

Too Many Things at Once: Why the Cripps Mission Failed?

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Abstract

The Cripps Mission of 1942 arrived when the British Empire in Asia was disintegrating. It promised India self-government after the war but failed in three weeks. This article contends that the mission failed because it attempted to satisfy too many contradicting goals at once. It was both a legitimate negotiation and a propaganda exercise aimed at American opinion. It pledged future independence but refused to share authority throughout the battle. It attempted to control communal tensions but ultimately aggravated them. The British government was deeply divided, with Churchill actively undermining compromises. The Congress Party was too split to accept a bargain, and Gandhi's moral power prevented compromise. Minority voices, particularly Dalits and Sikhs, were marginalised. The US talked about freedom but refused to put pressure on its ally. This article demonstrates that the failure was overdetermined, and that no single explanation is sufficient. The divide was unbridgeable because the mission attempted to accomplish tasks that could not be completed jointly.

Introduction

In the spring of 1942, Stafford Cripps, a British politician, flew to India carrying a briefcase full of promises. The Japanese army was sweeping across Asia. Singapore had collapsed. Rangoon was about to collapse. The war was on India's doorstep, and Britain sorely needed Indian cooperation. Cripps offered what no British government had before: full self-governance after the war, the right of Indians to design their own constitution, and even the opportunity for provinces to opt out of a future Indian Union if they so desired (Rao, 1971, p. 274). It appeared to be a significant advancement. Rather, it all fell apart in just three weeks. The offer was turned down by all of the major Indian political groups (Comstock, 1954, p. 360), and the Quit India uprising erupted within months (Kamtekar, 2002, p. 97).

Why didn't it succeed? Historians have been debating that issue for decades, and they continue to disagree. Some point the finger at Winston Churchill, who opposed Indian independence and never wanted the operation to be successful (Rao, 1971, p. 273). Some accuse Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress of being uncompromising (Datta, 2002, p. 644). According to others, the entire situation was never intended to be a genuine negotiation but rather a publicity stunt intended to impress the Americans (Pinkerton, 2009, p. 543). Others cite the profound differences between Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, and Hindus, which made reaching a consensus nearly difficult (Sandhu & Mahmood, 2011 p. 12; Bandyopadhyay, 2000, pp. 898–899).

In actuality, each of these explanations captures a significant aspect, and none of them is sufficient on its own. The Cripps Mission failed because it attempted to accomplish too many conflicting goals at once (Owen, 2002, p. 89) and because individuals on both sides of the table were ensnared by uncontrollable forces. The war panic that swept through India (Kamtekar, 2002, p. 82), internal conflicts within the British government (Rao, 1971, p. 273), the Congress Party's fractured state (Owen, 2002, pp. 80–81), the anxieties of minority communities (Sandhu & Mahmood, 2011 p. 12; Bandyopadhyay, 2000, pp. 898–899), and the United States' awkward role (Venkatramani, 1963, p. 263) are all necessary to understand what actually happened.

The Panic of 1942

The terror that engulfed India in early 1942 is essential to comprehending the Cripps Mission. The British Empire was disintegrating after appearing to be so strong for so long. Japanese forces had moved terrifyingly quickly into Burma and Malaya. Ordinary Indians thought for the first time that the British may lose. Due to wartime censorship, no one had access to trustworthy news, thus they witnessed injured soldiers flooding in, white citizens fleeing, and crazy tales. Believing that British control was going to end, people began withdrawing their money from banks and storing cash. This period is referred to by one historian as "the shiver of 1942" (Kamtekar, 2002, p. 82). He demonstrates how the panic was a widespread phenomenon that was felt in the villages and marketplaces rather than merely being a political class issue (Kamtekar, 2002, p. 90).

Cripps was not dealing with self-assured nationalist leaders who were ready to make a deal when he arrived in Delhi. He had to contend with politicians who could detect weakness. Why would the British accept a promise of freedom after the war if they were going to lose? Congress leaders had less, not more, incentive to compromise as a result of the "shiver" (Kamtekar, 2002, p. 82). The British became more obstinate due to the same panic. At a time when control appeared to be slipping away, they were afraid of losing it. As a result, they refused to cede any actual authority throughout the conflict, particularly in the area of defence, which was what Indian leaders most desired (Rao, 1971, p. 275). As a result, neither party was willing to compromise during the negotiation.

