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Amritsar to Chandrapore

E. M. Forster & the Massacre

LIFE FOR EDWARDIAN INTELLECTUALS was amazingly free of what Leonard Woolf called the horrible urgency of politics. One event alone, according to Woolf, captured their imagination.

Over the body and fate of one obscure, Jewish captain in the French army, a kind of cosmic conflict went on year after year between the establishment of Church, Army and State on the one side and the small band of intellectuals who fought for truth, reason and justice on the other.

E. M. Forster's most political novel was also to centre upon a trial in which a man narrowly escapes being wrongfully convicted as the result of racial prejudice. But its setting was not France but India; and what was going on in Britain's overseas possessions was of no more concern to the average, well-educated member of the English middle classes in the first quarter of this century than Peter Walsh's Eastern life was of concern to Clarissa Dalloway. Nothing demonstrates this unconcern more strikingly than the deafening silence with which English intellectuals in 1919 and 1920 greeted what Forster called the public infamy of Amritsar.

Events in India at the time require perhaps a brief recapitulation. The constitutional reforms initiated by the Montagu Declaration of August, 1917, had done little to meet popular political demands. After the Armistice the Raj, alarmed at what it considered "revolutionary" crimes, sought to perpetuate its wartime curbs on civil rights by the notorious Rowlatt Acts, which were passed early in 1919. Gandhi met this new move of the Raj with his own innovation, *Satyagraha*, or civil disobedience. A *hartal* organised for 10 April passed off for the most part without violence. But when Gandhi was prevented from entering the Punjab, riots broke out in several towns of the province. In Amritsar, where the *hartal* had been uneventful, the arrest of two pro-Gandhi doctors on the 10th gave rise to serious rioting, in which five European men were killed. General Dyer took over control of the town

which remained quiet for the next two days. Then on the 13th a large crowd gathered in the public space known as the Jallianwala Bagh. Dyer arrived with a column mainly of Gurkhas whom he ordered to open fire. When they withdrew they left 379 men and boys dead or dying, and an uncalculated number of wounded.

For those who believed that Dyer's action put an end to an incipient revolt, this was the Amritsar Affair. Others, appalled by the facts that many people in the square had not heard the proclamation against assemblies (some had merely come to town for a religious festival), that no warning to disperse was given, that escape from the square was almost impossible, and that the firing continued for ten minutes, called it the Amritsar Massacre. The Hunter Committee, appointed six months later to look into the Punjab disorders, censured Dyer's action, and its censure was upheld by the Secretary of State for India. But Dyer had his impassioned defenders in the Commons, and the Lords passed a motion deploring the censure. Public sympathy for Dyer ran high; a consolatory fund was opened and quickly reached £28,000.

Forster's Wilcoxes probably contributed generously; but what were the Schlegels doing? Official censorship has been blamed for their silence. Certainly before the Hunter Committee report in May 1920, few details of the rising reached English newspapers. Yet *The Times* of 19 April 1919 carried a report that "At Amritsar, on April 13, the mob defied the proclamation forbidding public meetings. Firing ensued, and 200 casualties occurred." And the day's leading article referred to the shootings, though in the belief that they were directed against an open revolt. Even though the figure of those killed was short of the facts, it was a good deal in excess of, say, the number killed on a comparable occasion forty years later at Sharpeville. One has to conclude that in 1919 even the most sensitive and scrupulous readers of *The Times* paid scant attention to what was being done in their name in the Punjab.

E. M. Forster was an honourable exception to this general indifference. Thanks to his many Indian contacts and his recent experience in Egypt of how race relations could be damaged by the abuse of power, he was well aware of the significance of the massacre. His friend Malcolm Darling, a liberal-minded administrator, was actually in the Punjab at the time; and in the novel, Fielding, half-in and half-out of white officialdom, has a name which portmanteaus "Darling" and "Forster." Though Forster's published writings contain only one reference to the massacre, *A Passage to India*, begun in 1913 but recast and completed after Forster's 1921 visit, abounds in echoes of the Punjab troubles.

THE CHANDRAPORE AFFAIR, like the Amritsar one, takes place at the hottest time of year, when the disturbances to be expected at a current religious festival have rendered the European community edgy. Trouble starts with the arrest of a local doctor, as it had begun in Amritsar with the arrest of two doctors. Before Aziz's trial, the Sweepers—Gandhi's Untouchables—go on strike. From the Civil Lines, a *hartal* was indistinguishable from a strike, and assuming this viewpoint Forster at one stage wrote: "Sweepers were acquiring racial solidarity. Something was behind the people, some new and insolent force." Fielding's support for Aziz earns for him the sort of disapproval lavished by the real "Anglo-Indians" of the time upon B. G. Horniman, a close associate of Gandhi, who wrote the first independent account of the Amritsar troubles, which Forster could have read in 1921. Horniman was the editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*, and in the manuscript of the novel Fielding, faced with unemployment, considers journalism as a possible means to his staying on in India.

