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India's Fin de Siècle

Nation, Religion, Identity

Examining the interweaving of religion and nationalism in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century India, this essay argues that the preoccupation with identity that characterized the European fin de siècle was also active in other cultures during the same period and concludes by calling for a global history of the fin de siècle.

When one thinks of the fin de siécle, one usually thinks of Europe – of French tracts on degeneration, of German and Austrian preoccupations with the meaning(s) of gender, of literary decadence in Britain, of anti-Semitism and Zionism in France and Central Europe, and a host of other themes. Only recently have there been attempts to bring the rest of the world into the frame of the fin de siècle.[1] Building on this recent work, this short essay explores some aspects of Indian history from the mid-1870s to the onset of the First World War, arguing that although unique to India in their specific nature and contexts, they bore a family resemblance to European preoccupations of the time without being derived from them.

Any history of European fin-de-siècle thought would record the intensity with which questions of identity – the identity of individuals, of the sexes, of races, of religions, of nations – were analysed and debated from dramatically different perspectives by artists, writers, intellectuals, doctors and politicians. From nationalism to feminism, from the alleged loss of masculinity to anti-Semitism and Zionism, fin-de-siècle European cultures resounded with debates on the relevance of identity to politics and society. Similar concerns were at work in India as well. Indian intellectuals, politicians, commentators and artists were as vociferous as their European counterparts in seeking to define identity and to identify, exploit and manage difference. It would take a book to establish this argument in detail but let me illustrate it here with a brief discussion of the intertwined issue of national and religious identity.

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Whose Nation?

India's endless geographical, linguistic, religious, social and cultural diversity was long regarded to preclude European-style unitary nationhood. In *India* (first published in 1888), a primer used for the training of generations of British administrators in India, John Strachey (1823-1907) had declared: "There is not, and never was an India, or even a country of India, possessing, according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious."[2] As late as in the 1930s, a period of intense nationalist activity on the subcontinent, Winston Churchill continued to insist that India was a mere "geographical term" and "no more a united nation than the Equator."[3]

Despite the formidable obstacles to imagining India as a unitary nation, discourses of nationalism emerged in India from the 1870s. A major impulse had come from Europe and from the Irish movement for Home Rule, but everybody recognized that the Indian situation did not permit any simple imitation of European models.[4] The first generation of nationalist leaders, in fact, did not even seek national sovereignty. Their demand was for India to be a "self-governing colony" like Canada or Australia, free of the bureaucratic despots of the Raj and their colonial racism, but still a member of the British Empire.[5] Their agitations were "constitutional", which meant they were loyal, peaceful, law-abiding – European revolutionary tendencies were rejected unhesitatingly – and conducted mainly in the form of petitions and memorials to the Government of India or the British Parliament. The fair-minded, freedom-loving British race, it was thought, would correct the deficiencies of their Indian regime as soon as their subjects had brought them to their attention.[6]

But even if the demand for self-government was granted by the British, who would be the "self" in the self-governing colony? The early nationalists talked of the entire nation but concentrated on the interests of the Western-educated middle classes. This meant that they were concerned mostly with Hindus – who had taken to Western education with greater enthusiasm than Muslims.[7] English-educated Indians tended – often unconsciously – to equate "Indian" with "Hindu" or, even more mythically, with "Aryan," portraying the centuries of Muslim rule as an age of despotism that was infinitely worse than the British Raj.[8] From the very beginning then, the nationalists' stated aim of bringing all of India "upon the same common political platform" was undermined by their ambivalence on Muslims.[9]

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The Spirit(s) of the Nation

India has traditionally been regarded by Westerners as a land of exotic gods and spirituality. In a different way, Victorian Britain and fin-de-siècle Europe were also fascinated by spirits, by hypnotism, by "psychical research."[10] It is not often appreciated, however, that the two played an intriguing role in the birth of Indian nationalism.

Nationalism in India did not begin with the Indian National Congress but once it was founded in 1885, it rapidly eclipsed other organizations, becoming, long before the First World War, the preeminent representative of the nationalist cause. Founded by the British civil servant Allan Octavian Hume (1829-1912), the Congress was meant to provide Indians with a forum for the expression of their legitimate grievances against British rule. Such a channel, Hume was convinced, was needed to prevent another outbreak of murderous rage like the Great Rebellion – formerly known as the Sepoy Mutiny – of 1857.[11] Hume claimed to have received warnings from higher spiritual beings of an impending second Mutiny, of thousands of desperate people across the country, crushed by poverty and hopelessness and determined to "do *something*." This "something," said Hume, "meant violence."[12] It is likely that Hume had received his information through the Theosophical Society, which he had joined in 1879.

