

Critical Commentary

Calcutta 1908: Apocalypse Now

Jeffrey Stanley

I was a 2018-19 Fulbright-Nehru Research Scholar in India. My research topic was early 20th century Bengali film and theatre and their impact on India's nascent independence movement. I spent most of my time in the state of West Bengal in the city of Kolkata. With this article, I would like to take you on a journey using only newspaper articles and advertisements. I use them to convey to us a sense of undeniability, a sense of "you are there," reading these historical newspapers on a daily basis, to help us imagine—and that's all we can do is imagine--what daily life was like for Indians under British rule.

Why Kolkata? Because Calcutta, as it was then called, was the capital of British India for most of its reign. When they constructed the city, the British touted it back home as the London of the East, promising that anyone who relocated here would find all the comforts of home. Much of the anti-British sentiment that was expressed here by Bengalis set the tone for the rest of the country in the years that followed. As Indian Independence leader Gopal Krishna Kokhale (1866-1915) once famously said, "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow."

Calcutta was known to British residents as having a "white town" and a "black town." You can guess who lived where. More affluent Bengalis with some social mobility could travel to white town to enjoy theatre done the Western way. This means five-act dramas, comedies and tragedies performed indoors on a proscenium stage.

Before long, Indian playwright-composers and performers decided to put on five-act plays in courtyards and on temporary proscenium stages in north Calcutta, aka, "black town," but with Bengali characters, language and settings, and a lot more singing and dancing to meet their Indian audience's expectations. This was all going on during the period known as the Bengali Renaissance, which spanned from the late 18th into the early 20th centuries.

By the late 19th century, Bengali playwrights began building their own permanent theatres in north Calcutta. The plays were light comedies, romances, and mythological dramas based on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, with no real political undertones. But this soon changed.

In 1885, the Indian National Congress, India's first political party with self-rule quickly becoming its chief aim, was formed. Soon the Swadeshi movement, the boycott of British goods, was underway.

Anti-British sentiment had gotten so strong in Calcutta by 1899 that the Lieutenant-Governor of the Bengal Presidency, Sir John Woodburn, modified the Whipping Act of 1864 to include a new Whipping Bill, which allowed for judges to sentence *juveniles* to whipping, and for reviving the whipping of Indian adults for "rioting with arms," as documented in the Catholic newspaper *The Indo-European Correspondence*.¹ I should clarify that the way the Penal Code worked in India, a regional leader, such as the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in this case, could enact a law in his own region, at which time it was called a bill. It would remain in effect while it was submitted to the Viceroy's Council for permanent approval, in which case it became an act applicable to the entirety of British-controlled India.

Meanwhile, Bengali playwrights, not wanting to be shut down for sedition by openly criticizing the British Raj in their plays, came up with a clever solution. They began presenting historical dramas about Indian warriors from their ancient, pre-British past. On the surface, these biographical, mythologized history plays couldn't possibly be about the British. However, they were about Indian heroes who had stood up to an invader. Sometimes they'd won, sometimes they'd died for their cause in a kind of Indian *Remember the Alamo* way, but these plays' true message was thematically clear: the time had come for ordinary Indians to awaken, take up arms, and rise.

Along with the development of this theatrical new guard, a newly spawned Bengali press had formed in north Calcutta near the theatres. Some of these newspapers were written in Bengali, some were in English, but they were aimed exclusively at Bengalis. These newspapers and theatres existed in a parallel universe to the British-owned newspapers and theatres in "white town."

In a February 15th, 1900 advertisement from *The Bengalee*, a Bengali-owned pro-Independence newspaper, for one of the top three Bengali-owned theatres in Calcutta, The Star Theatre, we learn that they're premiering a play called *Rajshingha*.² Also known as Raja Shinga, he was a Hindu warrior who fought the Mughals. The play was adapted from the 1882 novel of the same name by Bengali author Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, whom the ad refers to affectionately as "Bankim-babu." The beautiful princess in the play is described as exuding "patriotic pride." Patriotism in British India usually meant loyalty to Queen Victoria and to England, but increasingly to Bengali independence activists it signaled loyalty to India, as it does here.

On March 9, 1900, *The Bengalee* newspaper ran a satirical piece, likely penned by the editor Surendranath Bannerjea, whom the British press would later nickname "Surrender Not" Bannerjea, called "The White Man's Exemption Act," which proposes that, given that British men are rarely found guilty in Indian courts anyway, this racial prejudice should be codified into law.³

At the same time, short, silent films, also known as bioscopes, were being screened by itinerant British, European and American exhibitors who would set up tents in the city's main park, called the Maidan, or they would arrange to show them in private homes, and during intermissions in playhouses (movie theaters didn't exist yet). The films they screened were all imported from England, Europe and the US.

Those films produced in England were, as exemplified in an ad from the Bengali-owned Classic Theatre from November 30th, 1901, patriotic in the British sense, often propagandizing the might of the British Empire and celebrating their military victories.⁴ The first films listed in the ad describe footage of the Traansvaal War, also known as the Second Boer War, in South Africa, which included "the triumphant entry of thousands of her majesty's forces." Screenings of such pro-British films in Bengali playhouses likely served as a way of tempering the pro-independence messages of many of the plays in the eyes of British authorities.