Common Indians were also suffering horribly as a result of the conflict. Donny Gluckstein notes that British war measures, such as rerouting food, creating money, and interfering with trade, were already inflicting immense suffering and would eventually result in the famine that killed millions of people in Bengal (Gluckstein, 2012, pp. 163-165). In addition to being terrified of the Japanese, many were upset with the British for worsening their lot in life in the name of a conflict they had no say in. Beneath the surface of the Cripps negotiations, that rage was simmering and would boil when Gandhi started Quit India a few months later.

What Cripps Actually Offered

Cripps provided a package that was very unique. The British pledged that India would become a Dominion with complete self-government following the war, similar to Canada or Australia. To draft their own constitution, Indians would choose a constituent assembly (Comstock, 1954, p. 360). Princely states could remain outside the new nation or join it. The shocking thing was that any province may choose to leave the new Union if they didn't like it (Rao, 1971, p. 274). Partition is a possibility, as that final clause essentially stated (Datta, 2002, p. 645).

For the time being, the British proposed adding more Indians to the Viceroy's Executive Council throughout the war. However, the British would maintain complete command of the armed forces and the Viceroy would retain his veto (Rao, 1971, p. 275; Comstock, 1954, p. 360). That was the agreement.

Everyone could see the issue. Independence was the exciting part, but it was far off. Who leads the nation throughout the war—the crucial aspect at hand—offered virtually nothing. Years later, B. Shiva Rao summarised the official records as follows: Congress leaders were focused on "the immediate present," particularly defence (Rao, 1971, p. 275).

Gandhi described the plan as a "post-dated cheque" on a failing bank (Datta, 2002, p. 646). The line was incandescent, but it also revealed a structural problem. The offer made numerous guarantees, but only when the war was over (Kamtekar, 2002, p. 82). By 1942, nobody was sure that Britain would win the war.

The provincial option was another alternative. On paper, it appeared that the British were being accommodating, letting various communities make their own decisions about their destiny. In actuality, it infuriated practically everyone for various reasons. Congress perceived it as a scheme to divide India. Jinnah wanted an unambiguous pledge of Pakistan, not merely authority for provinces to opt out, therefore the Muslim League rejected it since it did not go far enough (Comstock, 1954, p. 360; Datta, 2002, p. 645). Sikhs in Punjab were terrified that if the province chose out, they would be stuck in a state with a majority of Muslims (Sandhu & Mahmood, p. 12). Thus, the identical provision that was intended to control intercommunal conflicts ended up escalating them all. It was a classic example of a proposition that no one finds satisfactory.

The British Government at War with Itself

The British's lack of sincerity is one of the most well-known reasons why the mission failed. And the evidence for that is abundant. The prime minister, Winston Churchill, was a traditional imperialist who believed that Indian independence would be catastrophic. It was what he had said for years. Nearly as awful was Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy. He worked behind the scenes to bind Cripps's hands because he disliked the idea that Indians should share his authority (Rao, 1971, p. 273).

According to B. Shiva Rao, the important decision-makers were "at cross purposes from the first stage of the negotiations to the last" (Rao, 1971, p. 273). Cripps aggravated the situation. He implied in secret sessions that the Viceroy might not exercise his veto and that the Executive Council could function like a legitimate national government. Leaders in India became optimistic. The London Cabinet then categorically denied that any such pledges had been made. Cripps appeared to be incapable of fulfilling his promises, and his credibility vanished in an instant (Rao, 1971, p. 276).

Indeed, the British behaved dishonestly. The mission was undermined by Linlithgow and Churchill. However, historian Nicholas Owen contends that concentrating too much on this ignores a more serious issue. There were huge differences between what Congress would accept and what the British could provide, even if they had been more serious. "No opportunity at all" is how Owen describes the mission (Owen, 2002, p. 89). He demonstrates that there were insufficient political underpinnings on both sides. After being kicked out of the Labour Party, Cripps lacked a solid political foundation in Britain. Nehru was unable to win Congress support for the Indian side of the war because the party was sharply split between Gandhians, socialists, and more pragmatic politicians (Owen, 2002, pp. 62-63). The mission was built on mutual misunderstandings and weak political ties.