Founded in New York City in 1875 by the Russian-American mystic and spiritualist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91) and the former US military officer Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), the Theosophical Society propagated that a superhuman brotherhood – the Masters – governed the spiritual evolution of humanity and communicated only with chosen individuals. Blavatsky claimed to have been chosen by the Master Morya, who was Indian and India, she believed, was the cradle of all wisdom. After establishing links with the reformist Hindu sect of the Arya Samaj – Hindu reformist sects played a significant role in the emergence of Indian nationalism, although I do not have the space here to discuss that history in detail – Olcott and Blavatsky set sail for India at the end of 1878. Among the many British and Indian people they met and impressed was Allan Octavian Hume. Long interested in spiritualism, Hume started corresponding with the Masters through Blavatsky.[13] Although Hume would later condemn Blavatsky as a fraud, he would never lose his faith in the Masters. Since they were convinced that the British Raj faced an imminent conflagration, Hume could not sit idly by. He decided to try and organize an opposition, which would be loyal to the Crown but, like the official Opposition in the British Parliament,

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scrutinize, criticize and hold the Government of India to account.[14] The survival of British India could be ensured only by creating "a safety-valve for the escape of great and growing forces."[15] The Theosophical Society helped translate Hume's project into reality.

The Society had not only built up a genuinely pan-Indian network of lodges and groups but, no doubt because of its white Western leadership and non-political identity, attracted a fair number of British members. Its annual meetings were one of the few places in colonial India where "natives" could meet their rulers on equal terms. Hume's familiarity with Indian elites was facilitated greatly by these meetings. He travelled widely across the country, keeping up the pressure on his contacts until, in 1885, he convened the first convention of the Indian National Union in Bombay, where the body was renamed the Indian National Congress. Olcott would claim two years later that the Theosophical Society was the "sole parent" of the Congress.[16] The Congress, of course, was neither an esoteric nor a spiritual body. Strictly speaking, it was no more than an annual meeting held in a different city every year in December where delegates from the entire country would discuss political matters, often very critically, and propose reforms to the Government. Although professedly secular, the Congress did not attract many Muslim supporters.

The loyalty of the Congress delegates to the British Empire was beyond question – Hume's project had originally been supported by the then-Viceroy Lord Dufferin – but the Government of India soon came to view the Congress (and its British friends) with suspicion.[17] The Congress did not have much confidence in their immediate rulers either. Their target audience was in London, where a branch of the Congress was set up in the 1890s to lobby members of Parliament. None of this brought about much change in the autocratic governance of India and younger supporters of the Congress began to call for more radical approaches. These disaffected nationalists came to constitute a so-called "New Party" – often referred to as "Extremists" – within the Congress.[18] They had strong regional bases and were far readier than their "Moderate" contemporaries to use traditional Hindu symbols and institutions to drive large-scale movements of resistance.

Their first big political opportunity came with the Age of Consent Bill of 1890-91, which proposed to curb the traditional Hindu practice of marrying off girls before puberty by raising the age of consent for girls from ten to twelve.[19] Hindus across the country were appalled by the Bill and rose in protest, claiming that their religious law ordained that a marriage must be

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consummated immediately after the first menstruation. Otherwise, any child born to the woman would be tainted. When *sati* (suttee) had been banned in the 1820s or the remarriage of widows permitted in the 1850s, there had been controversies, to be sure, but these had been confined to relatively elite levels.[20] The Hindu masses had then been disorganized and the media too undeveloped to incite any large-scale protests.[21] By the 1890s, however, the situation was very different and the Consent legislation became one of the most hotly contested in the history of British India. It did not simply offend traditionalists; many liberal nationalists were also reluctant to support colonial intervention in the domestic affairs of "natives." Understandably, therefore, the Indian National Congress refused to comment on the issue.[22]