The screening of imported films in Bengali playhouses was also true for *India's* first film exhibitor, Hiralal Sen. A professional photographer, he formed Royal Bioscope with his brother Motilal. Their company is the exhibitor listed in the above-mentioned ad. The name of their company, Royal Bioscope, is ambiguous, for it might refer to Queen Victoria or it might refer to any prior Indian ruler, such as the aforementioned Raja Shingha.

The slam dunk of pro-independence Bengali plays in terms of popular impact was, collectively, their songs. Not everyone could go see a play, but catchy songs from it quickly spread by word of mouth. Mainly, they were innocent-seeming tunes which opined about the natural beauty of India and her glorious past. But sing such a song at a protest rally, which was increasingly becoming the norm, and you had yourself a heartfelt nationalist cry for self-rule, which, to the British Raj, meant sedition.

In a *Bengalee* newspaper ad from January 11th, 1901 for the Bengali-owned Minerva Theatre, we learn that they're staging an adaptation of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath*.⁵ The novel, and the play, contains a poem entitled "Bande Mataram," or Hail, Mother—Mother in this case meaning Mother India—that would become a protest slogan and song which would spread across the country. We also learn that the play contains "sweet national songs" and film screenings by American Cineoscope & Co., a traveling exhibitor from the US.

In these ways, pro-independence messages were being increasingly broadcast to the Bengali public through the natives' own pop culture, including plays' subject matter and songs, and through the press. As the Swadeshi movement grew, artists and writers became more outspoken in their criticism of the British Empire. A *Bengalee* newspaper article from 1901 entitled "Disgraceful!" complains of reports from Indian soldiers of racist treatment by their white comrades while serving in the British army in China. It concludes with an electrifying statement, calling British soldiers "the scum of Europe" who are in no position to treat other races as being beneath them.⁶

In happier news, on December 28th, 1902 came word in *The Bengalee* that Royal Bioscope's Hiralal Sen had purchased his own movie camera for shooting "impressions of Indian life and scenery" because imported films no longer "satisfy the craving of oriental spectators."⁷ His films would feature "pictures purely Indian in design and execution representing...the habits and

peculiarities of the Indian peoples as well as the march of events in Indian history." Such filmmaking was "hitherto unattempted by Indian artists...The exhibition of animated photographs turned out by English and Continental firms, and as a matter of course shaped and designed according to foreign taste, although highly interesting in their own way, hardly satisfied the craving of oriental spectators." This article represents a groundbreaking moment. It is the birth of Indian cinema.

One month later on January 28th, 1903, Royal Bioscope made good on its promise. The company's ad from *The Bengalee* reads in part, "Epoch-making chapter in the history of the bioscope, bioscope brought home, Indian life and scenes, pictures representing the march of events from Indian history, Hindu mythology, theatrical scenes, a relief to the eyes satiated with scenes of European life and history, subjects purely Indian in design and execution which no other exhibitor in the world can boast of, pioneer and premiere exhibitors of the bioscope in India."⁸ Hiralal Sen was indeed a pioneer. The world's cinema history books, including books on Indian cinema history, which falsely attribute the title of India's first filmmaker to Debashadeb Phalke, need to be updated. Phalke didn't make his first film until 10 years later in 1913.

Meanwhile, the gramophone had also entered India. One of the first advertisements for a record store in the country is dated July 1st, 1905.⁹ The industry had followed a trajectory similar to films, in that at first, all of the records were imported, but by the time of this advertisement, recordings were also being made in-country. This particular ad prominently boasts of three recordings by women, two of whom were Bengali stage stars singing songs from plays, Nati Binodini and Giribala. These actresses had started out as sex workers. There were plenty of British actresses on the Calcutta stage in "white town," but in more conservative Bengali theatres, female roles were still being performed by men in drag. New Bengali playwrights found that embarrassing and wanted to change it, but Bengali women from so-called respectable families would not dare shame their loved ones by pursuing a career in acting.

So, Bengali playwrights and theatres turned to Calcutta's red-light districts to seek out acting talent among the city's sex workers. Some of them tried acting for a lark and were never heard from again, but some of them turned it into a career and became India's first famous actresses. An ad from July 2nd, 1905 for another Indian-owned gramophone business also boasts of their large stock of songs by Nati Binodini, who was the most famous actress of them all.¹⁰ She also wrote poetry, and she's the only one of these sex worker-actresses to publish a memoir, entitled *My Life*. A painting of Nati Binodini hangs in the lobby of the Star Theatre in Kolkata today.

Then came a major shock. On July 7th of 1905, the British Raj announced that Bengal would be partitioned into two separate municipalities, as we can read in a *Bengalee* article entitled, "The Partition of Bengal."¹¹ It reads in part, "An immediate announcement regarding the partition of Bengal is now expected. A new province, which will be called Eastern Bengal and Assam, with a capital at Dacca, under a Lieutenant-Governor" will be established.

