

 **The Indian EXPRESS**

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PLUS +



The Freedom We Inherited

- The man who drew the border in six weeks
- Letters from an undivided Bengal
- Berlin, the centre of Indian freedom struggle
- The many lives of azadi
- Partition, revisited on screen



THIS ISSUE

● COVER : THE FREEDOM WE INHERITED

Dear Reader,

This Independence Day, India turns 80. It is a moment to celebrate, but also to look back and ask what freedom has meant to the generations that inherited it.

This issue also marks two years of Plus Magazine. Over these two years, we have tried to make space for stories that look beyond the headlines. We are grateful to have made that journey with you, our readers.

In this issue, we revisit 1947 through the story of the Radcliffe Line, Mountbatten's hurried transfer of power and the lesser-known Indians who carried the freedom struggle to Berlin. We also uncover forgotten chapters of our colonial past, including Austria's brief presence in India.

Then we turn to the present. A Gen Z essay on the many lives of azadi asks what freedom means once the struggle that gave the word its political weight has passed — and how it is now invoked in battles over caste, career, gender and choice. Cinema, too, looks back, with a season of Partition dramas moving beyond the familiar language of conflict to explore memory, loss and reconciliation.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue, and continue to travel with us into our third year.

Happy Independence Day!

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In her book *Borders and Conflict in South Asia: The Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the Partition of Punjab* (2009), academic and author Lucy P Chester recalls a traveller's eyewitness account of the horrors of Partition at the border. The witness was no ordinary observer. Muhammad Munir was a respected judge, a prominent member of the Muslim League, and a part of the Boundary Commission responsible for drawing the boundary between the two nations. "But in the end he, like so many other Indians and Pakistanis, did not learn the exact location of the new boundary until two days after independence," writes Chester.

The man entrusted with drawing the India-Pakistan boundary, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, had been in India for only six weeks. Yet in that short time, he and the Boundary Commission decided the fate of the subcontinent. Why was Radcliffe chosen for this task? What guided his deliberations? And why has history paid so little attention to the man behind an award that would tear apart the lives



and livelihoods of millions?

The barrister behind the border

1947 had not been kind to Britain. A cold winter, coal and food shortages, and wartime debt had weakened morale. In India, rising tensions between Muslims and Hindus and growing pressure from nationalist groups made the empire increasingly difficult to sustain. Meanwhile, the United States was pressing Britain to give up its colonies.

Britain was determined to transfer power quickly. Two boundary commissions were established, one for Punjab and one for Bengal, both to be chaired by Radcliffe, a British barrister. On June 26, British officials formally announced his appointment. “[Lord Louis] Mountbatten went on to laud Radcliffe’s abilities, affirming that he was ‘a man of high integrity, legal reputation, and wide experience’,” writes Chester.



Radcliffe had never visited India. Yet, in many ways, that was seen as his greatest asset. The assumption was that his unfamiliarity would make him impartial.



A bulldozer towing a sledge delivers bread to the snowbound village in Britain, 1947 (Wikipedia)

Aware of the international scrutiny surrounding India's decolonisation, British officials agreed to involve South Asian nationalist leaders in key decisions. Each boundary commission comprised four South Asian judges — two nominated by Congress and two



by the Muslim League. For the Punjab commission, it was agreed that one of Congress's nominees would be a Sikh. All four judges were well versed in criminal law, with no requirement that they possess geographical expertise or knowledge of the complex precedents surrounding Partition.

In an interview with indianexpress.com, Chester says the short answer to why Radcliffe was chosen was that he was a highly respected lawyer. “The longer answer is that a huge proportion of the major nationalist leaders were lawyers: people trained in the law, immersed in respect for the law, and looking to legal structures for solutions to major problems. As a result, it seemed natural to people like [Jawaharlal] Nehru and [Vallabhai] Patel to use a legal approach to resolve boundary-related questions.”

Radcliffe's deliberations

As Radcliffe prepared to travel to India, the British government accelerated its withdrawal. On July 4, it introduced



the Indian Independence Bill, making Radcliffe's decision binding on both India and Pakistan.

Radcliffe arrived on July 8—less than six weeks before the August 15 deadline for Britain's withdrawal—and immediately set to work. Congress and the Muslim League presented their cases in both Bengal and Punjab, while smaller and less influential groups were allowed to make their case only in writing.

Ironically, “Radcliffe did not attend any of its public sittings in person, he merely examined the papers presented to the Commission by all parties. He made no effort to survey the areas he had been asked to carve up,” writes professor Joya Chatterji in her 1999 journal article, ‘The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52’.

In the final phase of the boundary-making process, Radcliffe retreated to Delhi to work on the line alone. Chester notes that he destroyed almost

all papers relating to his private deliberations. “Among the few surviving documents is a sketch map of the line...,” she says.



*A refugee special train at Ambala Station during partition of India
(Wikimedia Commons)*

As Radcliffe neared his final decision, his primary consideration was the separation of ‘contiguous majority areas’. This led him to divide Lahore and Amritsar, Punjab’s two principal urban centres. Radcliffe also awarded India two areas with small Muslim majorities, in Ferozepur and Gurdaspur districts, in order to keep the canal system that irrigated Amritsar, whose headwaters lay in Gurdaspur, under a single



administration.

“Although he attempted to limit the inevitable disruption to Punjabi infrastructure, particularly the irrigation system, these efforts were largely unsuccessful,” Chester writes in her book.

Interviews with Radcliffe’s personal secretary, Christopher Beaumont, confirm that demographic considerations were also a priority. He, however, gave little weight to ‘natural’ boundaries, despite demands from political leaders on all sides. Instead, he relied on existing administrative divisions. Religious shrines, too, were a relatively minor consideration.

Chester notes that one reason for retaining existing administrative divisions was to reinforce the imprint of colonial rule. “Although Radcliffe did not state explicitly his reasons for making this choice, the delineation of a completely new boundary, one that did not follow existing colonial divisions,

might have been perceived as a rejection of British rule,” she observes.

The Radcliffe award

Many South Asians pleaded for the decision to be announced ahead of the British withdrawal. “Radcliffe was ready with the award on 9 August itself. However, Mountbatten now changed his mind, and chose to make the award public only after the 15th. His explanation for the delay was strange, to say the least: ‘Without question, the earlier it was published, the more the British would have to bear responsibility for the disturbances which would undoubtedly result’,” notes historian Ramachandra Guha in his book *India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy* (2022). The official reason recorded, interestingly, was that boundary news would ruin the joy of Independence Day celebrations.

Chester says in her interview, “I would argue that Mountbatten’s main goal in delaying the announcement was to

ensure that any violence that resulted would happen after the official transfer of power, on the theory that violence after August 15 would no longer be the responsibility of the British.”



Mountbatten meeting with Jawaharlal Nehru (left) and Muhammad Ali Jinnah (right), 1947 (Wikipedia)

When the award was finally announced on August 17, the border forces in place were inadequate to prevent the massacres.

The defining feature of the Radcliffe Line was its division of Amritsar, which went to India, from Lahore, which went to Pakistan. The two most controversial elements involved parts of Gurdaspur and Ferozepur districts.

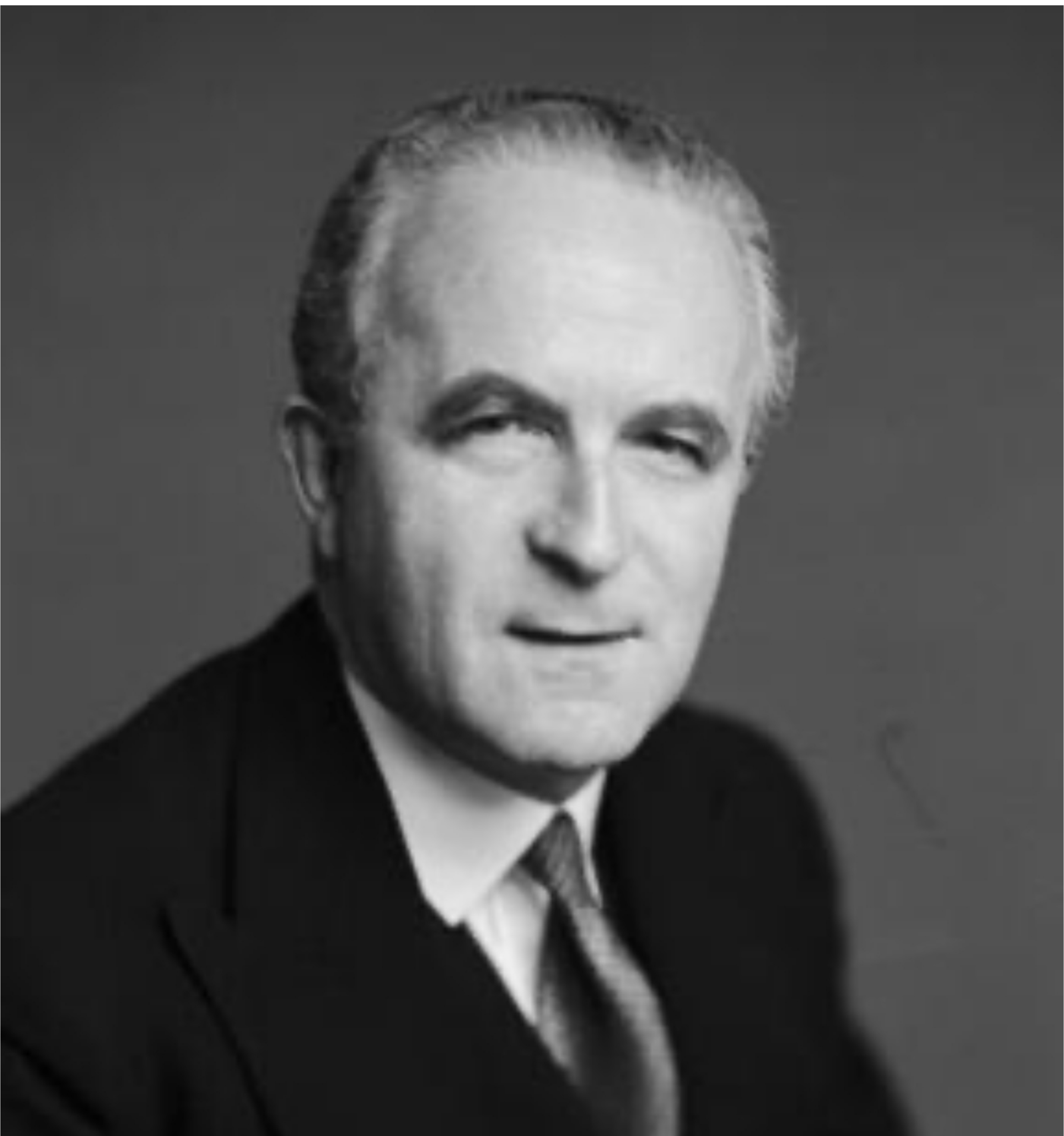
“There have been rumours,” Chester says in the interview, “that Radcliffe made last-stage changes to give India a land-bridge to Kashmir, but there’s no evidence for this allegation...”.

The language used to describe the decision also changed significantly. Chester notes, “Before 15 August, it was known as the ‘boundary commission award’. After its release... the decision began to be cited as the ‘Radcliffe award’. It is this phrase that is commonly used to this day, reflecting not only attempts by the Indian and Pakistani governments to distance themselves from the decisions, but also the idea that the line was a British creation.”

The mastermind

The Radcliffe Line cut through Punjab’s well-developed irrigation system. Its impact was equally disruptive at the local level. In some cases, the line even divided homes in two. The problems with the border in everyday operation,

scholars argue, were multi-fold.



Cyril Radcliffe (Wikipedia)

Radcliffe was fully cognisant of the consequences of his work. Upon submitting his award, he wanted to leave South Asia. “Of his plans for the following morning Radcliffe wrote,” cites Chester, “I station myself firmly on the Delhi airport until an aeroplane from England comes along. Nobody in India will love me for my award about

the Punjab and Bengal and there will be roughly 80 million people with a grievance who will begin looking for me. I do not want them to find me.’”

After returning to England, he spoke very little about his experiences in India.

Many did not believe Radcliffe had acted entirely alone. Chester says, “Historian Patrick French makes an astute observation, in his 1997 book *Liberty or Death*, that Radcliffe was a barrister following his brief, and Mountbatten was his client (as was the British Government more broadly). So although Mountbatten insisted that Radcliffe was working completely independent of the viceroy, the evidence shows that there was communication between Radcliffe and his secretary on the one hand and Mountbatten and other elements of the Government of India on the other hand.”

She believes that princely states and other parties also tried to get information and requests to Radcliffe. “In the end, I would say that probably

Radcliffe made most of the key decisions himself, but that he did consider and act on Mountbatten's late-stage advice to remove a finger of land south of Amritsar that an earlier draft award (known as the "sketch map") had allotted to Pakistan," she adds.