One leading Extremist, the Western Indian politician and journalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) did not think abstention was an adequate response and led the massive opposition to the Bill. If Indian customs needed changing, Tilak had earlier averred, then Indians must do it themselves. How else could one claim to be fit for self-government?[23] By the time of the Consent Bill, however, Tilak had become far more conservative. Being something of a Sanskritist – he would write books on the civilization depicted in the ancient Vedas – he sought to prove that the practice of child-marriage was enjoined by the sacred books of the Hindus.[24] Mass protests were intense in Western as well as Eastern India.[25] Tilak's rallies and marches in Bombay and Poona were matched by mass meetings and protests in Calcutta.[26] *Bangabasi*, a conservative Hindu newspaper with a huge circulation, even echoed the Masters' warning to Hume: "A slighter cause than this kindled the fire of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, and though thirty-three years have elapsed since that event … it should be remembered that even the most contemptible worm will sting the man that treads upon it."[27]

The enthusiastic participation of the masses in the agitation convinced Tilak that the ordinary population of the country could be politically mobilized only through religion. He would soon launch a very successful festival honouring the Hindu god Ganapati (Ganesa), which, in the words of historian Stanley Wolpert, involved the "urban and peasant lower classes, indoctrinating them with political songs and speeches, drilling young men to march about town in militant groups, and imparting to Hinduism a congregational character hitherto unknown to it."[28] Muslims were beaten up and their mosques vandalized by the marching bands and Hindu-Muslim riots became a regular feature of the festival.[29] Tilak would start another festival in 1896 – this one celebrated the seventeenth-century warrior king

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Shivaji, who had fought the (Muslim) Mughal Empire.[30]

That same year, there was an epidemic of bubonic plague in Western India. The high-handed campaign by the Army to prevent its spread antagonized most Indians and led to the assassination of Walter Rand, the imperious commander of the plague campaign, by two young men carrying the Hindu sacred book, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Suspected – not implausibly – of inspiring the assassins, Tilak was jailed for sedition, which, of course, turned him into a martyr in the eyes of his followers.[31] He was now the acknowledged leader of a new, militantly Hindu nationalist party. It remained within the Congress until 1907 but its objectives could not have been more different from Hume's.[32]

Divide and Rule

Although the Age of Consent protests had been massive in Eastern India, they had not broadened into a political campaign against the Muslims and the British. Nevertheless, it was during the Age of Consent controversy that a *Bangabasi* correspondent had called for a boycott of British-made products including salt and sugar. This tactic would be central to the next big political agitation in India: the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal.[33]

Literally meaning "of one's own country," the word *swadeshi* entered the political vocabulary when Bengalis launched a movement for the boycott of imported goods and the adoption of indigenous alternatives (exactly as *Bangabasi* had called for some fifteen years ago) in protest against the Viceroy Lord Curzon's 1905 division of Bengal into Western and Eastern segments.[34] The British claimed that the undivided province was too large, complex and unwieldy to be run properly whilst nationalists charged that the real aim of the partition was to divide Hindu from Muslim. The eastern half of Bengal was populated mostly by Muslim peasants but most of the land was owned by a minority of wealthy Hindus. The creation of a new Muslim-majority province with its own separate government would benefit Muslims by providing more educational and employment opportunities. Hindu landowners would lose much of their influence and might, in due course, even lose their land. Small wonder, then, that the *swadeshi* movement was supported by Hindus in both halves of Bengal, whilst the majority of Muslims were in favour of the Curzon plan. The Hindu case was not helped by forcing poor Muslim traders to stop selling British cloth or sugar and it was during the *swadeshi* movement that Bengal first experienced large-scale Hindu-Muslim riots.[35]

Hindu leaders condemned Muslims as "practically, if not avowedly the allies of the [British] bureaucracy in their war against Swadeshism" and

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exhorted Hindus to avenge their "offended honour" and fight back "like men … There is a limit beyond which forbearance ceases to be a virtue."[36] From Western India, Tilak extended his warm support to the Hindu nationalists and their campaign to boycott foreign products.[37] By now, however, Bengal had its own Extremists and, more importantly, an emerging group of revolutionary terrorists. The most aggressive of the latter were Hindu and as one of them was to admit later, their revolution had merely represented a resurgence of conventional Hinduism.[38]

The rapid degeneration of the *swadeshi* movement into religious warfare was nothing short of a tragedy, for in its initial phases, the movement had seemed to be revitalizing not simply politics and economics, but every aspect of national life. It had inspired some of the most creative figures of Bengal, including the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), whose patriotic songs infused the movement with a beauty that few political movements can match. Many less well-known supporters of *swadeshi* had laboured hard to regenerate the economy, whether by setting up cloth-mills or ink factories. Literary quests for the essence of the Bengali nation had produced some extraordinary works, whilst educators and philanthropists had planned institutes of "national education" and technical training.[39] None of this, however, was sustained and instead of national regeneration, the *swadeshi* movement inaugurated a long age of terror and counter-terror.