Immediately, as three articles from *The Bengalee* dated July 18th, 20th, and 25th,^{12, 13, 14} demonstrate, towns across Bengal held emergency meetings, and clung to the naive belief that they could convince Secretary of State for India Morley to change his mind. One of these articles describes the breakup of Bengal as something "never conceived of even in the wildest flights of

imagination of any rulers of this land." The articles attack India's Viceroy Lord Curzon's claims that the partition was intended purely to lessen the administrative burden on Calcutta. They call for all Bengalis to unite and resist, and they accuse the British of trying to sow dissent between Hindus and Muslims, even though they had lived peacefully in Bengal for centuries, as a ploy to neutralize the independence movement. Finally, they question why the scheme had been conceived in secret.

The Minerva Theatre gave a theatrical response to the partition announcement. Their ad in *The Bengalee* on July 27th, 1905, announces the premiere of a new play by D.L. Roy, *Rana Protap*.¹⁵ Protap was a Rajput leader who fought and defeated Mughal invaders. So again, we have a play with anti-occupier, nationalist overtones, which reads in part, "The mighty prince...who... withstood...the then most powerful empire in the world...We are not aware of a more illustrious personage ...whose whole career was one long and uninterrupted struggle for the independence of his country." Notice how they worked in the word "empire," as in British Empire.

Three articles from *The Bengalee* in late July and early August,^{16, 17, 18} show us that towns across Bengal were still holding emergency meetings and arranging protest marches. The biggest protest occurred at Calcutta's Town Hall on August 7th, 1905. It was attended by over 10,000 protestors, and Indian-owned businesses closed for the day as a sign of support. The speakers called the partition "the vivisection of Bengal," referred to it as "perverse," and repeated the idea that the British had divided up Bengal along religious lines which had nothing to do with easing their administrative burden but which was intended to create disunity.

A few weeks later in Dacca, the new capital of predominantly Muslim Eastern Bengal, the same kind of protest occurred, as a *Bengalee* article from August 11th, 1905 recaps.¹⁹ The Hindu and Muslim speakers drew 10,000 protestors, all of whom took the Swadeshi Oath (to only buy Indian-made goods). Such protest meetings continued nonstop in towns and villages across Bengal.

Those Indian businesses which had always sold Indian-made products were now advertising their wares as "swadeshi," sometimes comically so. In an ad from *The Bengalee*, the very top line in bold and all caps reads, "A REVOLUTION"...even though they're only selling..."footballs."²⁰ Likewise, Gupta's Teas, which had always been made in India, were now "country-made," in other words, Swadeshi, teas.²¹ The ad also explicitly mentions "The Partition of Bengal" and "The Protest Meetings." In an ad for fishing tackle, Indian-made fishing lines were now "stronger than English lines and last longer"²² (8/30/05).

By this time, Hiralal Sen's Royal Bioscope was no longer the only Indian film exhibitor in town, nor was Sen the only Indian filmmaker. His chief competition was Elphinstone Bioscope, run by a Parsi from Bombay who had settled in Calcutta, Mr. J.F. Madan. An Elphinstone Bioscope ad dated September 6th, 1905 shows us that Madan was swift enough to see a marketable film happening right outside his door, so he sent his crews out to film the aforementioned massive Town Hall partition march of August 7th.²³ A month later, it was now ready for public screenings. The ad describes the thousands of students marching from their colleges under different flags, all convening on Town Square, and it lists the speakers, whom the ad calls "Bengal's great patriots."

Nonetheless, the Partition of Bengal took effect on October 16th, 1905. Bengalis still refer to it as the First Partition, distinguishing it from the final partition of the country into India and Pakistan which would take place in 1947, and which most people are referring to when they talk about the Partition of India. Six days later, on October 22nd, 1905, Hiral Sen would premiere his own film of a second, and smaller, Town Hall march that drew 5000 protestors, but his ad is much more aggressive than Elphinstone's, calling his film "a genuine Swadeshi film of our own make...grand patriotic film...crusade against the dismemberment of Bengal. Bande Mataram!"²⁴

And thus, the resistance continued. Surprisingly, no one was openly calling for violence. Yet.

By 1906, another Bengali newspaper had appeared, the fiery nationalist *Bande Mataram*, which, you might guess from its masthead, featuring the slogan "A daily organ of Indian nationalism," was throwing down the glove.²⁵ They published articles with headlines like "Commerce, Religion and Politics in White-Land."²⁶ That particular article attacks US policies in Asia, and states that there are "Two classes of white men...the merchant and the missionary."

Bande Mataram was the newspaper in which Swadeshi activist and entrepreneur Sarala Devi Chaudhurani chose to advertise. She organized Swadeshi meetings of Indian wives, as they did most of the household shopping and were thus key to the success of the Swadeshi movement, and started a Swadeshi shop of her own called Lakshmir Bhandar.²⁷ The name, meaning essentially Lakshmi's Treasure, makes clear that Chaudhurani was aiming for women as her primary customer base. The goddess Lakshmi, perfect, goal-oriented wife of Vishnu, represents wealth, prosperity and beauty, all attributes for which the perfect wife, mother, and family accountant in Bengali Hindus' matriarchal society should strive to achieve. Now, being a perfect wife also meant boycotting British shops. Chaudhurani also founded the first women's rights organization in India, the Bharat Sree Mahamandal.