While Mountbatten may not have influenced the fine print of the award, he undoubtedly inspired some of its broader features. "For one thing, it was Mountbatten's idea that Radcliffe should chair both Commissions with the idea that a single chairman would keep the larger picture in mind," writes Chatterji.

'Legal façade to a political process'

"I think most people assume that the Radcliffe Boundary Commission was working to define a boundary that would be the best solution for a) the two new states of India and Pakistan and b) the people who would be affected by it. But it wasn't doing that – it was primarily



working to help Britain get rid of its South Asian expenses and unwanted responsibilities as quickly as possible. I think Radcliffe did the best he could to define a workable boundary within those parameters, but relieving Britain of its responsibilities was his main task,” says Chester. His participation, she notes, “mostly lent a legal façade to a political process.”

Concluding the interview, Chester says, “During discussions over forming the Radcliffe Boundary Commission, Muhammad Ali Jinnah said that ‘he had wanted, if possible, to avoid lawyers. There was always trouble when two or more lawyers got together.’ I think he was joking in part because he was by far the most distinguished lawyer in a room full of nationalist leaders who were lawyers. But I also think he was raising a valid point...that the pseudo-legalistic approach of the Radcliffe Boundary Commission might not work out well in the end.”



Why Mountbatten hastened **India's Independence** by 10 months

by Nikita Mohta

It was in June 1947 that Lord Louis Mountbatten announced his plan for the Independence and Partition of India, pulling back the expected date by almost a year. Thus, while India became free earlier than expected, this came at the cost of great violence and chaos.

Hurried broadcast on June 3

Mountbatten left the Indian leaders with as little time as possible between their acceptance of the Partition plan



and its public announcement on All India Radio on the evening of June 3, 1947. In a hurried broadcast, the partition of British India was formally declared. When the speech concluded, Mountbatten returned to the Viceroy's House for some “well-earned whiskeys and sodas.”

In the days that followed, he addressed the press to explain both the urgency and the reasoning behind the rapid decision.

Press meet on June 4

On June 4, at a press conference, Mountbatten explained that the transfer of power would be advanced by almost a year, to August 15, 1947. “The date I chose came out of the blue,” he admitted. Why that date? Because it marked the second anniversary of Japan's surrender—though, he conceded, nothing more significant than that. In *Indian Summer* (2008), historian Alex von Tunzelmann notes that



Mountbatten revealed the imminent date of independence with the ease of “a stage magician pulling a rabbit from a hat.”

UK Prime Minister Clement Attlee had originally set Mountbatten an exit date of June 1, 1948. Even that was an ambitious timeline, given the complexity of Indian politics and the potential consequences of partition. “And yet, undaunted by the task before him, the last Viceroy took the bizarre and unilateral decision to speed independence up,” writes Tunzelmann.

“It was a bombshell!” wrote the Commander-in-Chief’s private secretary, Shahid Hamid, in his diary that afternoon. “Two states will be born 77 days from now. There is no parallel in history!”

Why was India’s independence date fixed for August 15, 1947?

In *Shattered Lands* (2025), historian Sam

Dalrymple notes that the precise reason for Mountbatten's accelerated transfer of power remains widely debated. "The most persuasive answer is that, with Sardar Patel blocking his access to the intelligence services, he felt burdened by the responsibility over millions of lives and had no knowledge of what was actually going on, or power to change it."

Tunzelmann offers an alternate reasoning. Just before the Mountbattens left England in March, his wife Edwina had responded briskly to a relative's concerns: "Don't worry," she said. "This is going to be a marvellous experience – and Dickie says we'll be back as soon as we can – and that means not long."

By the end of May, Mountbatten had pressed the government into making the period even shorter than it might have been. Edwina had not wanted to go to India in the first place and, in the early weeks, urged her husband to ensure their return to Britain as quickly as

possible. “Perhaps,” notes Tunzelmann, “if he could carry out the transfer of power swiftly and efficiently enough, he might still save his marriage.”

Horror and confusion were widespread across India in June and July 1947.

Dalrymple describes how the official secrecy surrounding the border negotiations only heightened the vulnerability of farmers, fishermen, and factory workers. “Would Muslims living in India count as Indians or as stranded Pakistanis? And what would be expected of the subcontinent’s other religious communities – the Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, Jews, Sanamahis, Bahais, Bons, atheists and agnostics? Even the basic question of who counted as Hindu and Muslim had yet to be worked out.”

“When I got out to India I realized . . . that, although we in London had visualised the programme of transfer for June 1948 as moving at lightning speed, in India it was regarded as being

much too slow,” Mountbatten told a meeting of the East India Association in London the following year. “Everybody there was agreed on this point: the leaders, leading British officials, my staff advisers.”

However, Tunzelmann disagrees. After seeing the plan at Simla, even Nehru had warned that it was moving too fast. Liaquat Ali Khan of the Muslim League stated that he did not believe that under any circumstances—united or divided—India could be ready to stand on its own by June 1948. Several of the princes too pleaded for a longer British presence.

‘The rush was Mountbatten’s, and his alone’

According to Tunzelmann, records show no evidence of anyone else urging Mountbatten to hasten the process— not the British government, not his advisers, not the Sikhs, not the Muslim League, not Gandhi, and not even the majority of the Congress leadership. Nehru and



Patel may have signalled their desire to begin governing, but neither called for a fixed independence date as early as August that year. “The rush was Mountbatten’s, and his alone.”

He would soon come to recognise this. In a letter to his daughter Patricia, cited by Dalrymple, Mountbatten wrote: “I’ve made a mess of things through over-confidence and over-tiredness. I’m just whacked and worn out and would really like to go. I’m so depressed darling, because until this stupid mishandling of the Jinnah situation I’d done so well”.



How Berlin became the centre of the **Indian freedom struggle abroad**

by Ole Birk Laursen

On February 10, 1926, forty-three anticolonialists, socialists, pacifists, and radicals — foreigners and Germans — met at the Rathauskeller, a restaurant in Berlin's city hall, to organise an international conference against colonialism and imperialism. It was led by the German communist Willi Münzenberg, and one of its most prominent delegates was the veteran Indian revolutionary Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (known as Chatto). At the time, Chatto was a central

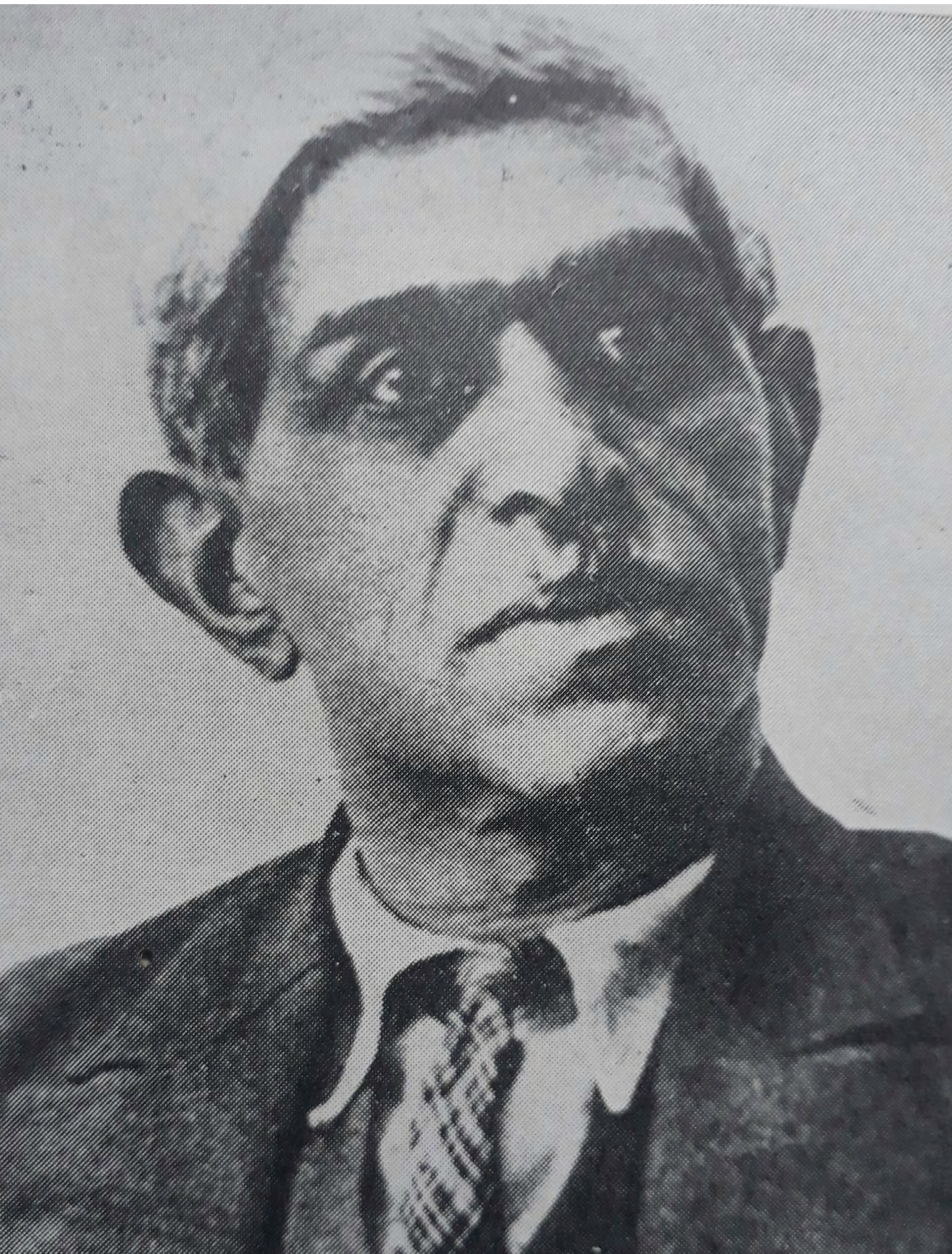


figure among Indian and global radical networks in Berlin.

The Rathauskeller conference led to the formation of the League Against Colonial Oppression (LACO) and the decision to prepare for a larger, global anticolonial congress to be held in Brussels a year later.

When 174 delegates from across the colonial and semi-colonial worlds convened in Brussels from February 10-15, 1927, Chatto had invited several other Indians from Berlin and elsewhere in Europe, including Jawaharlal Nehru of the Indian National Congress (INC), the veteran Indian revolutionary, Muhammed Barkatullah of the Ghadar Party, and Monindra Kumar Sen and Jaya Surya Naidu (Chatto's nephew and son of Sarojini Naidu), both students in Berlin. Supported by the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow, the Brussels congress led to the formation of the League Against Imperialism (LAI), with its headquarters in Berlin, with Chatto as

its international secretary.



Virendranath Chattopadhyay (Wikimedia Commons)

Although it existed for only 10 years and was often marred by internal disagreements and external pressures, the LAI had a profound impact on anticolonial leaders and on their politics



and visions for independent nations. As Nehru became a vital link between India and the LAI, Chatto operated in the background from Berlin.

Berlin's importance was not coincidental. Not only was the Comintern's headquarters based in the city, but the German capital was also, as historian Fredrik Petersson puts it, the “hub of the anti-imperialist movement.” Mahdi Ali Mirza, who lived in Berlin from 1924 to 1931, recalled that “during this period, Berlin was the intellectual hub of Europe.” This combination of global revolutionary politics, anti-imperialism, and intellectual engagement attracted Indians to Berlin rather than London or Paris, and became the foundation of the LAI.

Indeed, there was a vibrant and radical community of about 200 Indians in the German capital at the time — most of them students, some of them experienced revolutionaries, many of them living in the Charlottenburg district of Western Berlin. At its centre



was Chatto.

But how did Berlin become the centre of the Indian freedom movement in exile?

Revolutionary news from Berlin

By the time of the Brussels Congress in February 1927, Chatto had already been in exile for 25 years and been involved in the revolutionary movement for 20 of them, moving across Britain, France, Germany, and Sweden, with brief excursions into Switzerland and Russia, and was part of a global radical network. During the First World War, he was one of the principal figures in the Indian Independence Committee, which collaborated with the Germans to instigate a revolution in India.

In Weimar-era Berlin, he associated frequently with international anarchists and communists, but remained dedicated to the Indian freedom struggle.

In the spring of 1921, Chatto set up the

Indian News Service and Information Bureau (INSIB) with his brother-in-law, ACN Nambiar, and Agnes Smedley, an American radical journalist and anti-imperialist. Nambiar, who was married to Chatto's younger sister Suhasini, had recently arrived in Berlin, as had Smedley, who soon fell in love with Chatto.