Surendranath Banerjea (1848-1925), the doyen of "moderate" nationalism but a wholehearted opponent of Curzon's partition, wrote in his memoirs that the *swadeshi* upsurge was the nearest thing to a revolution that he had personally experienced.[40] He meant it positively but like all revolutions, this one too ended by devouring its own children. The Hindus and Muslims of India, it is true, had never had a perfectly amicable relationship, but in Bengal, at least, they had co-existed relatively peacefully. The Hindu excesses of the *swadeshi* movement led to a permanent polarization of the two communities. Their mutual mistrust would poison Bengali life for decades until being resolved, at enormous human and social cost, by another partition in 1947. The price that subcontinental people had to pay for their independence from British rule appeared to vindicate everything John Strachey or Winston Churchill had ever said about the impossibility of building a unitary nation in India.

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The Identity of the Fin de Siècle

I have tried to show in this essay how, around 1900, the religious identities of Hindus and Muslims, mobilized into mutually antagonistic political identities by nationalists, undermined the quest for a new, unitary national identity and reinforced the conventional colonial wisdom that India was not and could never be a nation because of its unmanageable diversity. The particularities of these ironies and contradictions – and others that I have not had the space to mention – were, of course, unique to the context of colonial India. But as far as the fundamental question of identity was concerned, there was little to distinguish Europe from India or, indeed, other parts of the world and what we need above all is a global history of the fin de siècle.

Notes

1. Michael Saler (ed.), *The Fin de Siècle World* (London: Routledge, 2015).
2. John Strachey, *India* (London: Kegan Paul, 1888), 5-8. On the contemporary importance of this book, see Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959; Reprint, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 137, 305.
3. Winston S. Churchill, *India: Speeches and an Introduction* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1931), 136.
4. Ireland and Great Britain were merged to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1800. Throughout the nineteenth century, there were protests against this merger in Ireland and demands for an Irish Parliament to be responsible for Irish domestic affairs. There was, however, little interest in complete independence as yet and it was accepted that a self-governing Ireland would remain within the British Empire. In spite of the commitment of the British Liberal leader William Gladstone to this idea of Irish Home Rule, it was not approved by the UK Parliament and Ireland remained an integral part of the United Kingdom until after the First World War. See Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867-1921* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); and on the influence of Irish nationalism in India, Michael Silvestri, *Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire and Memory* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009).
5. Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Centur*y (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 15.
6. Sanjay Seth, "Rewriting Histories of Nationalism: The Politics of 'Moderate Nationalism' in India, 1870-1905," *American Historical Review,* 104, no 1 (February 1999), 95-116.
7. One must not homogenize the Hindu community too much. Lower-middle-class Indians, especially in Bengal, often found the upper-middle-class nationalists to be elite, deracinated and motivated by their own narrow interests. See Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 190-191, 303-306.