In October of 1906, The Minerva ran an especially brave ad in *Bande Mataram*, penned by playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh himself, when premiering his new play *Mirkasim*, aka Mir Qasim.²⁸ During the 1757 Battle of Plassey, the last independent Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Douhah, was defeated by the East India Company's forces led by Baron Robert Clive, aka Clive of India, after he convinced Siraj-ud-Douhah's top general, Mir Jafar, to betray his leader. As his reward, Jafar was installed as the first *dependent* Nawab of Bengal, loyal to the British Crown. After Jafar died, his son-in-law, Mir Qasim, ascended the throne. The play is set against this historical backdrop. Ghosh himself would play the guilt-ridden protagonist's father-in-law, the traitor Mir Jafar.

His ad contains a bold quotation: "The cheek of every honest Englishman must blush with shame as he reads the account of the policy adopted by the leading men amongst their countrymen in India, a hundred and twenty years ago toward the native ruler whose subsequent fault in their eyes was his endeavour to protect his subjects from European extortion." This is a quote from, in all caps and boldface, "MALLESON." The well-read Ghosh couldn't make such an inflammatory statement himself without being hauled in for sedition, so he cleverly used the words of respected British military officer Colonel George Bruce Malleson against the Raj. The quote is from Malleson's 1883 book *The Decisive Battles of India: From 1746 to 1849 Inclusive*. Even so, such

language would have likely never passed muster in *The Bengalee* or other Indian-owned newspapers in Calcutta, but this was *Bande Mataram*.

The newspaper also kept tabs on Black Americans' fight for equality, providing extensive coverage of their successes in the US and drawing a parallel between those struggles and their own, viewing Indians' fight against the British Raj as a universal struggle against white domination. A lengthy article entitled "The Negro Movement in America" contains a reference to armed 19th century revolutionary abolitionist John Brown, described as a hero who died in the struggle for emancipation.²⁹

During 1907, the public flogging of minors persisted unabated, and continued to cause outrage, as an article from the British-owned *Empire*, entitled "Whipping for a Postman," confirms.³⁰ In this case, a 13-year-old mail carrier was sentenced to "10 stripes" for, allegedly, falsely accusing a policeman of assaulting him. This punishment, we should note, was never carried out on white children in India.

In Eastern Bengal, when the British Raj appointed several Muslims to civil service positions, numerous Hindu-Muslim riots were reported by various newspapers, the articles reprinted in the *India* newspaper during May, 1907.³¹ These articles show the scope of the tragic events in various districts, and that these troubles in Eastern Bengal were being reported across India, causing alarm across the country. In some instances, deaths on both sides occurred, with each side blaming the other. There were also reports of women being raped by mobs of men on both sides. Some were dismissed as rumors, many were true. Very, very bad things were happening in Eastern Bengal, and the entire country was on edge.

An article from the strongly nationalist *Freeman's Journal* in Ireland, reprinted in the *India* newspaper with the headline "An Irish Opinion," covered the violence and lay blame squarely on the British Raj.³² It reads in part:

The unrest in India, as it is called in the English Press, is the legacy Lord Curzon bequeathed to Mr. Morley...The partition of Bengal, ostensibly for convenience of administration, was really a political move, inspired by the obscurantist notion that the progress of the Indian people towards constitutional Government might be stayed. When the partition failed, then the Indian bureaucrats deliberately set themselves to fomenting race hatred between the Mohammedans and the Hindus. That malign stroke of policy...has...brought evils and dangers in its train that its originators never recked. Mr. Morley now finds himself face to face with an intensely grave situation.

Jumping ahead 10 months for a moment, the idea that appointing more Bengali Muslims into government positions was merely a cynical ploy intended to disrupt the independence movement, is lent credence by the fact that promotions of more Muslims into civil service positions wasn't going on all across India. Out of 65 million Muslims, only two of India's High Court judges were Muslims, this fact being pointed out by Lafindoni Ahmed of the All-India Muslim League, recapped in the *Empire* newspaper in March of 1908, entitled "Moslems and the State."³³

Back to May of 1907, at a large gathering of college students in Calcutta, violence against the British was now in the air, as related in an article from the *Empire*, entitled ““Die for Your Country””, which must have been alarming to the paper’s chiefly white readership.³⁴ The crowd at the protest was predominantly Hindu, but Muslims were in attendance, and everyone is reported to have behaved respectfully. Here for the first time in this period I found written in the news armed conflict being explicitly suggested, with one speaker calling for young men to volunteer to be trained to fight and to “lay down their lives for the cause of their country.” Another speaker advocated the formation of “secret clubs,” and 20 young men from Eastern Bengal performed a military drill for the audience.

Things were getting hot.

In late June and early July of 1907, a Bengali-owned Calcutta newspaper was searched and shut down by police for the first time, as related in an *Empire* article entitled “Sedition in Calcutta.”³⁵ The owner-editor Bhupendranath Dutt was arrested and charged with sedition. The newspaper was called *Jugantar*, meaning New Era. At court, we meet a major character in our story, Chief Magistrate Kingsford.