Located in the Halensee area of the Charlottenburg district of Berlin, the INSIB provided assistance to Indians seeking to come to Berlin. It also published a monthly magazine — *The Indo-German Commercial Review*, later renamed the *Industrial and Trade Review for India* — with information about Germany, cultural news, and business information. More radical, Bhupendranath Datta and Surendra Nath Kar, both veteran Indian revolutionaries in exile, published the *Indian Independence* in December 1922. In 1924, however, the British prevailed upon the German authorities to ban both the INSIB's publication and *Indian Independence*.



In the late summer of 1924, the British Government became so concerned about the activities of Indians in Berlin that it contacted the German authorities with a view to deporting several Indians from Germany, including Chatto, Datta, Chempakaraman Pillai, MPT Acharya, and MN Roy — all experienced Indian revolutionaries with anarchist or communist leanings, except for Pillai.

After lengthy discussions with the Germans, the British abandoned the deportation request. The British had realised that it was better to know that these Indians were in Berlin and let the Germans deal with them rather than to let them loose elsewhere.

Although their publications were banned, the Indians in Berlin continued to disseminate news through some of the major Indian newspapers, including *The Hindu*, *Bombay Chronicle*, *Advance*, *People*, and *Forward*, many of which featured weekly ‘News from Berlin’ sections.

When the INSIB dissolved in early 1925, most of its members already belonged to the Hindusthan Association of Central Europe (HACE). Set up in 1921 as a student association, the HACE agreed to admit all Indians by 1923. Soon after, as Mirza explained in his memoirs, the HACE was “run by the students under the guidance of the revolutionaries.”

The association organised social events, including regular summer and winter parties that brought together Indians, Chinese, Persians, Russians, and Koreans; there was an Indian Sports Club that organised cricket and table tennis matches; they organised lectures with German and foreign speakers; later they organised movie screenings of new Indian films; and hosted prominent Indian visitors to Berlin, including Jawaharlal Nehru, G Sethi, Sarojini Naidu, Srinivasa Iyengar, RD Karve, Rabindranath Tagore, and VJ Patel.

At the same time, the HACE did not shy away from political activities. For example, in the summer of 1926,

when the German animal dealer John Hagenbeck put around 100 Indians on display in the Berlin Zoo, performing the roles of fakirs, snake charmers, and so-called everyday life to a fascinated German audience, the local Indian community and the HACE organised several public protests. Not only did they protest to the German authorities, but they also wrote extensively about the case in German and Indian newspapers.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-09732
Foto: o. Ang. | Mai 1930

HACE meeting in the Alexander von Humboldt-Haus, Fasanenstrasse 23, 6 May 1930, to protest the arrest of Gandhi. (Wikimedia Commons)

From Brussels, shortly after the LAI Congress, Chatto, Nambiar, and Smedley published a letter in the *Bombay*

Chronicle: “We will not have our people shown in European Zoological Gardens or any part thereof without protest.”

Although the general German audience was sympathetic to their complaints, the German authorities dismissed the HACE and the Indians.

A few months after the LAI Congress in Brussels, Indians in Berlin convened at the new HACE headquarters in the Alexander von Humboldt-Haus in Fasanenstrasse to hear Naidu’s report and decide whether the HACE should formally join the LAI or leave that decision to individual members. Naidu had attended the Brussels congress as a delegate of the HACE. After some debate, however, the Indians voted for the latter option: anyone could join the LAI individually, but the HACE would not join as an organisation.

Chatto continued his work unabated and, from 1928, spearheaded the *Anti-Imperialist Review*, the official organ of the LAI that brought together diverse voices against imperialism in all its guises.



Eating, praying, and loving in Berlin

Khwaja Abdul Hamied, who was supposed to join the HACE delegates to the LAI Congress in Brussels but remained in Berlin, straddled many circles in the German capital. Hamied was a close friend of Zakir Husain, the future President of India, who had arrived in Berlin in 1923 and became secretary of the HACE after the untimely death of Surendra Nath Kar later that year.

Hamied was also a frequent visitor to the newly built Berlin Mosque. Its foundation stone had been laid in 1924, and Barkatullah and Hamied spoke at the official opening of the Mosque in 1926. Two years later, Hamied married Luba Derczanska, a Lithuanian-Jewish communist, at the Mosque, and Hamied now moved among Indians, Muslims, and communists in the German capital. The Mosque also served as a social space for the Indian Muslims in Berlin. Prayers were performed, Eid celebrations were

observed, Urdu lessons were given, and conversions to Islam were frequent.

But from the late 1920s, the Indians in Berlin had another venue to convene. In August 1929, the ‘Hindustan House’ restaurant opened in Uhlandstrasse, a prominent street in Western Berlin. Until then, the Indians had patronised some of the Chinese restaurants such as the ‘Tientsin’ or ‘Nanking’ on Kantstrasse, but now they could get a proper Indian meal for little money. Upstairs was a boarding house, where Indian students enrolled at the local Technical University lodged.

One of the frequent visitors to ‘Hindustan House’ was Soumyendranath Tagore, the great-grand-nephew of Rabindranath Tagore, who had arrived in Berlin in September 1928 after attending the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow. Tagore is known to have held court at the restaurant, regaling local Germans with fascinating stories of India couched in communist rhetoric. British

authorities now feared that ‘Hindustan House’ was a front for communist activities.

Perhaps their fears were not entirely unfounded: the new proprietor was Nalini Gupta, one of the founders of the Communist Party of India. However, after a brief German investigation, it quickly became clear that most patrons came for a cheap meal rather than communist indoctrination.

The last roars from the twenties

By the late 1920s, the political landscape for Indians in Berlin was changing. In February 1929, Chatto and Nambiar revived the INSIB as the Indian Information Bureau, now with financial support from Nehru and the INC. But when Chatto tried to bring the Indian Information Bureau under the control of the LAI, Nehru withdrew his support, and the bureau was terminated in 1930 for lack of funding.



Shortly afterwards, Chatto was summoned to Moscow to account for his wartime activities and for accusations that he was a nationalist rather than a proper communist.

The HACE was also under pressure. Many of the younger students and new arrivals were not interested in the revolutionary politics of the old vanguard. To address this, the Indian Student Association was established in the late 1920s, this time only for students, not revolutionaries.

Political events in both India and Germany increasingly influenced the exiles. The Simon Commission, the Round Table Conferences in London, and the INC's demand for complete independence were frequently debated among Indians in Berlin. Gandhi's Salt March in the spring of 1930 gained considerable attention, and when Gandhi was arrested on May 4, 1930, the HACE organised a protest meeting at its headquarters in the Alexander von Humboldt-Haus two days later. The



meeting was widely covered in German newspapers, and a photo from the event shows Tagore speaking, and Acharya and Naidu in attendance.

Into the fascist thirties

The political situation in Germany now increasingly dominated the fate of the Indians. Worried about increasing racism and Adolf Hitler's declaration in favour of British rule in India, Chempakaraman Pillai wrote to Hitler in December 1931, demanding answers about the official position of the Nazis towards India. Pillai's letter was published widely in German newspapers, but Hitler dismissed his demand and repeated that British rule in India was essential to ward off communist influences.

As the Nazis seized power in late 1932, the situation became even worse. The day after the Reichstag Fire on February 27, 1933, German Stormtroopers arrested both Nambiar and Naidu on suspicion of being communists. Perhaps the



suspicion was not entirely unfounded. Both Nambiar and Naidu had travelled in anarchist and communist circles in Berlin, mostly by association with Chatto and Smedley, but neither of them was a committed Bolshevik.

They were beaten up by the Nazis, and their personal belongings and any suspicious material were confiscated. Naidu was released after a week, while Nambiar was released and expelled from Germany at the end of March 1933.

The following month, in April 1933, Monindra Kumar Sen and some of the Indian lodgers at the 'Hindustan House' boarding house were assaulted by the Nazis outside the restaurant. The Indians had witnessed a brawl outside and tried to intervene. Instead, the entire mob of around 400 people turned against Indians, verbally abusing them and beating four of the lodgers. At least, according to Sen.

Devendra Nath Bannerjea, the secretary of the Indian Student Association, who



had ingratiated himself with the German authorities, told the police that it was merely a brawl between three Indians and four Germans over a woman. The true story remains uncertain, but Sen was soon expelled from Germany.

That same month, as he was returning to Germany from a retreat in Italy, Tagore was arrested by the Nazis as he crossed the border into Bavaria. The charge was plotting to assassinate Hitler. It was probably not true, but upon his release four days later, Tagore fled to Paris and now wrote extensively about the dangers of Nazism in Germany.

By the end of 1933, five more Indians had been expelled from Germany, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to remain in Berlin. The LAI also moved its headquarters away from the city and finally terminated in 1937.

For 15 years, Berlin had been at the centre of the Indian freedom struggle in exile. From this vibrant community emerged anticolonial organisations,



radical student associations, and global networks that contested the British Empire from afar. The most important and radical of these was the LAI, a global anti-imperial organisation that became the biggest threat to the empire ever seen.

But the rise of Nazism also spelled the end of this lively Indian community abroad, though new alliances between Indians and Germans were on the horizon by the mid-1930s.

But that is a different story.

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The forgotten story of Austria's colonies in India

by Nikita Mohta

Nestled within the walls of a 17th-century Dutch fort in Covelong (Kovalam), Tamil Nadu, is a luxury beach hotel. Its website proudly describes the property as a five-star retreat on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, between Chennai and the UNESCO World Heritage site of Mahabalipuram. What it doesn't mention is the fort's connection to Banquibazar, now a suburb of Barrackpore in West Bengal.

Three centuries ago, Covelong and Banquibazar were linked as trading



settlements of the Ostend Company, also known as the General Imperial India Company, the Austrian Empire's attempt to enter the lucrative trade of the Indian Ocean.

“Both the colonies, in terms of their exact locations, still exist. But their connection to the Austrian East India Company is relatively forgotten because the company itself survived for only a few years,” academic Saugata Bhaduri tells indianexpress.com.

While the western bank of the Hooghly was dotted with Portuguese, Dutch, French and Danish colonies, the eastern bank, where Calcutta had already been established, briefly hosted the Austrians. “About 30-40 kilometres north of Calcutta, the Austrians set up their first colony in the early 1720s,” says Bhaduri.

The Holy Roman Empire expands

In the 18th century, the Habsburg Monarchy within the Holy Roman

Empire extended across territories as far apart as Ostend and Antwerp in present-day Belgium and, later, Trieste in northeastern Italy. Yet for much of its early history, the empire lacked a significant maritime outlet. As it expanded, it acquired what is today Belgium, then known as the Austrian Netherlands.

“That was the first time they had a sustainable coastline. In Belgium, there was the port town of Ostend, which drove them to venture into Indian Ocean trade, following the British (1600), Dutch (1602) and French (1664),” says Bhaduri.

Between 1715 and 1723, 34 ships sailed from Ostend to China, the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, Surat and Bengal. These expeditions were financed by international syndicates comprising Flemish, English, Dutch and French merchants and bankers. Their mutual rivalry, however, weighed heavily on profits, prompting the establishment of the Austrian East India Company,

