation also included ex-Indian civil servants like Sir Henry Cotton and Sir Lepel Griffin, who had been Randolph Churchill's mentor on Indian affairs and was a hard-liner opposing Indian self-rule and believed that treatment of Indians in South Africa resembled imperial Russia's vicious genocide against Jews. Such behavior was "unheard of under the British flag," he said. Griffin spoke those words when the delegation met with Colonial Secretary Lord Elgin at his Downing Street offices in 1906. Lord Elgin, who had expressed doubts about meeting with the delegation, gave a cautious response. Gandhi came away with a more favorable impression and would express the meeting as "exceedingly good."

A few days before Gandhi was scheduled to return to South Africa, undersecretary Churchill agreed to meet with Gandhi about the registration act in South Africa. Gandhi and Churchill would go on to have an epic rivalry on the world's stage in the decades to come, but this was their first face-to-face meeting as relatively young unknowns. It would be their last.

Churchill, two days shy of his 32<sup>nd</sup> birthday, gazed across his desk at a slim, urbane man with a low intense voice wearing a well-pressed suit. Gandhi told Churchill that he was first a loyal British subject. He understood that the British were in charge in South Africa; however, "we do feel that we are entitled to all the other ordinary rights as that a British subject should enjoy." Churchill interrupted, "If the British government refuses to give assent to the registration ordinance, what then?" He went on to state that surely the new South African government would pass an even more

restrictive law. “No law can be worse than the present law,” Gandhi replied. Churchill promised to do what he could, and the meeting ended on a friendly note.

Then British Prime Minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman met with a caucus of Gandhi supporters and pronounced that he did not approve of the ordinance and would speak with Lord Elgin. Surely victory was within their grasp. As Gandhi prepared to leave London, everyone agreed that the delegation had been a great success. Gandhi sent a letter to the London newspapers adding, “The lesson we have drawn is that we may rely upon the British sense of fair play and justice.” On their way back to South Africa, an ecstatic Gandhi received cables indicating Churchill had announced in the House of Commons that Lord Elgin would rebuke the registration ordinance. This was more than Gandhi had hoped for and he said “Well-directed efforts yield appropriate fruit.” For the rest of his voyage, he planned the next campaign over Indian grievances.

But somber and gloomy friends greeted Gandhi when he reached Johannesburg. Nowhere in Churchill’s speech had he said the Crown would block a registration law passed by the *new South African government* under the new British-approved constitution. This was an important subtlety not raised in Gandhi and Churchill’s discussion. In a few months, the new South African government passed a registration law, and the British government would now approve fingerprinting and registering all Indians. Gandhi assumed that he had been tricked by Churchill and the Colonial Office, who wanted to appease South African opinion at the expense of the Indians. However, Churchill had told him the truth--just not the whole truth.

Even before he met Gandhi, Churchill and his colleagues had decided that they would have to grant the new South African government the power to force Indians to register, even though they would disallow the old law to keep up imperial appearances. When a memo was written describing their predicament, Churchill wrote at the bottom: “I agree entirely. We are in a wholly indefensible position. Gandhi’s deputation will certainly stir up difficulties in the House of Commons. What can we say after promising the new South African government their ability to enact

their own laws, no matter how offensive?” When someone questioned what to do about Gandhi’s delegation, Churchill scribbled: “Dawdle.” That was exactly what he did when he met Gandhi, while slyly revealing his hand. The decision to disallow the law had been made almost three weeks before they met, and Churchill’s speech in the Commons a week later was artfully crafted to evade the storm to come.

To Gandhi, it was a crooked policy, one that he could give a harsher name with perfect justice--fraud. Churchill had shepherded the new constitution for South Africa through Parliament. It was undeniably liberal in its principles and aspirations embodying the prime minister’s statement that “a good government is no substitute for self-government,” except, of course, for India. Churchill’s modern constitution was, as he said, “to step forward into the sunshine of a gentler and a more generous age” of the British Empire. The plight of the Indians, however, did not rise to that level of imperial importance in Churchill’s mind.