And in Eastern Bengal, flying in the face of all logic, a British judge sentenced a 10-year-old to 30 stripes.³⁶ As an article from *India* relates, only upon the pleas of a medical doctor did the judge reduce the sentence to six stripes. The 10-year-old's crime was throwing a rock at a policeman. As the article explained, this sentence was given despite the fact that the Raj's own Penal Code stated that “Nothing is an offence which is done by a child above seven years of age and under twelve.” The boy’s age was originally misreported as 7, and was corrected in a follow-up story³⁷, but age 10 is certainly infuriating enough.

Naturally, the Indian public was as incensed as you would be if an occupying government started publicly flogging your children, and only children of your race, in your own country. A few weeks later on July 24th, 1907, as we learn from *The Empire*, Judge Kingsford delivered a guilty verdict in the *Jugantar* case, and in his judgement stated that several of the newspaper’s articles were seditious because they expressed “disaffection of the Government established by law in British India.”³⁸ Kingsford sentenced the editor, Mr. Dutt, to one year's “rigorous imprisonment,” or hard labor, and confiscated *Jugantar*’s printing press.

The next night, a protest demonstration was held in College Square, led by *Bande Mataram* editor Bipin Chandra Pal.³⁹ First, the crowd sang patriotic songs and then listened to a series of guest speakers. Srijut Upadhyaya, editor of the newspaper *Sandhya*, meaning Transition Time, said that all the Indian people needed was “a number of earnest madmen” and that “the day of freedom was at hand.”

Meanwhile, *Jugantar* kept rolling out the paper even though it had, at least officially, no editor and no printing press. Three weeks later, the manager of the paper, Abinash Chunder Bhattacharjee, was arrested for sedition along with the owner of the printing press they had borrowed, Basunto Kumar Bhattacharjee.⁴⁰ The two men appeared in court together before Judge Kingsford. During the trial, *Jugantar*'s lawyer, Mr. Roy, rightfully pointed out to Judge Kingsford that the British

press of the city regularly reprinted these inflammatory articles under sensational headlines like "More Sedition" and "Jugantar At It Again" with complete impunity.

As a further example of my own, *The Hindu* newspaper published an article in late August called "The Selfish Anglo-Saxon" which was then reprinted in *The Empire* without complaint.⁴¹ It reads in part:

It is evident that the white man, whether he be an Englishman or American, has absolutely no sympathy with the advancement of all nations, irrespective of race, colour or creed....The selfishness of the Anglo-Saxon knows no bounds and recognizes no limits. It is this selfishness that makes racial war inevitable.

Simultaneous to the *Jugantar* sedition case, a *Bande Mataram* case was going on, in which the editor, Bipin Chandra Pal, had been charged with sedition.^{42, 43} Again, Judge Kingsford presided. In the end, he found them all guilty of inciting violence and rebellion, and sentenced all parties to one to two years of hard labor.

As if intended to inflame the public even more, the public whipping of Indian children was hurtling along like a runaway train three months later in December of 1907, as an article from *The Hindu* newspaper, again reprinted in *The Empire*, entitled "Whipping Youths," shows us.⁴⁴ Kingsford, its chief proponent, had made himself a hated man.

And so, this steady downward spiral toward violence continued.

We shouldn't be surprised that on December 6th, 1907, a train carrying Bengal's Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Andrew Frazer, was bombed in the town of Midnapur about 80 miles west of Calcutta, as reported in the *Catholic Herald*.⁴⁵ The assassination attempt failed. Six Bengali conspirators would ultimately be found guilty and sentenced to prison.

A few weeks after the bombing of Frazer's train, on Christmas Eve, 1907, to be exact, someone attempted to assassinate Judge Allen in Dacca while he was waiting on a train platform at night, as recounted by the *Catholic Herald*.⁴⁶ Two shots were fired and one struck him in the shoulder. The two shooters fled into the night and escaped. Mr. Allen's injury was serious, but the bullet was surgically removed and he survived.

This finally brings us to 1908.

In January, Muslim pro-independence activist Leakat Hussain, who had been imprisoned for writing and distributing seditious pamphlets, had his bail denied because another sedition charge was brought against him.⁴⁷ He was sentenced by Judge Kingsford to 3 years.

A few days later *The Empire*, still out to sell papers by terrifying its chiefly white readership, reprinted an article from *The Hindu* entitled "White and Coloured," which states in part:

In America, it will be remembered, the question was settled in the middle of the last century by a bloody civil war, in which the cause of humanity and freedom triumphed over that of

*barbarism...It is the saddest of sad reflections ...that the general moral standard of the whites...in regard to the position of the coloured races as human beings should have fallen to much lower than what it was in the last generation.*⁴⁸

In other words, the time had come for Indians to start a civil war of their own.

An advertisement from March 3rd shows us that customers could now buy Indian made Beka brand records containing "Famous speeches on Swadeshism and Partition of Bengal."⁴⁹ Customers would also receive printed versions of the speeches with their purchase. The Beka record label was, by the way, Muslim-owned.

On March 11th, *The Catholic Herald* reported that a Christian missionary, Mr. Hickinbotham, was shot in the chest in yet another nighttime attack.⁵⁰ The assailant fled into the night. Mr. Hickinbotham survived.