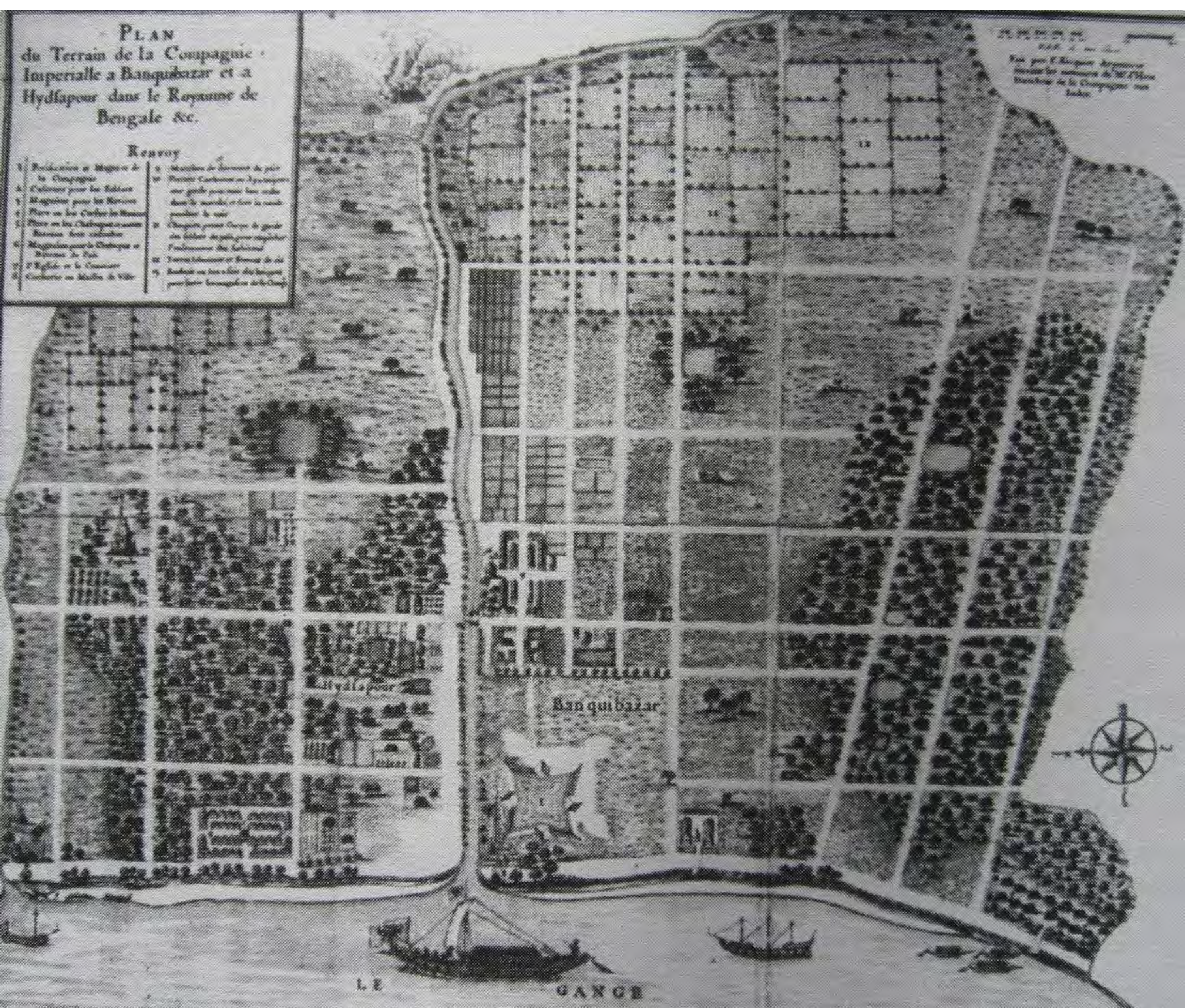
chartered by Emperor Karl VI (Charles VI) in December 1722. Also known as the General Imperial India Company, it was a joint-stock trading company modelled on the English East India Company.



Emperor Charles VI (Wikipedia)

The Company established factories at Canton in Bengal and on the Coromandel Coast, and its rapid success soon aroused the jealousy of the maritime powers. It first established a settlement at Covelong. In 1723, with the assistance of the French, it

secured permission from the Nawab of Bengal, Murshid Quli Khan, to establish factories at Banquibazar (Bankibazar) and Hydsapour (present-day Ichapur), adjoining settlements on the eastern bank of the Hooghly, just north of present-day Barrackpore.



Map of Banquibazar, 1764 (Wikipedia)

Explaining why Banquibazar was chosen, Bhaduri says, “This was the belt to be in because it was dotted with all these colonial powers. There was already a trade infrastructure and a ready maritime environment.” The first formal



ship of the Ostend Company reached Banquibazar in 1724.

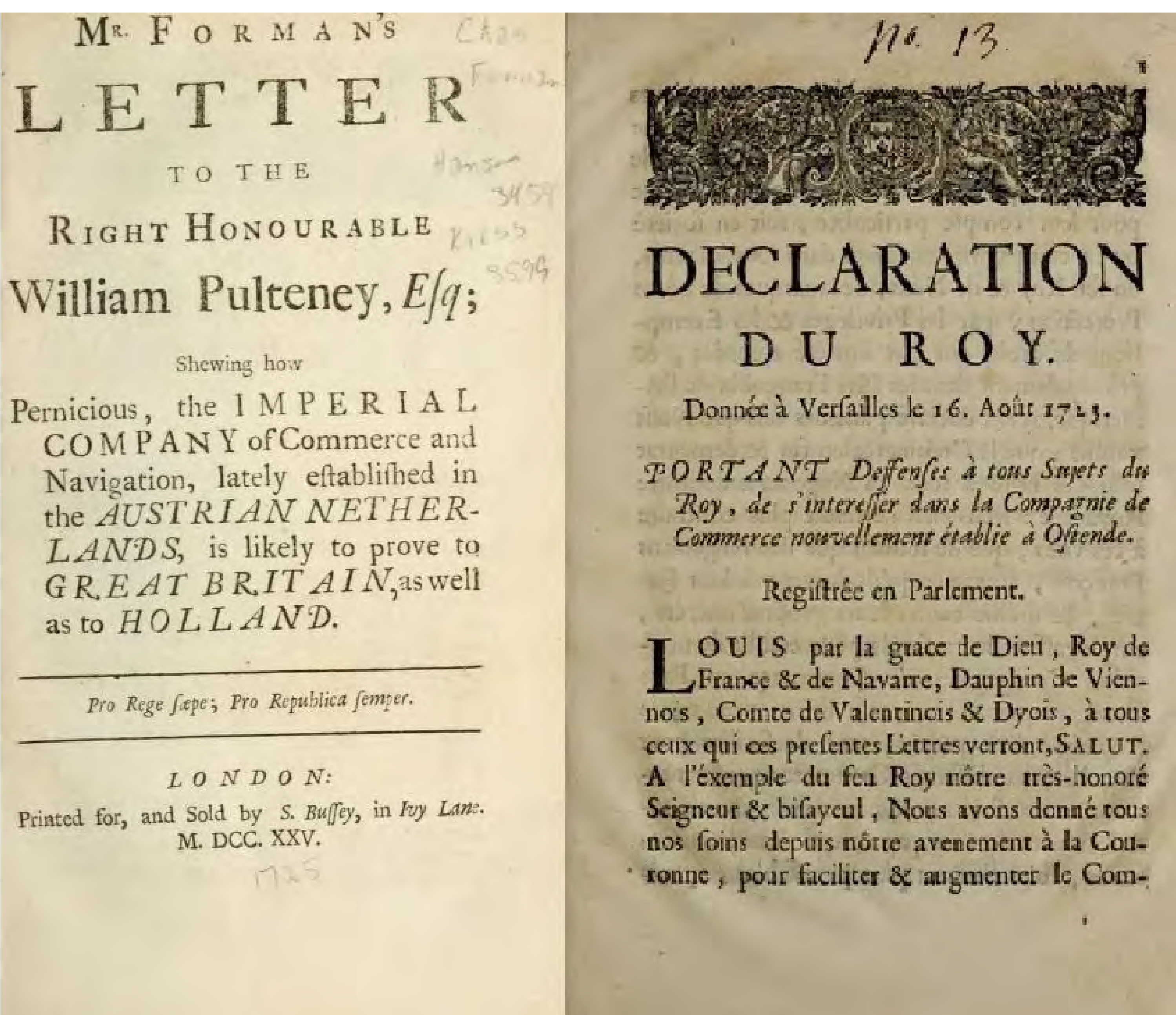
The Company initially employed ambitious sailors and entrepreneurs, as well as former personnel from other European trading companies. In his dissertation, *Worlds of the Ostend Company in Qing China and Mughal India* (1717–1744) (2021), Wim De Winter writes, “The ships’ crews also reflected a mixed maritime labour force, with as much as 41% ‘foreign’ crewmembers comprising French, English, Dutch and Southern Netherlandish nationalities.”

The Company also relied on linguists and translators in Bengal to navigate local commercial and political networks. Armenian and Persian merchants also formed enduring alliances with the Company.

The first phase of the Ostend Company

However, the arrival of the Ostend Company unsettled the existing colonial

powers. “A new colonial power entering the region naturally created a great deal of anxiety. Some colonial powers collaborated with the Austrians, while others opposed them. As history tells us, the French, who were rivals of the English, strongly supported the Austrian cause,” Bhaduri says.



Pamphlet condemning the Ostend Company as “pernicious” to both British and Dutch traders (left) and a 1723 law forbidding French subjects from investing in the company (right- Wikipedia)

The French even interceded on the Company’s behalf with the Nawab of Bengal to secure a tract of land,



which Murshid Quli Khan granted at Banquibazar. The English, however, remained deeply sceptical and were determined to stop the Company's activities.

Ironically, the Ostend Company was formally abolished in 1731 by Emperor Charles VI under the terms of the Treaty of Vienna, a concession to Britain and the Dutch Republic in exchange for their recognition of his daughter, Maria Theresa, as heir to the Habsburg monarchy. They, however, remained in Bengal.

The rivalry soon culminated in the first siege of Banquibazar in 1733. The British and Dutch bribed the faujdar (administrator) of Hugli to drive out the Ostenders. The faujdar persuaded the Nawab to order the removal of all fortifications at Banquibazar. When the Ostend Company refused to comply, his forces attacked. The Austrian garrison, comprising just 14 soldiers, was quickly overwhelmed and forced to surrender



The return of Ostenders

The colony was almost abandoned after the Company’s abolition. By the 1740s, however, the Ostenders had begun returning. Bhaduri explains that the settlement “started a second lease of life.” From the 1740s onwards, Ostenders gradually trickled back into Banquibazar and resumed settling there, though the colony continued to witness periodic conflict. One such episode was the second siege of Banquibazar in September 1744.



Share in the Ostend Company, issued 2 September 1723 (Wikipedia)



“Actually, they were collaborating with the Marathas to dislodge both the English and the Nawab of Bengal at that point. Under that accusation, Banquibazar was attacked. The Austrians themselves chose to launch a pre-emptive attack on Hooghly on 22 September 1744, anticipating the siege that was to come. But they lost decisively, and that is when the siege of Banquibazar took place. The Ostenders were completely expelled,” says Bhaduri.

The final phase of an Austrian colony

In the 1770s, the Ostenders once again returned to Banquibazar, retaining control of the settlement until 1794. “In 1775, a new Austrian East India Company was established,” says Bhaduri. Formally known as the Imperial Asiatic Company of Trieste and Antwerp, it was led by William Bolts, a renowned merchant who had previously served the English East India Company and was well acquainted with the Indian Ocean trade. Bhaduri adds, “He was



also the one who tried to set up the first newspaper in Bengal.”

Under Bolts, the Company initially flourished. Bhaduri explains that Bolts secured permission from Haider Ali, the Sultan of Mysore, to establish additional trading posts along the Malabar Coast. In 1778, he also dispatched an expedition that briefly occupied the Nicobar Islands.

However, the Company’s fortunes changed after the Charter Act of 1793, which renewed the English East India Company’s trading monopoly in the Indian subcontinent. “Therefore, all the other players, including the Austrians, gradually fell away after the Charter Act of 1793. The French Revolution further shook the Holy Roman Empire”.

Bhaduri summarises this phase in *Polycoloniality: European Transactions with Bengal from the 13th to the 19th Century* (2020): “The Austrian East India Company gained a second lease of life when, from the 1770s, a series of three



new companies was founded in Antwerp and Trieste. The first of these was the Imperial Asiatic Company of Trieste and Antwerp—also known separately as the Asiatic Company of Trieste, or the Antwerp Company—founded in 1775 under the charter of Karl VI’s successor, Empress Maria Theresa, by Willem Bolts, an old Bengal hand who had served both the Dutch and the English Companies in Bengal in the 1760s. The Company was quite successful to begin with. It re-occupied its earlier colony at Bankibazar and held it till 1794.”

The last European nation to enter maritime trade with India was Sweden. When the Ostend Company was suspended, many of its employees found themselves out of work. “Henry Koning, of Stockholm, took advantage of their knowledge of the East, and obtained a charter for the Swedish Company, dated June 13, 1731. The headquarters of the company were at Gothenburg, and between 1731 and 1778 it sent seventy-six ships to China, three to Bengal, and three to Surat,” notes historian Henry



Cabot Lodge in *The History of Nations* (1906).

“Many suspected that the Swedish East India Company was the formally banned Ostend Company, now trying to resume its trade on the sly under the guise of a Swedish company,” remarks Bhaduri.

Overshadowed by more familiar colonial narratives of the Portuguese, Dutch, French and British is the story of the Ostend Company and their connection between South India to East.





The many lives of *azadi*

by Vaishnawi Sinha

“**B**hookhmari se azadi, haan.
Bhedbhaav se azadi, haan.
*Pakshpaat se azadi. Hum leke rahenge
azadi, tum kuch bhi kar lo...*”

I first heard these words bellowing from then-student leader Kanhaiya Kumar on a prime-time television news programme in 2016. I was in school then, with little understanding of what they meant. I had absorbed the debates playing out around me: India got its freedom in 1947, became the world’s largest democracy, and built itself into



a sovereign nation. So why were people still shouting for *azadi*?

Over the years, I watched those words change meaning.