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8. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histori*es (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 76-106. Although they opposed many policies of the British regime, the nationalists acknowledged that the pax Britannica was preferable to the "universal anarchy and disorder" of late Mughal rule. See Bipinchandra Pal, *Memories of My Life and Times* (Calcutta: Bipinchandra Pal Institute, 1973), 236. The tendency of non-Muslim nationalists to emphasize Muslim tyranny, however, was not necessarily one-dimensional. Often, the figure of the "Muslim invader" was used to symbolize all foreign rulers, including the British, in forms that would not attract the hostile attention of the colonial state. See Joya Chatterji, "Nationalisms in India, 1857-1947," in John Breuilly (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 242-62, at 248.
9. Greatly influenced by the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), the nationalist leader Surendranath Banerjea declared: "Mazzini had taught Italian unity. We wanted Indian unity." Mazzini's "revolutionary teachings," however, he immediately rejected as "unsuited to the circumstances of India." See Surendranath Banerjea, *A Nation in Making* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 41, 43. On Mazzini's influence on Indian politics, see C.A. Bayly, "Liberalism at Large: Mazzini and Nineteenth-Century Indian Thought," in C.A. Bayly and Eugenio F Biagini (eds), *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism 1830-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 355-74.
10. Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Heather Wolffram, *The Stepchildren of Science: Psychical Research and Parapsychology in Germany, c.1870-1939* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009); and Sofie Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Resarch and Metaphysics in France, 1853-1931* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).
11. A fascinating man with many interests – he is regarded as the father of Indian ornithology *and* of the Indian National Congress – Hume served during the 1857 Rebellion and was always convinced that better government would have prevented the outbreak. He was very critical of the British administration in India and resigned from the Indian Civil Service in 1883 after several high-profile spats with the government. See William Wedderburn, *Allan Octavian Hume: 'Father of the Indian National Congress,' 1829 - 1912*, ed. Edward C. Moulton (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
12. Wedderburn, *Allan Octavian Hume*, 66. For a concise discussion of the difficulties of identifying Hume's sources and the nature of information he received, see Edward Moulton's introduction (*ibid*., lxxxi-lxxxiii).
13. He would write his letters and give them to Blavatsky, who would put them in a special box – they would soon vanish in their intangible voyage to the Masters. Replies would appear in unexpected ways – perhaps even drop from the ceiling or appear on a pillow. See Mark Bevir, "Theosophy and the Origins of the Indian National Congress," *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 7, nos 1-3 (2003): 99-115, esp 102-103.
14. The authoritarian regime the British had established in India ran on the backs of thousands of lower-level Indian staff, but the important decisions were taken by the officers of the Indian Civil Service, virtually all of whom were British. The nationalists

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of the 1870s, in fact, had repeatedly called upon the Government to "Indianize" its administration by making it easier for Indians to enter the ICS. See S. R. Mehrotra, *The Emergence of the Indian National Congress* (Delhi: Vikas, 1971).

15. Wedderburn, *Allan Octavian Hume*, 63.
16. Isaac Lubelsky, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism,* trans. Yael Lotan (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 255.
17. Richard Davenport-Hines, "Blackwood, Frederick Temple Hamilton-Temple-, first marquess of Dufferin and Ava" [2008], in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31914 (accessed on October 4, 2018).
18. Amales Tripathi, *The Extremist Challenge: India between 1890 and 1910* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1967); and Daniel Argov, *Moderates and Extremists in the Indian Nationalist Movement, 1883-1920* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1967).
19. The Age of Consent legislation was rooted in the campaign against child marriage conducted from the 1880s by the Parsi reformer Behramji Malabari (1853-1912). See Gráinne Goodwin, "A Trustworthy Interpreter between Rulers and Ruled: Behramji Malabari, Colonial and Cultural Interpreter in Nineteenth-Century British India," *Social History*, 38, no. 1 (2013): 1-25; Amiya Sen, "Hindu Revivalism in Action: The Age of Consent Bill Agitation in Bengal," *Indian Historical Review,* 7, nos 1-2 (1980-81): 160-184; and Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
20. Ariel Glucklich, "Conservative Hindu Response to Social Legislation in Nineteenth-Century India," *Journal of Asian History*, 20, no. 1 (1986): 33-53; and Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
21. S. Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India,* 2nd edn (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), 84.
22. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity,* 164-65.
23. Stanley Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 47.
24. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale,* 61.
25. Pal, *Memories of My Life and Times,* 484-87. On the protests in Maharashtra, see Padma Anagol, "Rebellious Wives and Dysfunctional Marriages: Indian Women's Discourses and Participation in the Debates over Restitution of Conjugal Rights and the Child Marriage Controversy in the 1880s and 1890s," in Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (eds.), *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 282-312.
26. Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 127.
27. *Confidential Report on Native Papers - Bengali*, 27 September 1890, 928; and Sukeshi Kamra, *The Indian Periodical Press and the Production of Nationalist Rhetoric* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011), 99-126.
28. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 69.
29. For details, see Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 68-70.

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30. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 81.
31. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 84-103.
32. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 62-63.
33. *Bangabasi* (March 21, 1891), in *Confidential Report on Native Papers - Bengali,* March 28, 1891, 381.
34. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010) is still the best history of the period.
35. Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 38-50.
36. Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee, *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought in Indian Politics* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1964), 47-49, 71-75.
37. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 167-68.
38. Bhupendranath Datta, *Bharater Dwitiya Swadhinatar Sangram* [India's Second War of Independence] (Calcutta: Nababharat, 1983), 36-37, my translation.
39. Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal.*
40. Banerjea, *A Nation in Making,* 197.

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