The three assassination attempts in late 1907 and early 1908 were only a prelude. On April 30th, all hell finally broke loose. A sensational story about it broke four days later in *The Empire* on May 3rd.⁵¹ "TERRORISM IN BENGAL, DEATH OF MRS. KENNEDY," the headline screamed. An 18-year-old college student from Calcutta, Khudiram Bose, described in the article as "a weedy youth...with flowing hair," had traveled by train some 375 miles northwest from Calcutta to the town of Muzaffarpur in what is now the state of Bihar, along with another young man, Profulla Chaki, alias "Dinesh Chandra Roy," age 19. Bose had then thrown a bomb into what he believed was Judge Kingsford's closed carriage as it left the whites-only European Club. Inside the carriage, however, were one Judge Pringle Kennedy's wife and daughter.

Bose and Chaki had struck the wrong carriage. The blast resulted in the young Miss Kennedy being "blown to pieces". Her mother, Mrs. Kennedy, was "severely injured" and died the next day. "The carriage was shattered...The reverberation...was heard three miles from the place of the occurrence."

Bose and Chaki had split up and run off, each trying to make their way separately back to Calcutta. Bose was captured at a train station. He didn't learn he'd bombed the wrong carriage until after he was arrested. To many Indians, he had scored a win by killing family members of a British judge, bringing the fight home to the Raj's front door. The attack made international headlines.

In the pro-Independence, Muslim-owned newspaper *The Mussalman's* coverage, we learn that Bose's 19-year-old accomplice, Profulla Chaki, was cornered at another train station but before he could be arrested, he pulled out a gun and shot himself dead.⁵² Many Indians consider Chaki to be the first martyr of the freedom struggle, and one of its youngest. He had committed suicide as a planned contingency should he find himself cornered, in order to protect his compatriots. Today, the Mokama train station in Bihar where he killed himself features a monument to him.

A few days later, his accomplice, Khudiram Bose, proudly made a full confession. In Calcutta, the police responded rapidly with a series of pre-dawn raids after they extracted from Bose information on his co-conspirators.⁵³ This is precisely why his comrade Chaki had chosen to kill himself rather

than surrender. Bose's intel "proved accurate and led to the capture of many men and tremendous quantities of bombs and explosives."

Among the items found was an article from a London newspaper detailing the attempted assassination of the King and Queen of Spain in 1906, in which one Mateo Morral had tried to throw a bomb into the royal carriage as it passed in a procession, killing 24 but leaving the royals unharmed. The article included a sketch of Morral's bomb. Apparently, it had served as a model for the Bengali bomb makers. The irony that they had apparently found inspiration to throw a bomb at a passing carriage, and instructions, not in the "seditious" Bengali press but in a mainstream British newspaper, the editors of which suffered no criminal penalty, does not escape me.

The evidence pointed to the defendants being part of a well-organized group which had been planning the attack for some time. One of the many homes raided included a garden house at 134 Harrison Road (now, ironically, Mahatma Gandhi Road), where the most damning evidence was found—a makeshift "bomb-making factory" in the back yard garden.⁵⁴

Among the roughly twenty men arrested in the sweep was one Aurobindo Ghosh, an architect of the Swadeshi movement and a ringleader of the bomb plot who would later be revealed as an anonymous editor of *Bande Mataram*.

On May 4th, one of the captured men, Ulas Kur Dutto, freely admitted in an *Empire* article entitled "A Frank Revolutionist" to being the bomb maker.⁵⁵ He told a reporter at the Alipore Central Jail, where he and all of the other accused were being held, that his motive had been "to free his homeland from the British government, and that he hoped the assassinations would spark a revolution." He didn't allude to John Brown but I can't help making the mental comparison here, and I don't believe it's a stretch to do so. When asked if he was sorry for the Kennedy women mistakenly being killed, he replied, "No, not at all. I would do it all again."

The garden house on Harrison Road had been cheekily dubbed by the conspirators a "college." Their intentions were to train willing young men and send them out to set up do-it-yourself bomb-making factories, or colleges, all over India.⁵⁶

Here comes a plot twist.

British homeland coverage, chiefly delivered to the people of England through the British-based Reuter's newswire, was often slanted in its explanations for the violence. On June 1st, *The Empire* ran a Reuter's story from London that British detectives were shadowing Indian revolutionaries in New York, who were allegedly in close touch with Irish extremists.⁵⁷

Were Indian expats in the US really providing the Bengali revolutionaries with financing? Were they really meeting in secret with revolutionaries in New York's Irish immigrant community seeking their advice and expertise on how to strike back against the Empire? Whether the Irish connection was true or rumor, the bomb conspirators couldn't have been happier than to know they had made the British Empire panic and tremble on the world stage.

Five weeks after the bombing, The *Daily Telegraph* in London gave extensive coverage of speeches by Viceroy of India Lord Minto, from his lavish residence at Simla, along with his top advisers, in which they announced strict new legal measures.⁵⁸ These included the introduction of the Newspaper Bill. In short, it meant a tremendous tightening of Calcutta's Bengali-owned press.