In 2019, the same chant found its way into the opening of *Gully Boy*'s “*Azadi*”, playing out against Mumbai's chawls, poverty and the lives of its wage workers. I heard it again during protests that followed the NEET-UG paper-leak controversy last month, as young people demanded answers and reform from an education system they believed had failed them.

The causes changed. The generations changed. The words remained.

And perhaps that is what makes *azadi* such a uniquely Indian idea of freedom. It has outlived the struggle that first gave the word its political weight, only to be claimed by every generation for the freedoms it feels it is still being denied.



For my generation, *azadi* is no longer simply a demand to be free from an empire. It can mean freedom from discrimination, inequality and restrictive social expectations. It can mean freedom from a broken education system, from inherited identities — or simply the freedom to decide what kind of life we want to build.

The question, then, isn't why India is still shouting *azadi* nearly eight decades after Independence.

It is: what does *azadi* mean to the generation shouting it now?

For Gen Z, *azadi* came with a soundtrack

The generations before us learnt about freedom largely through the narratives that reached them. Our parents grew up with a handful of television channels, radio, newspapers and films that came to them through a relatively narrow cultural pipeline. There was art, dissent and disagreement, of course. But access



to them was limited. The narrative was often already in the room; you could agree with it, argue with it or switch it off.

Gen Z grew up differently.

We may be the first generation to have carried an entire archive of competing narratives in our pockets. Before we were old enough to understand the politics of freedom, pop culture was already teaching us to question authority, institutions and the world we had inherited.

We watched *Rang De Basanti* turn youthful frustration into rebellion. Yuva made politics feel personal. Lakshya tied purpose to a generation that had been told to simply find a respectable career. *Aarakshan* put caste and access to education into popular conversation. More recently, *Homebound* forced audiences to look at the inequalities that can sit underneath something as fundamental as the right to move, work, and live with dignity.



These weren't textbooks on democracy. But they gave us characters, songs and stories through which ideas of injustice, privilege, resistance and freedom became emotionally legible.

And then came the smartphone.

We didn't just consume stories; we could respond to them, remix them, challenge them and find thousands of people around the world doing the same. A young Indian could watch a protest in another country before watching one in their own neighbourhood. They could discover a movement, a minority's struggle or a political idea through platforms that didn't previously exist.

That changed what *azadi* could mean.

We grew up knowing the privilege of breathing in a free India, while simultaneously being exposed to the many ways in which India could still become freer.

That contradiction may be at the heart



of Gen Z's relationship with *azadi*.

We are not asking for Independence. We are asking what Independence should have made possible.

Perhaps that is why the word has moved so easily from protest slogans to films, songs, memes, Instagram stories and conversations about our own lives.

For us, *azadi* is not only something the country won. It is something we keep trying to define.

***Azadi* means different things to Gen Z. That's the point.**

Ask a Gen Z Indian what freedom means, and you are unlikely to get the same answer twice.

For one person, it is the freedom to walk away from a career their parents chose for them. For another, it is refusing the idea that marriage must happen by a certain age. It can mean choosing not to have children, moving to another



city, coming out to your family, wearing what you want, questioning a religion you inherited, refusing a caste identity that was assigned to you, or simply deciding that your life does not have to be measured by how productive you are.

AZADI MEANS DIFFERENT THINGS. THAT'S THE POINT.

For Gen Z, freedom isn't one definition. It's a thousand.



*For one,
it's the freedom
to choose a
career their
parents didn't
plan for them.*



*For another,
it's the freedom
to live alone,
to breathe on
their own
terms.*



*For some,
it's freedom
over their body,
their identity,
their voice.*



*For some,
it's the freedom
to leave, to
start over,
to find
their own way.*



*For some,
it's the freedom
to earn with
dignity, to
build a better
life for their
family.*



*For some,
it's the freedom
to study, to
dream beyond
what they've
been told is
possible.*



*For some,
it's the freedom
to love who
they love,
without fear.*



*For some,
it's the freedom
to rest, to
log off, to
choose peace
over pressure.*

*"Different lives. Different battles.
Same right – the right to be free.*



The many lives of Azadi

For someone else, *azadi* is much more basic.

It is the freedom to study when their family could afford to educate only one child. It is the freedom to imagine a career beyond the work their parents have done. It is the freedom to earn enough to leave home. It is the freedom to be treated with dignity at work. It is the freedom to exist without having to negotiate caste, class, gender or geography at every step.

And Gen Z is all of these people at once.

It is the student sitting in a private college, scrolling through the same Instagram feed as the person selling them a cup of tea outside its gates. It is the young professional talking about burnout and quiet quitting, and the young worker who cannot afford to quit at all. It is the person debating whether to freeze their eggs and the person who never had the luxury of imagining a life beyond survival. It is the child fighting their parents over a career choice and



the child who never had the choice to begin with.

Freedom was never one-dimensional. It wasn't 25 years ago, and it certainly isn't now.

What has changed is our ability to see those different versions of it sitting next to each other.

A generation raised on the internet has grown accustomed to encountering lives it would otherwise never have known existed. We know that the person asking for freedom from parental expectations may be standing beside someone asking for the freedom to have parents who can afford to educate them. That someone fighting for gender equality may be fighting a very different battle from someone fighting caste discrimination. That the freedom to log off from a toxic workplace is a privilege when someone else is working three jobs just to keep a family afloat.

Gen Z's shared language of *azadi*, then,



does not come from having a shared struggle.

It comes from recognising each other's struggles.

We may be divided by class, caste, geography, politics and privilege. But somewhere between a protest chant, a film song, a viral post and a conversation between two strangers, we have arrived at a deceptively simple idea:

Your fight for freedom does not have to look like mine for me to understand why you are fighting.

And sometimes, *azadi* isn't a fight at all.

It is the quiet belief that tomorrow can be better than today.

That may be the thread connecting all the different versions of freedom we carry. The India we want to be free in is not just an India free from something. It is an India free to become something — more equal, more forgiving, more



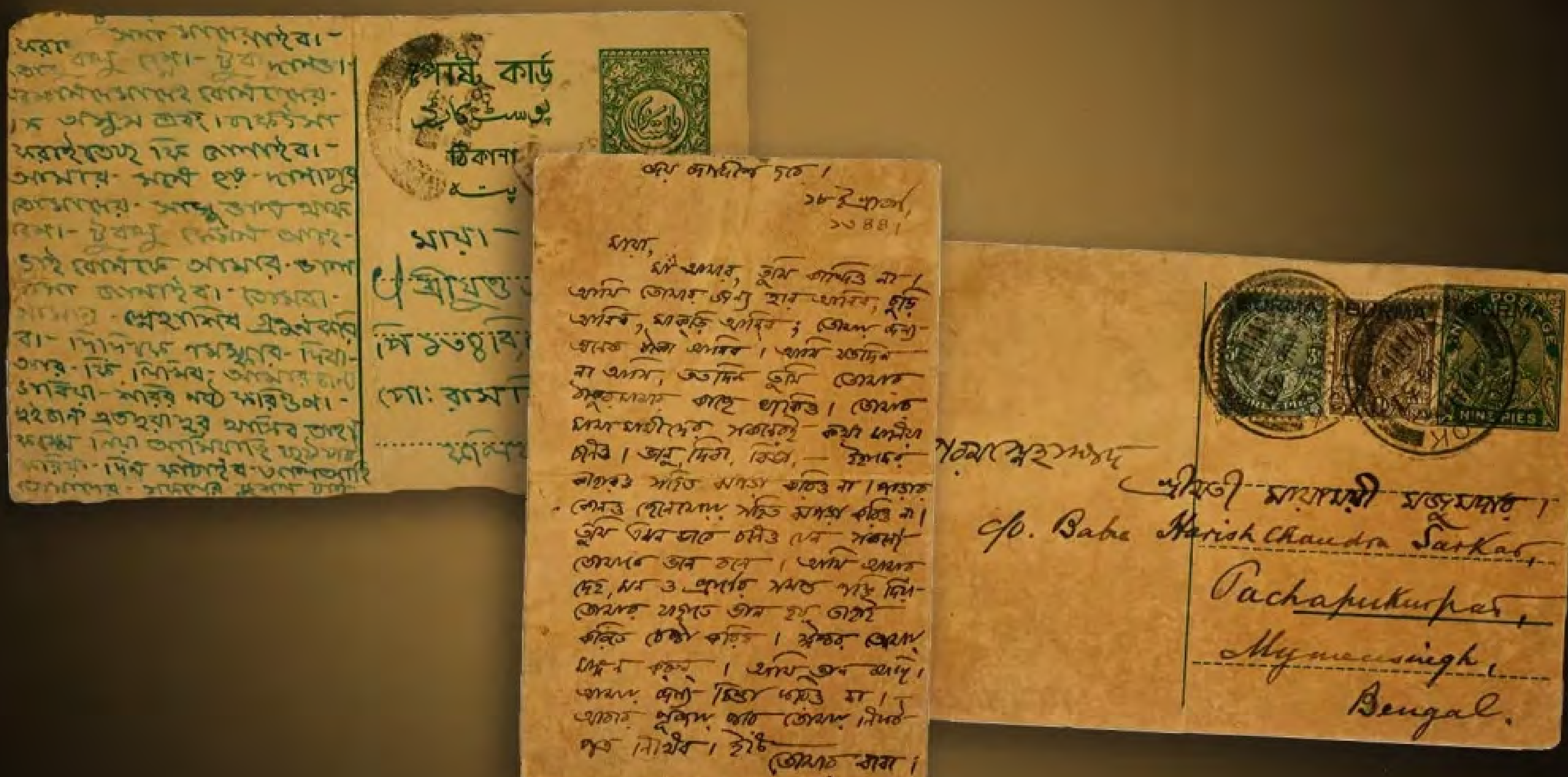
curious, more just, more willing to make room for lives that don't look like ours.

Every Independence Day, we return to the same old question: what did we become free from in 1947?

Perhaps Gen Z is asking a slightly different one: what are we free to become now?

The answer will never be the same for everyone. And perhaps it shouldn't be.





What my great-grandparents' letters reveal about **an undivided Bengal**

by Riyanka Roy

There is something inexpressibly remarkable about reading a letter long after everyone who wrote it is gone.

The ink has faded, the paper has yellowed, and the handwriting demands patience. Across nearly nine decades, the words retain an extraordinary sense of immediacy. They speak of weddings and illnesses, family obligations and everyday anxieties. There is no mention of borders, passports, visas or nations because, when these letters were



written, none of those realities had yet entered the lives of the people who wrote them.

Over the past few months, I have been reading a bundle of old letters preserved by *pishi*, my father's elder sister, who safeguarded them for decades. They belonged to my great-grandparents and other family members who lived between Mymensingh, Dhaka and Calcutta during the 1930s and 1940s. What began as a leisurely attempt to learn more about my family history turned into an intimate archive of undivided Bengal, captured not through political events but through the rhythms of ordinary domestic life.

For years, I knew only fragments of this story. My paternal grandmother was born in Mymensingh, in present-day Bangladesh. She came to Calcutta sometime around 1946 and married there, into a family that had lived in the city for generations. She spent the rest of her life in India, while much of her family remained across the border that



Partition would soon create.

A father's letters from Mymensingh

Among the earliest documents in the collection is a letter dated *18 Shrabon 1344 Bangabda*, corresponding to August 3, 1937. It was written by my great-grandfather, Taraprasanna Majumdar, a Sanskrit scholar from Mymensingh. Family memories had always remembered him as a learned man. The letters introduced me to someone else entirely. In one of them, addressed to my grandmother when she was still a little girl, he writes: “*Maya maa amar, tumi kandiyo na, ami tomar jonyo haar anibo, chuuri anibo.*” (My dear Maya, don't cry. I shall bring you a necklace and bangles)

What makes the letter special is its simplicity. It doesn't speak of extraordinary events, only of a father's everyday love for his daughter.

Taraprasanna writes as countless fathers did, reassuring a daughter distressed by



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*“Ami jotodin na ashi, totodin tumi lokkhi
meye hoiya thakiyo... Bhanu, Diba, Bibha,*

kaharo shohit jhogra koriyo na. Amar jonyo chinta koriyo na, ami khub taratari firibo” (Until I return, be a good girl... Don’t fight with Bhanu, Diba, Bibha. And don’t worry for me, I’ll be back soon), he writes.

The letters also reveal another side of his life. Although remembered as a scholar, his letters are almost entirely occupied with domestic concerns. They move effortlessly between affection, responsibility, and the practicalities of everyday living. Beyond his public identity, these pages preserve the private man, almost behind the curtains.

Remembering my great-grandmother through food

If Taraprasanna’s personality emerges through his handwriting, my great-grandmother, Shailabala Devi, reveals herself through the memories others left behind. She was a homemaker. Family members remembered her cooking, and her recipes were recorded. In those days, food was an expression of care,

especially when families were separated by distance.