To save the British Empire, Churchill would strike deals with South Africans, Labor radicals at home, American isolationists, and even Joseph Stalin. And anyone who dared to stand in Churchill’s way would be ruthlessly dealt with. Gandhi was the first to learn that lesson in 1906. The world would learn it many times over in the next 40 years. Gandhi, of course, saw things very differently. To his mind, Churchill and his Colonial Office colleagues had revealed that the British “fair play and justice” phrase was a joke. Gandhi would no longer be interested in promises, only results. The old ways of doing things with petitions and respectful delegations had failed. Gandhi decided that if Indians were going to get what they needed and wanted, they must have a new kind of political movement built on new principles. Above all, it would be based on the new idea he had been pushing on his colleagues---passive resistance. Gandhi returned to India with this new principle front of mind for the balance of his life.

Within the borders during the 1930s and 40s, India was unsettled and on edge with ambitions of cleaving away from the British Empire. The turmoil of the independence

movement was marked by stand-ins, sit-ins, boycotts, and a famous “Salt March to the Sea,” all inspired by Gandhi’s passive resistance principles.

Meanwhile, Churchill had a much larger issue with which to deal---the war. He was masterful, and the British people clung to Churchill in refusing to give in even during their worst hours. As victory approached, however, Churchill’s electorate lost their taste for sacrifice and risk. In his reelection campaign, he faced a formidable Labor party who promised free national health care, social security pensions and guaranteed full employment. Churchill had hoped that victory over Hitler might bring a resurgence of the old imperial spirit, especially regarding India. Instead, victory brought a sense of relief mingled with exhaustion and desire to get on with things. That included shedding India as part of the empire. While India contributed 2.5 million troops to the war effort helping defend and secure the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia, its reliance on England’s goods had dramatically shrunk. The days when imperialists like Churchill could threaten economic ruin if India were independent were over. Labor swept the election taking 393 out of 640 seats removing a national hero from office.

India secured its independence in 1947. Churchill kept his promise---he never let the jewel of the crown go on his watch. Gandhi had outlasted Churchill. But post-independent India was undergoing civil unrest with violence among Hindus and Muslims at epic proportions. Gandhi wanted peaceful transition from the English empire even if it meant separating India into two—Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India. In the end, this would cost Gandhi’s life when a Hindu fundamentalist, Nathuram Godse, who wanted an undivided India with Muslims removed, assassinated Gandhi. His death inspired and led to a more peaceful partition of India, but nonetheless it was tragedy to the masses. Churchill would die exactly 17 years to the day of Gandhi’s assassination. Two men, born 5 years and 4000 miles apart met only once when both were unknown, both believed that the personal and political were inseparable. Gandhi spent his life insisting Indian self-rule and rule of self were the same thing. Likewise, Churchill believed a strong nation was the necessary product of

strong people. To late Victorians like Gandhi and Churchill, those terms meant the same thing.

### Epilogue

When non-violent protests swept across India, they caught up the youth of the country, including a teenaged boy. Such upheaval and transformation were thrilling for a rambunctious teenager looking for excitement. He lived in the city of Sitpur, a town the size of modern-day Middletown, Ohio. It was “Middletown India” in the truest sense. But his plans were much more global as inspired by Gandhi’s education in London and Churchill’s time in India. The young boy dreamed to explore far-away lands and see the world beyond the town in which he lived, especially as he studied Gandhi and Churchill.

Aside from limited post-war opportunities, the boy also faced a headwind from his father—or at least from his father’s prominent role in town. His father, like Gandhi’s, was the city’s barrister, who was required to prosecute residents charged with illegal acts, even if they were friends and neighbors participating in nonviolent protests. The barrister faced a dilemma---uphold and prosecute the law as an objective officer of the court, but also live as an Indian citizen sympathetic to the independence movement. The barrister begged his children, especially his most rambunctious son, to avoid the protests, knowing that if they were caught breaking the law, he would be forced to prosecute and incarcerate them as he would anyone else. Ignoring his father’s plea, the boy joined the crowds blocking trains with human walls, blocking roads impeding commerce and marching in disruptive protests. Thousands were prosecuted and incarcerated by the city’s barrister. Thankfully, none were family.