Minto takes a bizarre turn regarding Judge Kingsford, in which he states absurdly that “the public have been told, both in India and at home, that the attempts on his life were due to the infliction by him of sentences of flogging for political offenses, an unwarrantable accusation, which I am glad to have the opportunity of denying...” You've now read about the many news stories from Calcutta documenting systemic sentences of flogging, including of juveniles. Lord Minto could deny it all he wanted, but this man was lying like a Jaipur rug. In his lie refuting reports that there had been floggings of men for political offenses, he was masterfully shifting the conversation away from public floggings of children altogether.

Minto next takes another surprising turn, insisting that Indians' new ideas of inflicting violence against violent oppressors could not have originated in the docile Indian mind. These ideas therefore must have come from another country:

To the best of my belief it has largely emanated from sources beyond the confines of India...but, unfortunately, the seeds of its wickedness have been sown amongst a strangely impressionable and imitative people, seeds that have been daily nurtured by a system of seditious writing and seditious speaking of unparalleled virulence. Well not anymore, he concluded. “[W]e must have further powers.”

There it was. The British Raj was going to exploit the bombing to further restrict daily life for Indians. As he explains, “By some irony of fate the outrages... have been sprung upon us almost upon the eve of the introduction of constitutional changes.” He was talking out both sides of his mouth. On one hand, the bombing had been the result of a mere handful of anarchists whereas the majority of Indians were happy with British rule. On the other hand, all of British India would be made to suffer further by a greater imposition of martial law.

His promise of a coming constitutional democracy surely rang quite hollow to Indian ears. In a royal proclamation many decades earlier in 1877, Queen Victoria, who declared herself Empress of India, had promised the Indian people that they would be treated equally under the law to her British subjects in England. This promise was never fulfilled, and here in 1908 India's Viceroy had come up with new reasons for indefinitely postponing it. We must also remember that Minto's primary audience in this speech was the people of England, most of whom likely had no clue what was really going on in their name in India.

The “Alipore bomb trial,” so called because of the prison where the suspects were being held and the courthouse where the trials would happen, was put swiftly underway by the third week of May. By July, one of the accused, Narendranath Gossain, had flipped.⁵⁹ He turned approver, or witness for the prosecution, and started singing like a canary. The result was the arrest of nine more young men who were also thrown into the racially segregated Alipore Central Jail to await trial.

Gossain was awarded parole for agreeing to testify against his comrades, but was encouraged to stay on at the jail, in the better-appointed whites-only section, for his own safety. He wasn't required to live there, and he could come and go from the prison as he pleased. Within the prison, he enjoyed luxuries and liberties not afforded the Indian prisoners, regularly socializing with the white inmates and Indian guards.

As the other conspirators were tried one by one, Gossain happily strolled to court every day to gladhand pro-British fans, both white and Indian, along the way, and to chat with reporters outside the courthouse, enjoying his celebrity status. He proudly told reporters that he planned to take his family and resettle in England as soon as he had testified.

Half a world away, about three weeks later, the *Baltimore American* ran a story about a recent speech by Lord Morley, the Secretary of State for India.⁶⁰ He warned that the United States should take note of the recent revolutionary activity in Bengal, not only because “the latter may at any moment be called upon to deal with something very similar in the Philippines, but also owing to the fact that...Much of the money which the revolutionaries...have at their disposal... comes from the United States.”

First it was Ireland's fault. Now it was the United States' fault. In the *New York Tribune's* coverage on the same date, headlined “Discontent in India Fomented in America,” Morley found yet another country to blame.⁶¹ He suggests that the “Pan-Asiatic element” of the Japanese government might also be financially supporting India's revolutionaries. At least he was quick to add, however, that there is “no proof of this.” He also threw in the Sultan of Turkey as a potential culprit.

Indeed, the British Empire was looking to cast blame anywhere—Ireland, the US, Turkey, Japan—except on the British Raj itself and its way of governing India. Not surprisingly, in all of these articles from the West, not one of them contains quotes from Indians. Not one of these Western newspapers bothered to offer room for Indians' first-hand points of view of the events preceding the violence. If they had done so, they might have learned that the bombing was not a random act but a last-ditch effort, an anguished cry for something that felt like a democracy and which honored Queen Victoria's forgotten promise of equal protection under the law. But the British Empire was fully in charge of the messaging outside of India.

On the morning of August 11th, the confessed bomb-thrower, Khudiram Bose, age 18, was hanged at the jail in Muzaffarpur where the blast had occurred. Witnesses said that he was cheerful and smiling as he stood on the scaffold.⁶² Today, Khudiram Bose is revered in India as a national hero. The Shahid Khudiram, or Martyr Khudiram, metro station in Kolkata is named after him. I am reminded of what Emerson wrote about the hanging of John Brown in the 19th century US: “He has made the gallows as glorious as the cross.”

The morning of August 31st, 1908 saw yet another shocking story: “TERRORISTS AVENGED.”⁶³ Accounts vary slightly, but more or less, after recent death threats against Gossain, he was moved from the white quarter of the prison to the infirmary as a security measure. Some reported that he had genuinely fallen ill.