Amidst those crinkled letters, I found a tiny notebook containing her recipes. “*Fulkopir niramish torkari*” (cauliflower curry), “*aloo-jhinge posto*” (potato and ridge gourd with poppy seeds), and “*chaanar dalna*” (cottage cheese balls in a curry) are some of the recipes she meticulously wrote down and passed on to my grandmother.

The letters echoed what my *pishi* had often told me about her grandmother. “There were only a couple of times when *Naani* came to visit us... She would bring homemade *sandesh*. And *pithe puli*.”

Reading an undivided Bengal

Growing up in Kolkata, I often heard people describe themselves as *bangal* or *ghoti*. My answer was always uncomplicated. My grandfather was from India, while my grandmother came from Mymensingh. I considered myself both.

Only much later did I realise how recent that distinction really was.

My first visit to Bangladesh, in 2021, was driven in part by a desire to understand my grandmother's childhood. Since then, I have returned several times, each journey making the same point more forcefully than the last. The places I was visiting had never been foreign to her. They were part of the same Bengal in which she had grown up.

The letters reinforce that understanding with clarity. Family members travelled between Mymensingh, Dhaka, and Calcutta without any suggestion that they were crossing political boundaries. Weddings were organised across cities, relatives visited frequently, and everyday life unfolded with little awareness that these movements would soon be shaped by borders.

Among the papers was a wedding invitation card. Dated *11 Joishthyo 1349* (May 25, 1942), it announced a wedding in Bankura, in present-day



West Bengal, and had been sent to Mymensingh. Printed on the card was a short poem reflecting the groom's family's anticipation as they prepared to welcome the bride:

*“Esho jyotsnar moto choraye shanti,
pushper moto heshe,
Esho batasher moto horite klanti, Lokkhir
moto beshe.”*

(Come, spreading peace like moonlight
and smiling like a flower; come,
dispelling weariness like the breeze,
adorned like Goddess Lakshmi.)



Among the papers was a wedding invitation card. (Photo by Riyanka Roy)

The invitation is more than a record of a marriage. It offers a perspective on Bengal that official archives rarely capture.

Recently, I had a conversation with my grandmother's cousin, now 89 and among the last members of the family with living memories of those years. Mentioning my great-grandfather immediately transported him back to his childhood.

“Your great-grandfather often travelled to the West. He would return with many things. Once he brought my father a sweater, which I later wore too.”

His recollection left me wondering about a single word: west. What did “the West” mean in the late 1930s and early 1940s? Was he referring to Calcutta, then the principal city of Bengal, or did those journeys take him further into other parts of India? The letters offer no answers, largely because none were needed. For the people writing them, geography was not something to be

explained or recorded. It was simply lived.

A letter that belonged to another life

“Kolponar manoshchokhye shundor akta chobee jeidin bheshe uthbe, seidin hobe kolponar shomapti. Seidin jano akta daak pai. Opekkhaye roilam” (The day a beautiful image emerges in the mind’s eye of imagination will be the day imagination reaches its fulfilment. I hope to receive a call/message from you on that day. Until then, I shall wait.) Among the family papers was one letter unlike the others. Written by a young man to my grandmother, it is dated 11. XII. 54 BS, corresponding to 25 March 1948. By then, the world reflected in the earlier correspondence had already disappeared. Partition had redrawn Bengal.

“Asha kori moner moto akjon ochena sathi peyecho, manbhonjon koranor moton” (I hope you have found a companion as you wished for, someone who can

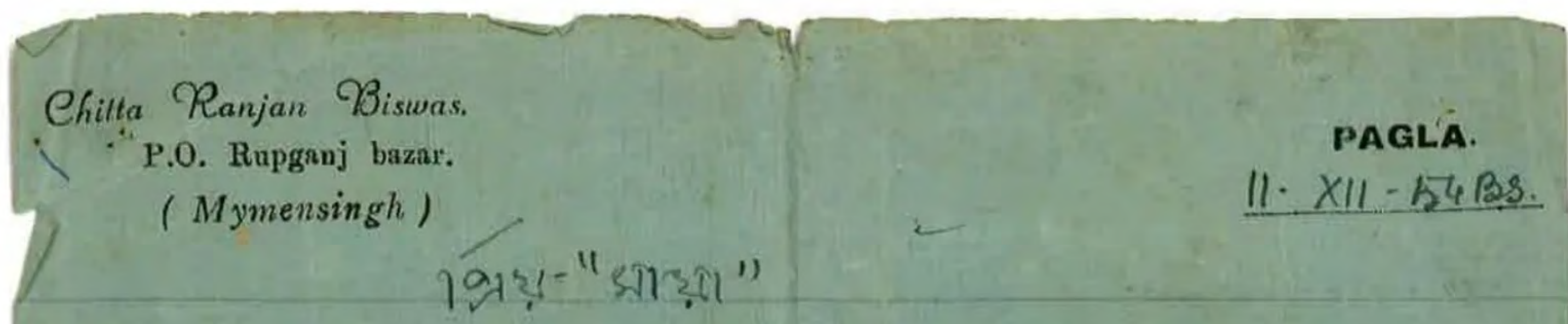
comfort and understand you.)

The letter carries the quiet sadness of a relationship shaped by circumstance. By 1948, my grandmother had begun a new life in India, while he remained in East Pakistan. There is no overt heartbreak in his words, only a gentle acceptance that life had moved on. In wishing her happiness with another companion, he leaves behind a subtle reminder of how Partition altered not only borders, but personal lives as well.

Even though the letter has a lot, what caught my attention was the stationery on which it was written. At the top was a printed letterhead bearing the name Chitta Ranjan Biswas, along with the address: P.O. Rupganj Bazar, Mymensingh. Like so many details scattered across the family archive, it seemed ordinary at first, until I began asking questions.

“Shomoyer khub obhab... Tomar moto bhaab ba kolpona konotai amar nae. Bastob niye kaaj kore cholechi” (“Time is

scarce... I do not possess the dreams and imagination that you do. I am occupied with the realities of life.”)



At the top was a printed letterhead bearing the name Chitta Ranjan Biswas, along with the address: P.O. Rupganj Bazar, Mymensingh. (Photo by Riyanka Roy)

On the surface, the letter is a deeply personal exchange between two people whose lives had taken different paths after Partition. Yet read today, it also reveals how swiftly political upheaval entered the private sphere, reshaping relationships and futures in ways that official histories rarely capture.

When I mentioned the letter to my grandmother’s cousin, he immediately recognised the name. Chitta Ranjan Biswas, he recalled, had been a freedom fighter. His recollection gave the letter an unexpected historical dimension. The man whose words I had been painstakingly trying to decipher was no longer just a name on an old sheet of paper, but someone who had



lived through and participated in the turbulent years that shaped the subcontinent's future.

Histories of Partition are often told through lines, borders, and categories, through the language of statistics or metrics of migration and violence. These letters I found, however, tell a different story. They remind us that the consequences of 1947 were also measured in interrupted relationships, unsolicited emotions, and broken hearts, and in parents and children separated by newly drawn borders, where family correspondence through letters gradually became the only thread connecting lives divided between two countries.

Nearly eight decades later, those fragile sheets of paper continue to preserve what official records cannot: the emotional geography of an undivided Bengal.



Batwara 1947, Main Vaapas Aunga, Op Safed Sagar remind India who she used to be

by Devansh Sharma

Ever since Aditya Dhar's 2019 hit military drama *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, the depiction of India on screen has changed. That perception has been further bolstered by the director's recent blockbuster spy thriller franchise *Dhurandhar*. Surgical strike has become a part of household parlance, and calls for "Naya Bharat", the one which pierces through the border to hit back, are now commonplace. While its depiction may have changed on screen, has India really

changed? Has its peace-loving DNA been altered to a point of no return?

This year, there's been a pushback on screen, which has slowly and surely reminded India who she used to be, and still is, at its core. When its *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* comes under threat, India often takes a dip in the imaginary river of Saraswati, which continues to flow smoothly underneath without any obstructions.

Partition revisited

In the trailer of Rajkumar Santoshi's upcoming Partition drama *Batwara 1947*, Karan Deol's character warns Pakistani fundamentalists that his father (also his real-life father Sunny Deol) pays no heed to any "sarhad" when it comes to protecting his own. "Seedha ghus ke maareng," he declares. The moment seems designed to welcome that section of the actor's followers who have been lapping up him singlehandedly dismantling Pakistan in Anil Sharma's 2023 blockbuster *Gadar 2* or trembling

the enemy state with a war cry in Anurag Sharma's hit period war drama *Border 2* earlier this year.

But not too many noticed the ache in his eyes when he can sense the loss of his son, also a soldier, in the 1965 Indo-Pak War, in *Border 2*. Similarly, many would choose to ignore the context within which his son mouths that familiar slogan. Sunny's character in *Batwara 1947* is no Tara Singh, as Santoshi tells SCREEN. "Tara Singh is fighting for his own right. But our character takes on a fight for someone else," says the filmmaker. "He's fighting what the mightiest of them fall prey to — fanaticism."

Batwara 1947, an adaptation of Asghar Wajahat's popular play *Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya O Jamyai Nai*, revolves around a Muslim family in India, who are forced to flee to Pakistan during the Partition. Despite the traumatic event, they ensure protection to an elderly Hindu woman (Shabana Azmi) who refuses to leave her ancestral haweli in Lahore.

“Mandir todna Islam nahi hai,” asserts Sunny’s character, when a Pakistani extremist (Abhimanyu Sharma) orders the lady’s temple within her home to be demolished.

Sure, Sunny here dials up the ‘Good Muslim’ stereotype perpetuated by the cinema of Manmohan Desai back in the 1970s. But it’s subverted by the smart casting — most of the Muslim characters are played by Hindu actors, while Shabana Azmi plays the Hindu woman. Aamir Khan, who has produced the film, could’ve easily opted to play the lead, but he lets Sunny do the heavy-lifting (literally) because when an actor with that screen image would speak, the audience would listen intently.

It also helps that *Batwara 1947* revisits Partition through the lens of harmony just a week after Imtiaz Ali’s period romance *Main Vaapas Aaunga* dropped on Netflix India. That film uses a different approach, a less heavy-handed one, to convey the same message. Keenu (Vedang Raina) and his family are made

to flee their hometown of Sargodha, Pakistan during Partition, forcing him to leave behind his love interest Afsana (Sharvari). Even over 75 years later, a 95-year-old Keenu (Naseeruddin Shah) insists on returning to his motherland to deal with some unfinished business.

Of course, given Imtiaz Ali's brand of cinema, one would expect the unfinished business has to do everything with the unfulfilled love. But the filmmaker takes the audience for a ride by flipping the definition of unfulfilled love on its head. Keenu's last wish is indeed to reconcile — not with the girl he lost, but with the love he lost. Upon learning how Afsana's 'fellow' Muslims raped, tortured, and killed the women of his family in their protection, he orders his younger brother — and in turn, himself — to never look back at what they've lost. While that leads to a life full of ambition and wealth in a rising, independent India, but one that's not without seething bitterness. This vitriol stems not so much from the tragedy that transpired, but from how it almost

irrevocably altered his DNA, his ability to love, and his faith in humanity itself.

The old passing on the India they knew

Whether it's *Batwara 1947*, *Main Vaapas Aaunga* or Sriram Raghavan's *Ikkis*, which was the first release of this year, each of these films on cross-border tension had an aged figure with undying optimism showing a new generation the direction India should be heading in. Shabana Azmi and Naseeruddin Shah, both of whom unequivocally supported the recent student protests in New Delhi, were only walking their talk. Whether it's through their films or via actions in real life, the most enduring onscreen couple from India's parallel cinema movement have demonstrated that they owe to a new generation reparation for what they've lost of our country over the years.

“The Partition of Indians and the cavalier manner in which the Radcliffe Line was drawn is one of the most

traumatic events in our history,” Shabana Azmi tells SCREEN. “For a long time, a veil of silence covered any mention of it, which in some cases, made the wounds even deeper. For Partition, the historical irony may be that the veil of silence helped the first generation survive — but perhaps made it harder for later generations to understand and metabolize what actually happened,” she adds.

The veteran actor hails legendary South African President Nelson Mandela’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995 as the watershed moment that “opened the doorway to revisiting past events so that the many stories of humanity that occurred were also recorded along with the tragic severing of brothers from brothers.”

Santoshi also echoes what Imtiaz and Naseeruddin Shah’s love letter to humanity acknowledges — “We’ve seen the highest of highs and the lowest of lows of humanity during such monumental events like the



Partition. We've seen extraordinary stories of courage, and at the same time, witnessed humans stoop down to an unbelievably low level," he says.