Owen is correct, in my opinion, to push us past straightforward tales of villainy, but I also believe he minimises the reality that actual individuals made actual decisions that ended the operation. Churchill was more than just a structural force; when Cripps and American ambassador Louis Johnson were on the verge of a defence compromise, he personally stepped in to prevent it (Clymer, 1988, pp. 270-271). That was not an abstraction; it was a choice. Thus, the failure was

both individual and systemic. Strong individuals ensured that the system remained biased against success.

This has an additional layer. According to Alasdair Pinkerton, the entire Cripps Mission was partially a propaganda campaign directed at the United States (Pinkerton, 2009, p. 543). The idea of fighting for freedom while maintaining an empire was becoming more and more unpopular in America, and Britain needed American support to continue the war. Therefore, the British had to appear as though they were making India a reasonable offer. A massive operation was launched by the British Information Service in Washington, which fed tales to American radio and newspapers that portrayed Congress as irrational and British policy as generous (Pinkerton, 2009, p. 545). According to this perspective, the mission was partially performed for an American audience. However, you cannot be a performance and a true negotiator at the same time. Since Churchill and his allies would have been incensed by any genuine concessions, the propaganda goal unavoidably diluted the content, while token gestures were sufficient to deceive American media. Since the mission was never intended to succeed completely—rather, it was intended to appear successful while failing—it was set up to fail from the beginning.

Congress Was Its Own Worst Enemy

It is easy to blame the empire for everything and to see the Cripps Mission as a tale of British deceit. However, that would allow Indian politicians to get away with it far too easily. In 1942, the Congress Party was a jumble of conflicting groups and views, and this internal turmoil made it nearly hard to reach an agreement.

The biggest challenge was Gandhi. He declined the offer. He disagreed with the idea of India joining the conflict. He detested the provincial option because he believed it would lead to partition. Given his unwavering commitment to nonviolence, Gandhi found any deal involving India in the Allied war effort to be morally abhorrent. Historian V. N. Datta claims that even if other Congress leaders had wanted to approve the Cripps plans, Gandhi's moral influence was so great that he would have stopped them (Datta, 2002, p. 644). Although the Working Committee was clearly divided, with leaders like Rajagopalachari and Nehru being inclined to compromise, they eventually bowed to Gandhi. The rejection was the result of a single man's desire rather than a group decision.

But was it really only Gandhi? Congress was so divided that any decision would have led to the party's disintegration. The Gandhians would have rebelled in opposition to acceptance. The socialists would have been furious about collaborating with the British. Despite their willingness, the pragmatists did not have the required information. Therefore, rather than Gandhi imposing his will, it's probable that the denial was the only option that could maintain the organization. Congress's ideological differences prevented it from committing to the kind of wartime cooperation Britain demanded. Gandhi was not only the cause of that impossible but also its voice (Owen, 2002, pp. 80–81).

Congressmen's true desires are quite different. They were more than just a challenge. They saw Britain in a terrible situation when they examined the war's current state. They witnessed the "shiver" (Kamtekar, 2002, p. 82), the general conviction that British control was on the verge of disintegration. When it appeared that they could become independent sooner if they just waited, why accept a promise of freedom later? (Kamtekar, 2002, 97). They interpreted the Cripps offer as an attempt to maintain India's involvement in the war while it was ruled by the British. They would receive a few seats on the Viceroy's council, but they would have no actual authority over finance or defence (Rao, 1971, p. 275). Despite having no control over the war, they would be accountable for it. They understood that was a trap. According The refusal was a logical calculation

made by leaders who thought the empire was collapsing rather than merely being stubborn (Kamtekar, 2002, p. 97).

The People Who Got Left Out

The three-cornered conflict between the British, Congress, and Muslim League is the main subject of most Cripps Mission history. However, there were more than three groupings in 1942. The viewpoints of Sikhs, Dalits, and the princely states, who all had a stake in the outcome, reveal something crucial: the mission failed not just because of the major actors but also because the political landscape was too divided for any agreement to endure.