At any rate, two young Indian defendants asked to see him in the infirmary on the pretense of making further confessions. Upon entering, they whipped out revolvers and opened fire. Gossain ran out screaming, "My God, they'll shoot me!" He was right. A Hollywood chase sequence ensued, involving Indian guards and white inmates trying to block the shooters' paths, but in the end, they triumphed, gunning him down in the prison courtyard. Gossain, the educated son of an affluent landowner, left behind a wife and two young sons.

Without Gossain's testimony, the court could only find Aurobindo Ghosh, a key architect of the bomb plot, guilty of writing seditious articles in a separate ongoing *Bande Mataram* trial. But Ghosh must have known his days were numbered, that sooner or later the Raj would find a reason to put a noose around his neck. Conveniently, he soon claimed that while he was in jail awaiting trial, he'd had a series of mystical visions which led him to get the hell out of Calcutta, move to French-controlled Pondicherry, proclaim himself a pacifist and open an ashram.⁶⁴ He eventually became *Sri* Aurobindo, the world-renowned Hindu philosopher-poet, and authored several books throughout the remainder of his long life. I do have my skepticism about his sincerity, but I'll keep my thoughts to myself.

On November 10th, one of the two young men who'd shot Gossain, 20-year-old Kanailal Dutt, was hanged at Alipore Central Jail. His final statement in court on the day of his sentencing had been, "I did kill him. It was because he was a traitor to his country."⁶⁵ *The Mussalman* gave a touching, sympathetic account, which reads in part:

Early on Tuesday morning, conch-shells were blown from innumerable houses in Calcutta and the metropolitan suburbs...[T]he auspicious, booming sound heralded the advent of Kanai's passing away from this world of cares and conspiracies and of tears and treacheries.

...300 Bengal armed police...and a number of European sergeants of the Calcutta Police were also in attendance...Kaina Lal met his death like a hero. He stood firm and erect while the noose was being adjusted round his neck. It is said that he objected to the hangman adjusting the neck-rope and put it on himself with wonderful calmness and fortitude. His face brightened up with a serene smile.

*The dead body was made over to Kanai Lal's elder brother precisely at 9:30 a.m....The scene at the [Kalighat] burning ghat baffles all description. There persons of all sorts and conditions of both sexes assembled in thousands to catch a last glimpse of the face of this wonderful man...Fervid cries of *Bande Mataram* rent the skies as the body was being burnt and patriotic songs were sung...Thus ended the wonderful career of Kanai Lal Dutt.⁶⁶*

Eleven days later on November 21st, 26-year-old Satyendranath Bose, Aurobindo Ghosh's uncle who had helped assassinate Gossain in order to save his nephew, was hanged at Alipore Central Jail.⁶⁷ This time, authorities refused to hand over his body to his family for a public funeral procession, instead bringing in a Hindu priest to cremate him on the prison grounds. Today, the places of his execution and cremation at the prison are considered hallowed ground.

In lighter news, the day after Kanailal Dutt's execution, a bold record store was quick to cash in on the bomb hysteria, as the Alipore Bomb Trial was still ongoing. "THE RECORD BOMB HAS BURST," an ad shouts, along with an unsettling graphic showing an explosion of records as they shatter outward from the center of the ad and become shrapnel.⁶⁸

In more entertainment news that captured the mood of the moment, Elphinstone Bioscope was delighted to show documentary footage of "The Destruction of Hyderabad in 13 scenes. A veritable torrent of death...the state capital overwhelmed by the waters of the River Musi... Scenes unparalleled since the Johnstown Disaster," as stated in their ad in *The Empire*.⁶⁹ Who among the *Empire*'s chiefly white readership could resist capping off 1908 by watching thousands of Indians die?

The tumultuous year wasn't quite over yet. On December 11th, *The Mussalman* reported on "Sedition in Talking Machines," a reprint from the British-owned *Statesman* newspaper, in which is reported that the government had banned recordings of "seditious songs and speeches."⁷⁰ Bengali playwright-composers were making a strong showing here. Banned records included playwright D.L. Roy's song "Amar Desh," or My Country, which he had written in response to the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Despite its having recently been sung without incident before Eastern Bengal's newest Lieutenant Governor, Sir Lancelot Hare, it had now been proscribed. Also among the banned songs are "selections from *Siraj-ud Doulah*," another pro-Independence historical drama written by Girish Chandra Ghosh about the aforementioned 1757 Battle of Plassey. The government considered Ghosh's songs from this play to be "highly seditious," not because of their content but because they were frequently being sung at protest gatherings.

And thus, one of the most violent years in British Indian history came to a close. Bengal, and the rest of India, would truly never be the same. The events of 1908 touched off a decades-long series of violent acts against the British across the country that lasted until India's independence in 1947. As Gandhi would write one year after the Alipore bomb trial in his book *Hind Swaraj*, or Indian Home Rule:

[W]hat you call the real awakening took place after the Partition of Bengal. For this we have to be thankful to Lord Curzon. That day may be considered to be the day of the partition of the British Empire. The shock the British power received through the Partition has never been equaled by any other act...That which the people said tremblingly and in secret began to be said and to be written publicly.⁷¹

The book was promptly banned in India.

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Jeffrey Stanley (jstanley@drexel.edu) is a professor in the Westphal College of Media Arts & Design at Drexel University.