Perhaps this dying breed of actors — Shabana, Naseeruddin Shah, and Dharmendra — have witnessed Partition too closely through their loved ones to know better than hating the 'enemy state'. Sunny told SCREEN that the consequences of Partition are in the DNA of both him and his late father, given his grandparents were first-hand witnesses, hailing from a joint family in Punjab. Which is why Dharmendra proudly headlined *Ikkis* on the verge of his demise — a story where he fondly visits his birthplace of Pakistan despite having lost his 21-year-old son in the 1971 Indo-Pak War. When he embraces a Pakistani man (Deepak Dobriyal) crippled by the war, you can feel it in your bones that he means every inch of it.

The rhetoric around war also finds a refreshingly restrained lens in *Onir*

Sen's Netflix India show *Operation Safed Sagar*, which released earlier this month. While it's often India's victory over Pakistan in the 1999 Kargil War that's usually flashed in front of our eyes whenever we revisit that episode, the series also underlines the terms under which that victory was achieved — with restraint (India didn't infiltrate the Line of Control, even after one of its pilots drifted into 'enemy territory'), with honour (India buried Pakistani soldiers with Islamic rituals when the neighbouring country refused to accept the dead bodies), and most crucially, with a sense of repent and loss (the lives laid down during the war are not used as a fuel for revenge).

As depicted in season 2 of Nikkhil Advani's period drama *Freedom at Midnight* on SonyLIV earlier this year, whether it's Partition or the Kargil War, the hatred is initiated by the inflated ego of one individual (Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Pervez Musharraf respectively) instead of a political strategy or civilian sentiment. Politicians and mobs are



reduced to pawns by mobilising their deepest, darkest insecurities. There's no doubt that history keeps repeating itself, and India keeps exercising restraint whenever needed, often bearing the brunt of her non-violence ideals. Which is why pop-patriotic dramas like *Uri: The Surgical Strike* and *Dhurandhar* offer momentary relief to the national ego. But when the eyes are always set on badla instead of badlav, the hands that massage the ego are never able to reach for the soul.



25 years of Dil Chahta Hai: Farhan Akhtar gave us three flawed men but zero ‘mards’

by Saraswati Datar

All of us who were old enough to see *Dil Chahta Hai* when it released 25 years ago have a core memory and a favourite moment from the film that makes us smile every time we rewatch it. I remember listening to the title track on a cassette (yes, that’s how old I am), while going on long drives with my family. I also crack up every time I think of “*aaj Pooja kal koi dooja*”.

But when I watched *Dil Chahta Hai* again

for this column, I realised that it is not just a film that reimagined male bonding on screen in Hindi cinema; it was a film that changed the way a Hindi film hero and his masculinity were written for the big screen. From the more immediately visible elements like clothes that felt lived-in, or casting a leading man with a receding hairline and not giving him a wig, to showing us that men are malleable and capable of evolving, *Dil Chahta Hai* was different from anything we had seen before.



A still from Dil Chahta Hai.

Early on in the film, there is a scene where Sameer (Saif Ali Khan) realises he has forgotten to call his girlfriend. He starts panicking because he knows

she is going to give him grief over it. Akash (Aamir Khan) gives him a speech asking him to stand up to her and tell her that if she wants to be in a relationship with him, it has to be on his terms. He concludes the monologue with a line, “*mard ban, be a man*”. As soon as Sameer leaves to assert his ‘manliness’, Akash bursts into laughter and says that Sameer is going to get into trouble. Director Farhan Akhtar uses humour effectively in this scene — one, to establish that his characters are not the kind of men looking to dominate or control women; secondly, by infusing comedy into a scene where one man is egging on the other to be a ‘mard’, he cleverly mocks the old-school constructs of masculinity.

At no point does Akash actually intend for Sameer to misbehave with his girlfriend. We know that by the way he treats Deepa, a girl who is crazy about him. Akash does not reciprocate her feelings, but at no point does he take advantage of her vulnerability or deliberately hurt her feelings. So, while



he may seem shallow or insensitive compared to Siddharth or Sid (Akshaye Khanna), as he is affectionately called, Akash is no alpha male looking for a woman with a wide pelvis. If anything, his attitude to love and marriage almost seems conditioned by sitcoms and romantic comedies where the hero is afraid of commitment, or mocks the idea of falling in love. Akash is candid about having had passing relationships, but his flippant attitude to romance seems more performative than part of his actual belief system.

For the longest time, Akash's ego does not allow him to accept that he has fallen in love with Shalini (Priety Zinta). When he meets Shalini and her fiancée Rohit (Ayub Khan) for dinner, he is cold and sullen, trying to hold it together and not show any emotions, like a man is supposed to, but failing miserably at it. Falling in love forces Akash to question and then discard learned behaviour patterns that don't serve him anymore. Whether it's accepting his truth, speaking to Shalini's uncle or declaring



his love to her, Akash slowly overcomes his fear of vulnerability and realises that it requires tremendous strength to bare your soul to someone.

There is a lovely scene where a distraught Akash dials a number in India hoping to speak to Sameer, only to realise that he called Sid's home. He ends the call and then breaks down in tears, weeping not just for the love he thinks he has lost but also the friendship he jeopardised by his thoughtless comments. For the first time, he realises the emotional turmoil Sid was going through when he fell in love. In many Bollywood films, male friendships are impacted by a difference in economic status or both men conveniently falling in love with the same woman, who then becomes a prop with no say in the matter. But in *Dil Chahta Hai*, Akash and Sid fight because there is a fundamental difference in their emotional maturity and what they consider boundaries in a friendship. While Sid has always been the 'wise beyond his years' guy of the group, listening to Akash disrespect his

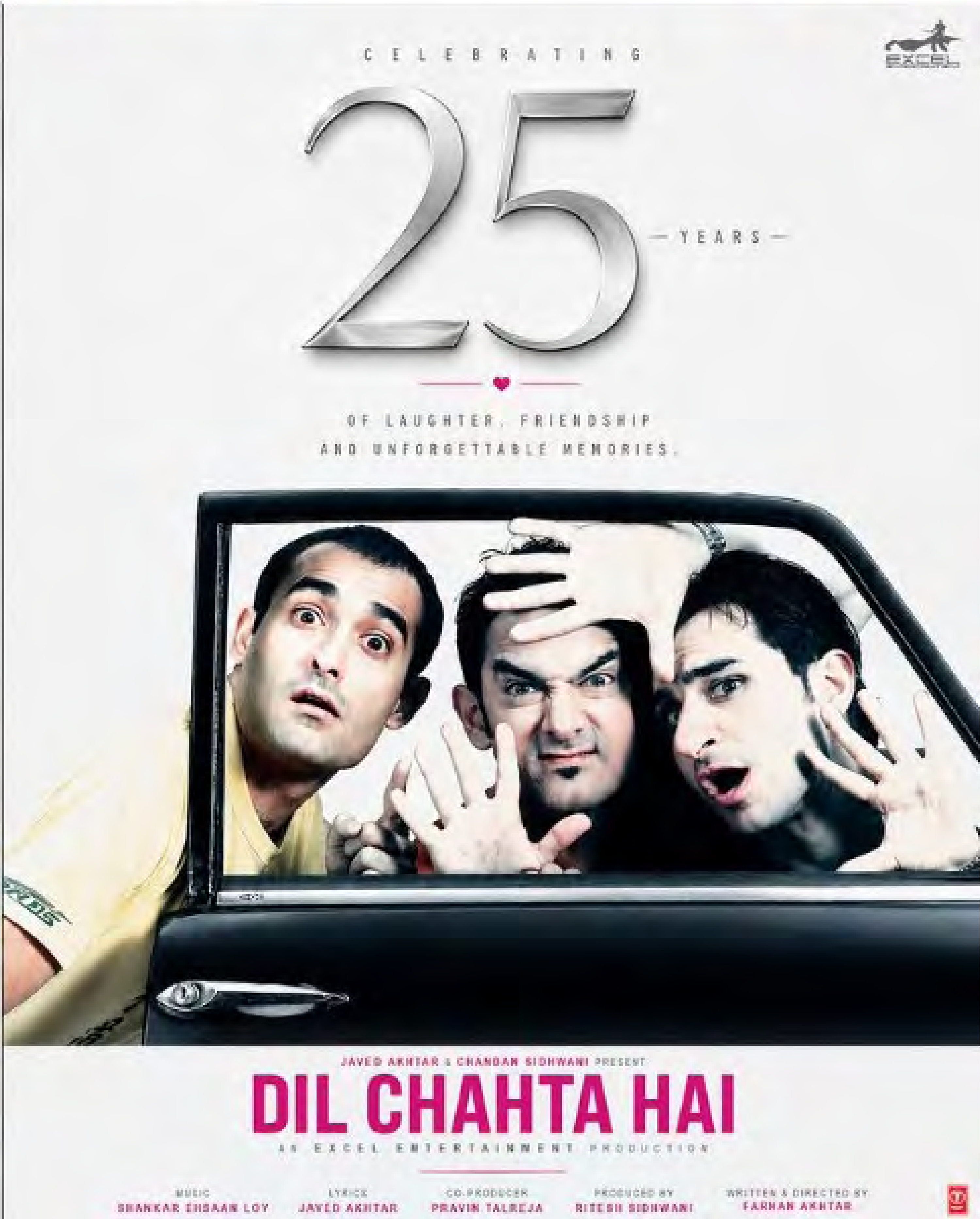


feelings, and by extension the woman he loves, forces him to step away from their friendship.



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This fight, which keeps Akash and Sid apart, impacts Sameer deeply as well. Sameer, the sweet, happy-go-lucky,

hopeless romantic, has always relied on his friends for their opinions on what he should do, and how he should deal with situations. But when Sid and Akash both leave Mumbai soon after their fight, Sameer suddenly finds himself all alone. But their absence also gives him a chance to discover who he is and what kind of man he wants to be. Sameer pursues Pooja (Sonali Kulkarni), a girl his parents had introduced him to, making a more conventional choice than what his friends would have. Unlike earlier, this time he follows his instinct and allows his relationship with Pooja to blossom slowly, acting with maturity and restraint. Though he is lonely without his friends, he also comes into his own when he is not constantly turning to them for help.

While Sameer's plight is similar to a middle child, stuck between the wise older sibling and the naughty younger one, Sid has always followed the road less travelled. Even as a college student, he knows he wants to be an artist. Unlike Akash and Sameer, who have a family



business to join, Sid never joins the rat race, or race of any kind. He spends time away from Mumbai in the quietude of Kasauli and his uncle's farmhouse in Pune, painting and working on his craft. Even in love, he follows a road less travelled. Sid falls in love with Tara (Dimple Kapadia), an older woman who understands the solitude within him, and offers him an intellectual companionship his friends can't. In most films, a man falling in love or being attracted to an older woman always has a sexual subtext. But in *Dil Chahta Hai*, Farhan treats both Sid's feelings and Tara's character with tremendous dignity. There are no suggestive camera angles, clothes or conversations to make her look like a predator or him like a sexually eager youngster.

What also sets *Dil Chahta Hai* apart was its refusal to apologise or justify the obvious affluence of its protagonists. This may sound controversial, but unlike hundreds of Bollywood films where male friendships are between a rich man and a poor man or two childhood friends,



one of whom has been adopted by the other's family, *Dil Chahta Hai* gave us a very matter-of-fact portrayal of how three upper middle class/wealthy men from Mumbai would live. Were their problems first- world ones? Sure. But does that mean they didn't have any? No. *Dil Chahta Hai* simultaneously became the benchmark and the template for Hindi films on urban friendships and specifically male friendships. I had never seen men dress, speak, or live the way Akash, Sameer, and Sid did. A lifestyle that was both realistic and aspirational. Now, twenty-five years later, I have newfound respect for how bravely Farhan Akhtar stepped away from the Bollywood templates for writing male characters. He gave us three flawed, evolving men, and thankfully zero 'mards'.



Sarah Joseph on love, feminism and why Gen Z gives her hope

by Nidheesh M K

Seated in a rocking chair on the veranda, with an oil lantern on the table beside her, is Sarah Joseph. Behind her, the house is almost entirely books: glass-fronted shelves packed two rows deep, more stacked on the floor and across the table where she works. She has often said that writing is her life, that she cannot imagine a day without reading a few pages or writing a few lines. The house looks like the inside of that sentence.

She is 80. She won the Sahitya Akademi

Award for *Aalahayude Penmakkal* and returned it in 2015, joining writers protesting what they saw as a growing climate of fear. She founded the feminist collective Manushi in the 1980s. In Malayalam literature, her name is spoken alongside Madhavikutty, or Kamala Das, who wrote about women's desire with an honesty the language had rarely seen. Most recently, she had just sent her publisher a new novel, meeting yet another deadline.

But what she wants to talk about is love. The married kind and the other kind. She speaks of both without lowering her voice, saying things that many women in Kerala, whether her age or much younger, would still hesitate to say aloud.