Think of the Sikhs of Punjab. Punjab was a vital province and a significant recruiting source for the British Army. The minuscule but strategically significant Sikh community was alarmed by the Cripps' theories. If Punjab joined a Muslim-dominated Pakistan through the provincial option, Sikhs would be a vulnerable minority. They really needed guarantees (Sandhu & Mahmood, 2011, p. 12). But Sikh political leadership was divided, disorganised, and unable to formulate a coherent strategy. Cripps advised them to negotiate with the League and Congress, but they were unable to do so (Sandhu & Mahmood, 2011, p. 8). The negotiations stalled in part because of their inability to use leverage. The center cannot hold when regional players are unable to express their opinions at all.

Then there were the Dalits, formerly referred to as "untouchables," who were led by the astute but uncompromising B. R. Ambedkar. The Cripps Mission and the broader process of power transfer were catastrophic for Dalit politics. Claiming that Dalits were a distinct group with their own interests that the Congress, which was dominated by caste Hindus, would never support, Ambedkar had been building his own political movement (Bandyopadhyay, 2000). The Cripps ideas did not take this seriously. Ambedkar lamented the transfer of power to the same powerful institutions that had long persecuted Dalits and the lack of meaningful protections (Bandyopadhyay, 2000, pp. 898–899). The British gradually reduced the categories that were significant to simply General, Muslim, and Sikh over the course of the following few years. They pushed Caste away from the table. Dalit political demands had been suppressed by the time of independence, and Ambedkar's League had lost elections (Bandyopadhyay, 2000). A pivotal moment in that process was the Cripps moment. It was more than just the transfer of power from Britain to India; it was about which Indian factions would be allowed to use that power and which would not.

These tales are important because they demonstrate that Churchill and Gandhi alone cannot account for the mission's failure. The Cripps plans widened rather than filled the gaps in the shifting political landscape of India. The offer was intended to handle a three-body problem, but the formula could not handle India's many-body dilemma.

The Americans: Big Talk, Small Action

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was seen by Indian nationalists at the time as supporting their cause and pressuring Churchill to grant India independence. That belief was primarily false and only partially true. Roosevelt backed off when it mattered, despite the United States' cautious insistence on Britain to take action on India (Venkatramani, 1963, pp. 220–221).

American strategy, according to M. S. Venkatramani, was centred on winning the war. Not because Americans were passionate about Indian independence, but rather because India served as a base against Japan. The top officials of the State Department, including Cordell Hull and Sumner Welles, insisted that the alliance with Britain came first, despite the desire of some State Department officials for a stronger line. Roosevelt never faced Churchill head-on, but he did make

supportive sounds. When Churchill objected to his ambiguous proposal of a temporary Dominion government, Roosevelt abandoned it (Venkatramani, 1963, pp. 220-263).

And there's the strange story of Louis Johnson. Johnson was Roosevelt's personal envoy in India, supposedly to help with war production. He did, however, get very involved in the Cripps debates. He worked with Cripps and Nehru to create a defence plan that would preserve British supremacy while giving Indians more clout. For a minute, a deal seemed possible. Churchill hurried to the roof and ordered the compromise to be destroyed as soon as he found out. Johnson pushed Roosevelt to depend on Churchill. Roosevelt rejected the advice of Harry Hopkins, who had promised Churchill that the US would not meddle in Indian politics (Clymer, 1988, pp. 263-280). The moment was gone.

Thus, nationalists had believed that the Americans would stand up for Indian freedom. Keeping Britain in the war was their top aim, and they were, in all but name, an empire themselves. Although their anti-colonial rhetoric was genuine, strategic needs always took precedence (Clymer, 1988, p. 281). As a result, there was a lot of discussion about freedom, which increased and then decreased expectations, making the situation even more toxic (Pullin, 2010, p. 292).

According to Eric Pullin, American propaganda in India exacerbated the situation. The majority of American officials blamed Congress rather than Churchill for the failure of the Cripps Mission, despite the Office of War Information's desire to portray the United States as a champion of democracy. They had been told by the British that the Indians were being irrational and the suggestions were generous (Pullin, 2010, p. 282). Indian leaders perceived a betrayal. Gandhi claimed that Americans participated in imperialism (Pullin, 2010, p. 283). Instead of winning people over, the propaganda campaign created animosity. Pullin's conclusion is straightforward: propaganda that lacks a legitimate policy fails (Pullin, 2010, p. 298). Indians could discern that America was doing one thing while saying another.