The boy, now 16 and mature, was eager to help develop the new India in the wake of Gandhi. The young man had a passion for improving the daily life and health of Indians and chose the sciences, and specifically, pharmacy, as his field of study at university.

His sense of adventure and curiosity inspired by Gandhi and Churchill kept his eyes open to the world. Only a few universities around the globe had graduate level pharmacy programs. So, in an act that was as much hope as desperation, he applied to graduate programs half a world away: Purdue University and Ohio State University had America's most renowned graduate study programs in pharmacy. He applied and was accepted into both. Though he left no explanation why, it's likely he picked Purdue, located in the state of INDIANA, which had his country INDIA embedded in the spelling of Indiana. That way, home would never be too far away.

Inspired by Gandhi and Churchill's expat experiences, the young man made the journey to America via England crossing the Atlantic on the *Queen Elizabeth* ship in January 1956. He disembarked in New York with enough money for a one-way Greyhound bus ticket to West Lafayette, Indiana. The new Ph.D. candidate would spend his first night in America on a bus, and his second at a professor's home. The key for successful Ph.D. candidates was to have the right research-focus area—his professor at Purdue had a dormant project for delivering antibiotics topically. Failed attempts remained in the file, but an interesting U.S. military angle still drove the need.

Battlefield injuries and ensuing infections were common. Hitting wounds with antibiotics immediately could save lives and limbs. Safely storing antibiotics before use and having immediate release when applied was a problem with no apparent solution. He had his project, and a well-deserved Ph.D. was awarded in 1959.

The Doctor of Pharmacy was now a more seasoned and experienced resident in America, and like Gandhi and Churchill, he was ready to return to his home country as a more advanced person having lived a successful expat life. Unexpectedly, a relatively small pharmaceutical company located in Indianapolis was interested in gaining government projects as a way toward growth. Hearing of the progress on topical antibiotics and associated military interest, the company acquired the project from Purdue and convinced the new Ph.D. to join the company.

Under the 1952 Immigration Act, immigration and residency applications from anywhere outside Western Europe were essentially denied unless “special skills” were proven. So, the company’s lawyers went to work navigating the bureaucratic permanent residency requirements for its research employee so the project could continue. The process was formidable and pedantic. The Pharmacist made plans to return to his native India when his student visa expired. He sent money for his wife to visit for his remaining months in America. The couple ventured out on a final road trip along the famed Route 66 to and from California, as seen from an ill-conditioned 1954 Dodge. The journey from Indianapolis to the Pacific Ocean did not disappoint.

No other road has captured the imagination and the essence of the American Dream quite like Route 66. The idea behind the “Mother Road” was to connect urban and rural America from Chicago all the way to Los Angeles, crossing three time zones. Although the road starts out in Chicago, the route was officially designated as “66” in Springfield, Missouri, the official starting point. Even today, if you travel on old Route 66 near Flagstaff, Arizona, you’ll find an elegant dining experience called “Road Kill Café,” which is adjacent to a store simply called “Guns.” And several miles down, one finds a store called “Guns, Beer and Ammo.” All the essentials.

The couple returned to Indianapolis ready to board their plane back home. They opened the last of their mail as they were moving out of their apartment—only to find a letter confirming permanent residency. The military need carried the day - without it, the residency application would have been denied.

The project continued, patents were awarded, and a topical antibiotic product was eventually delivered to the military. Ultimately, the product was commercialized for consumers and sold under brand names, such as Neosporin®. A small but meaningful mark for that young 16-year-old who was inspired by Gandhi and Churchill when planning his future.

The Pharmacist spelled his name “K-a-n-u” pronounced phonetically “canoe.” Kanu ultimately became Senior Vice President of Quality Assurance for Merrell-Dow in

Reading, Ohio, which, after a series of acquisitions, became Sanofi-Aventis, today the world's fifth largest pharmaceutical company. Kanu developed an affinity for the occasional fine scotch and cigar; traveled the world, and, in 2004 at the age of 74, sailed permanently to sea and would not dock again. His ashes would not be spread in the Ganges River as was Gandhi's, but rather, in the "Ganges" of his adopted home country for over 50 years---The Ohio River.

That "canoe" that sailed to America in 1956 was my father.

Ken Patel

#### Sources

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