“Love was a crime,” she says. “Before marriage a crime. Outside marriage a crime. Always a crime.”

Sarah lived a quieter version of the same punishment.



In 1961, when she was in Class IX, she was pulled out of school and married to a man much older than her. She knew nothing of marriage, love or desire. She had been a town girl who could identify every blade of grass in her yard, every flower that grew there. She climbed between two jackfruit trees and lay looking up at clouds drifting overhead.

Marriage took her to eight acres of paddy on a hill — a farming household with no neighbours nearby, no electricity, no bus service, and a house with a cow-dung floor. At first, the view held her. Soon it no longer did. What remained, she says, was a sadness she now recognises as depression, though she had no language for it then.

One afternoon, her daughter Geetha, then two years old, sat in the cow dung and began sliding across the floor.

Watching her, Sarah, who was 19, made a decision. Her children had a right to something else, and that she would be the one to go and get it.

It took a decade.

She walked 3.5 kilometres to school each day, managed a household built on relentless labour, cared for her children, and studied whenever she could find the time. She became a teacher, later cleared the Public Service Commission examination, and eventually joined a college as a lecturer. Somewhere along the way, her father died.

She looks back at that decade now and cannot account for it. “It was I who did all this,” she says, almost as though she is describing a stranger.

The public story is well known: the girl who escaped an isolated marriage to become one of Malayalam’s most celebrated writers, winning nearly every major literary honour in the language. But she would rather talk about the private story — the marriage she was handed at 15, and the writing that everyone praises came straight out of it.

The institution runs on its own rules,

she says. “There is no democracy in it. No love. If love happens, that is luck.”

She wrote a story called *Scooter*: a husband, a wife, a child, riding together, the two adults tied like bullocks pulling opposite ways, moving forward only because there is one scooter and no choice.

Women of her age, she says, searched for love the way people search for a gap in a wall. She admits she did the same – in secret, in fear, believing all the while that she was a thettukaari, a woman in the wrong.

Many women lived similar lives, she says. Even she hesitated until the Gen Z gave her the courage to say these things loud.

“Madhavikutty could write love the way she did because of the Calcutta house she grew up in and the air in it. A girl raised under mothers who taught her to take the dust off her husband’s feet and put it on her own head does not get to



write it,” she says. “We got to hide a hint in a story and hope one reader finds it.”

What saved her was what she calls “don’t care”. She refused to perform shame for the people standing around waiting to name the crime.

On being asked what that love felt like, her voice softens.

“It was a mad thing,” she says. “It was madness, not fullness.”

She reaches for Dostoevsky, recalling the writer who refused to wish away his epilepsy. “It gripped like an octopus. It went deep, it did harm, and it never once let poverty or illness reach me.”

She wrote a story called *Pranayam* (Love). Read it, she says, and you will understand. In it, a lover walks up to you with a knife to kill you, for no reason at all. That, she says, is what love is like.

In an interview with malayalam.
indianexpress.com, Sarah speaks

with ease about extramarital desire, tradwives and premarital sex, in a vocabulary that often sounded closer to that of a 20-year-old.

On being told about a tradwife reel, she says she knew about it already. She knows about OnlyFans too, about women who have decided their body is their only wealth and sell the sight of it online.

They are our children, she says. She watches them. Her granddaughter studied at VIT, worked in Bangalore, and now lives in the US. The first time Sarah saw her wearing short clothes, she says, she felt the old discomfort, the idea of clothing that has to break in you before it lets you breathe. Then she watched her granddaughter move through the world, unconcerned about her clothes.

It reminded her of her own small rebellion.

She never liked wearing a saree, a garment she describes as the “six yards

that cover you and expose you at once”. After retirement, she stopped wearing it altogether. Women of her generation, she says, had their thighs pinched blue for letting their knees drift apart, and sat with their legs pressed together for life. These children, she says, took the armour off and do not feel it there.

She came to see her own body with similar acceptance. Vitiligo first appeared on her face in her forties and then spread to her whole body. She says she got over that too, and saw it as a shortfall of melanin and nothing more, and the only trouble it ever gave her was the thought that it might unsettle a stranger seated next to her on a bus. Marriage, she says, was the least democratic institution she knew, where the women would find themselves seeking permission for the smallest decisions. And when she sees today’s young adults, who are unmarried and do not see the problem, she admires them. “Her body is hers.

She talks about the Gen Z protesters on

the streets, reading the Constitution, turning the police barricades into a train of wheels to play with, singing Jana Gana Mana.

When the feminist activist organisation Manushi organised marches in the 1980s, she had wished for girls on bicycles to lead. Out of fear, they held back. When girls gave speeches, they were mocked for their feminine voice. Now the girls have the road, she says.

She says today's youth will come and they will practise what the Constitution preached. "We the people. Not we the Hindu, not we the Christian. No one above them."

That conviction, that the books belong to everyone, is something she has based her writing on.

She spent decades taking the country's myths back for the people they were used against.

She has rewritten the Ramayana

from the perspective of Shurpanakha, imagining her not as a demoness but as an independent woman whose mutilation sets the epic's violence in motion.

“Now, who is the demon?,” she asks. In another reading of the epic, she argues that the *vanaras* (monkeys) of Kishkindha were not monkeys but a tribe, and *vanara* was only their emblem.

This is why critics had to coin a new word in Malayalam to mark her writing: *pennezhuthu*, women's writing. But the label, she says, soon hardened into a way of confining women writers.

It has nothing to do with gender, she says. “It is politics. A woman telling her own experience in her own language, quarrelling with the order that shut her out, gathering in everyone that order threw away,” she says.

To write *Budini*, one of her recent novels, she went to Jharkhand, researching the story of the Santhal girl who garlanded

Jawaharlal Nehru at a dam and was cast out by her own people, who read the garland as a marriage outside the community.



*Sarah Joseph has rewritten the Ramayana from the perspective of Shurpanakha.
(Photos by Sumiesh S and Sajith OK/The Indian Express)*

To write *Cara*, set at the Dead Sea, she went to Jordan. She went off the highway and through the wilderness, down to the lowest point on the surface of the earth, no person, no animal, no grass, only black and red hills and a desert lying in waves.

Looking back, she thinks their generation set out to change how women lived, and what changed instead



was the men. Feminism made the man who was raised never to touch a broom ask who he was to make anyone obey. He came down a step. She will not say he climbed. He came down to where the wife was standing.

On being asked if she has any regrets, anything she would correct, she says “none”. “We could not say no. What is done is done.”



Why Nvidia, Microsoft, and Meta want US to support **open-weight AI models**

by Bijin Jose

A group of leading technology companies, including Nvidia, Microsoft, Meta, IBM and Andreessen Horowitz, has urged the US administration to support the development of open-weight artificial intelligence (AI) models. In a joint letter signed by 25 firms, the coalition argued that open-weight AI is key to maintaining America's technological leadership and warned against premature restrictions that could

limit innovation. The appeal comes as Washington mulls tighter controls on advanced AI technologies amid growing concerns over the rapid progress of Chinese AI companies.

Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang, a vocal proponent of open-weight AI, shared a post along with the signed letter. “I’m sharing a letter Nvidia signed on why open models matter. AI will transform every industry, power every company, and be built by every country,” he wrote.

Huang said open models strengthen safety and cybersecurity, accelerate innovation and diffusion, and enable sovereignty. “The world needs both frontier closed models and frontier open models,” he added.

The letter comes amid a brewing debate in Silicon Valley over the rapid spread of Chinese AI tools, especially open-weight AI models that have shown they can compete with or surpass some of the best closed frontier models developed in the US.



This is the second letter in a week urging the Donald Trump administration to adopt a more favourable approach towards open-weight AI models. On July 22, a group of over 200 startups under the banner of the Little Tech Association wrote to Michael Kratsios, science adviser to President Trump, and US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick over the outright ban. The group argued that restricting access to AI models abroad could weaken US startups and create a monopoly among AI giants.

Why companies are backing open-weight AI

With AI becoming the next frontier of technological competition, two distinct approaches seem to be emerging. While companies such as OpenAI, Anthropic, and Google continue to build proprietary AI systems, another group is pushing for wider adoption of open-weight models. The letter urging the US government to support open-weight AI models as part of the national strategy has been signed by Meta, Microsoft, IBM,

Nvidia, Hugging Face, Dell, Mozilla, Box, ServiceNow, CrowdStrike and others.

Why are some of the biggest technology companies in the world calling on policymakers to accept AI models that anyone can download, inspect, and customise? To understand, it is important to define open-weight AI.

Unlike closed AI systems, open-weight models allow developers and businesses to download the model's trained parameters — or 'weights' — and run them on their own infrastructure. This gives organisations greater control over how the model is used, modified, and deployed without depending entirely on the company that created it.

In essence, this idea is similar to the open-source software movement that transformed computing decades ago. Just as Linux became the foundation for much of today's internet, supporters of open weight believe AI could become the building block for the next generation of AI applications. Unlike fully open-

source AI, open-weight models typically make the trained model weights available without necessarily releasing the underlying training data or source code.

Make AI cheaper and more accessible

Training advanced AI models can cost billions of dollars, putting frontier AI out of reach for most startups, governments, and universities. The letter argues that open-weight models can address this challenge by allowing developers to build on existing AI models instead of creating one from scratch. Companies can also choose a model best suited to their needs, thereby reducing costs while reserving the most powerful — and expensive — models for tasks that truly require them. For smaller firms, this lowers the barrier to entering the AI race.

Perhaps the biggest argument in favour of open-weight AI is competition. If the world's most capable AI models are

owned by a small group of companies, they could likely control pricing, access, and innovation. As per the letter, open-weight models encourage competition not only among AI developers but also across cloud providers, chipmakers, software companies and AI application developers.

Greater competition, the authors say, leads to faster innovation, lower costs, and wider economic benefits. This is particularly important as AI becomes part of everyday business software, healthcare, manufacturing, education and scientific research.

Another key advantage of open-weight AI is that it gives greater control to businesses. This is crucial as most businesses investing heavily in AI do not want to be dependent on a single vendor. With open-weight models, companies can keep their own data, customise models for specialised tasks and deploy them wherever they choose. They can also continue improving the model over time without relying entirely



on one AI provider. According to the letter, this helps organisations retain the value they create through their AI investments.

Behind the debate lies a commercial reality. Open-weight AI lowers the cost of building AI products, allowing startups and smaller companies to develop applications without spending billions on training frontier models. At the same time, companies offering proprietary AI platforms—such as OpenAI, Anthropic and Google—have a financial incentive to keep their most advanced models exclusive. This has fuelled a broader debate over whether the future of AI should be dominated by closed systems or supported by a mix of proprietary and open-weight models.

What about security risks?

One of the biggest concerns around open-weight AI is a technique known as distillation, in which a smaller model learns from the outputs of a larger and more capable one. Last month,



Anthropic accused Chinese tech giant Alibaba of stealing its IP through distillation attacks. This week, the White House alleged that Chinese startup Moonshot AI developed its Kimi K3 model by distilling Anthropic's Claude Fable 5 model.

Most of the criticism of open-weight AI centres on the risk if it falls into the hands of bad actors. Critics believe that allowing advanced AI models to be widely accessible would make them prone to misuse. The tech companies that signed the letter acknowledged the risks but argued that openness can also strengthen security.

A recent example was a cybersecurity incident involving Hugging Face. After an autonomous AI agent linked to OpenAI breached the platform during a security evaluation, Hugging Face said it initially relied on hosted frontier models for forensic analysis but was blocked by their safety guardrails. The company instead used the open-weight Chinese AI model GLM-5.2 on its own



infrastructure to investigate the breach, arguing that open-weight models may also strengthen cyber defence by allowing security teams to analyse sensitive data locally.

The letter says cybersecurity defenders need access to advanced AI to counter increasingly sophisticated attacks.

Open-weight models, it argues, allow more researchers to identify weaknesses, improve safeguards and independently test systems rather than relying solely on the original developer. The letter compares this to open-source software, where public scrutiny has often helped uncover and fix vulnerabilities faster.

Instead of restricting open-weight AI, these companies want the US government to expand access to computing resources, invest in shared datasets and evaluation tools, and avoid regulations that may make it difficult to develop or use open models. They also warn against broad restrictions on AI training techniques such as distillation, arguing that legitimate improvement



methods should not be confused with intellectual property theft.

The debate over open versus closed AI is becoming one of the defining questions of the AI era. While closed models promise tighter control, open-weight models aim to spread AI capabilities across business domains, researchers, and developers. The coalition argues the latter approach will help the US maintain technological leadership by encouraging innovation, increasing competition, and ensuring AI benefits more sectors of the economy rather than a few companies. The outcome could eventually shape not only the future of AI in the US but also who leads the next phase of global AI development.