The Problem with the Archives

There is one more thing we need to think about, and it is something most history books do not discuss: how do we actually know what happened? The documents historians have relied on for decades are not a neutral record. They were collected, selected, and published by people with their own agendas.

The Transfer of Power series, a massive compilation of government records compiled by Nicholas Mansergh and released in the 1970s and 1980s, serves as the primary source for Cripps Mission studies. Despite its value, Simon Smith has recently demonstrated how editing decisions that center the narrative around British officials have affected this series. Mansergh was linked to a Labour Party perspective on history that portrayed decolonisation as a kind, deliberate process—a narrative in which Britain graciously granted its colonies freedom (Smith, 2025, p. 786). The majority of the materials come from archives in Britain. It is far more difficult to locate Indian voices, particularly those from outside the Congress elite.

Even worse, it was revealed in 2011 that thousands of files had been covertly taken from colonies at independence and kept concealed for decades. Researchers were unaware of these "migrated files," which meant that everyone was utilising an incomplete official record (Smith, 2025, p. 795). Furthermore, we are aware that colonial officials frequently burnt important records before departing, meaning that important information was purposefully and permanently lost (Smith, 2025, pp. 797–798). As a result, the holes in the archive are many and not arbitrary. Things that would reflect poorly on the British are often concealed.

What does the Cripps Mission stand to gain from this? It implies that we ought to be modest about our perceived knowledge. Although they provide us with the perspective from London, the in-depth descriptions of Cabinet sessions and Viceroy's communications are rich. Because they were

less likely to be retained in the files the empire decided to retain, the fear in the villages, the rage of the urban poor, and the calculations of minority leaders are more difficult to access. A critical history of the Cripps Mission must read the records against the grain and search for additional sources of information, including as oral histories, newspapers, letters, and economic statistics. The publication of the official papers is not the end of the narrative.

Conclusion

What caused the Cripps Mission to fail? The simplest explanation is that it was expected to perform too many conflicting tasks at once. Additionally, the negotiation served as propaganda for American perception. While refusing to share authority throughout the conflict, it pledged independence afterward. Everyone was afraid of the provincial option, which was intended to handle communal tensions: Sikhs saw abandonment, the Muslim League saw a compromise, and the Congress saw partition. The entire design was fundamentally empty.

Things got worse because of the timing. Indian leaders, perceiving an empire on the verge of collapse, had less incentive to accept promises about the future, while the British were finding it more difficult to maintain power. Both sides were prevented from reaching a solution by Kamtekar's "shiver". Internal strength was lacking on both sides, making an agreement unworkable. Where he could, Churchill sabotaged. It was impossible for Congress to accept anything without breaking apart. As a negotiator, Cripps was unable to provide what he appeared to promise.

They had high expectations, but were let down by the Americans. Roosevelt spoke of independence but prioritised the alliance during the war. Churchill killed a last-minute defence compromise, and Roosevelt refused to step in. Without a solid policy, propaganda merely made people more cynical.

Sikhs, Dalits, and others were left in a precarious situation. Although the mission did not instill their anxieties, it did not resolve them, and as a result, it contributed to the marginalisation that ensued. Britain's handing over of the keys was only one aspect of the transfer of power; another was the selection of the Indians who would retain them.

The mission was described by Owen as an effort to close a "unbridgeable chasm" (Owen, 2002, p. 89). That is still the finest synopsis. However, the divide extended beyond British and Indian perspectives. It was a negotiation, a performance, a stalling strategy, and a reform plan all rolled into one, and those responsibilities were incompatible with the purpose itself. It was an overdetermined failure.

The fallout was quick. Quit India broke out. The British suppressed the protests and imprisoned Congress. Sitting out the chaos, the Muslim League gained more powerful. The route to division was more difficult to ignore as the communal divide deepened. These events were not caused by the Cripps Mission, but they seemed virtually inevitable as a result. The Indian empire was destined to be destroyed rather than reformed. That was the reality that the mission ultimately exposed through its failure.

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