Most interesting of all the parallels is that between Adela Quested's situation in the book and that of Marcella Sherwood in real life. (Again names are significant. Adela acquired her unusual first name at a late stage in the book's composition.) Miss Sherwood was a missionary teacher at Amritsar and so, like Adela, only on the fringe of English official society. In the disturbances of 10 April she was set upon by the mob and left for dead. The excessive collapse of Adela Quested, so surprising for a tough "advanced" young woman, is perhaps the awkward result of Forster's attempt to reproduce a situation, like Miss Sherwood's, which would give rise to a hysterical desire for revenge on the part of the white community. Their emotions fanned by rumours that Adela's life is in the balance, members of the Chandrapore Club regret (to quote another manuscript passage) "the

good old days . . . when an Englishman who was wronged could go out and shoot right and left until his honour felt satisfied and no questions be asked afterwards." General Dyer's extreme emotional response to the attack on Miss Sherwood, and the influence on his behaviour in the Jallianwalla Bagh of his apprehensions about the white women in Amritsar, came out clearly at the enquiry. The infamous "crawling order" enforced in the street where Miss Sherwood had been attacked finds an echo in Mrs Turton's outburst: "Why, they ought to crawl from here to the caves on their hands and knees whenever an Englishwoman's in sight"; while English popular reactions to Dyer's disgrace were very much in accord with the cry of an unnamed character at the courthouse: "There's not such a thing as cruelty after a thing like this."

The one person who seems to have retained a sane view of the incident was Miss Sherwood herself. In spite of the fact that she had been subject to very real injury, she behaved with the generosity and regard for the truth that mark Adela's conduct, once her echo has been exorcised. She refused government compensation for her injuries. In December 1919 she wrote a letter to *The Times* in which she pointed out that she owed her survival to her rescue by parents of her Indian pupils. She also put right some misreporting of an attack on a hospital similar to the one Forster makes the culminating point of the riot in *A Passage to India*: "A mob went to the Zenana Mission Hospital also with intent to burn it, but was harangued by Hindu and Mahomedan neighbours, and desisted." This incident becomes the clowning of Dr Panna Lal and the speech-making of the Nawab outside the Minto Hospital; in themselves an indication of the serio-comic handling of civic disorders in the novel.

The Marabar Caves had been a terrible strain on the local administration; they altered a good many lives and wrecked several careers, but they did not break up a continent or even dislocate a district.

The troops, to the disappointment of the very stupid subaltern, are not called out, and Dr Aziz does not suffer the fate so many suffered in the Punjab, transportation to the Andaman Islands. In the manuscript there is one victim of the riot following the trial—"a punkah wallah"—but Forster wisely dropped this notion. The irony was too neat, and even one "real" casualty would have robbed the Chandrapore affair of its triviality.

Trivial as it is in itself, the Chandrapore affair has intangible but deeply serious consequences. Even before the end of the Caves section of the book the Indians have closed ranks in a Hindu-Muslim entente, and their attitude to the British

has hardened. The Nawab Bahadur gives up his Imperial title. Hamidullah, whose agreeable good sense in the first part of the book suggests that he was modelled on Forster's friend Syed Ross Masood, now turns on Ronny and Adela with savage contempt. Aziz, though "without natural affection for the land of his birth", becomes a nationalist and plans to leave British India. These are exactly the ways Indian intellectuals reacted to the massacre and its aftermath. Dyer's exoneration at the hands of the Lords caused Rabindranath Tagore to write home to India:

The unashamed condonation of brutality expressed in their speeches and echoed in their newspapers is ugly in its frightfulness. . . . The late events have conclusively proved that our true salvation lies in our own hands.

He himself returned his knighthood to the Palace. Jawaharlal Nehru, who had hitherto kept aloof from Congress, found himself shortly after the massacre in a railway carriage with a group of British officers who were jubilant over Dyer's action. From that day on he threw in his lot with Congress. The years that followed were a time of close Muslim-Hindu accord within the Congress party. This political hardening and withdrawal was very evident to Forster when he returned to India in 1921; the title of an article he then wrote for *The Nation*, "Too Late", is repeated in the closing chapter of the novel: "Clear out, all you Turtons and Burtons. We wanted to know you ten years back—now it's too late."

WHEN FORSTER began his Indian novel after his pre-war visit, he did not know quite what crisis was to centre round the Marabar Caves. Details of the Amritsar massacre helped to give that crisis its ultimate form. But does this linking of fact with fiction in any way contribute to our understanding and evaluation of *A Passage to India* as a novel? In defiance of a strict formalism, I would maintain that it does. It can help us to decide between the view that the tragic-comedy of race contacts bears scant relationship to the "other world" explored by Mrs Moore and Professor Godbole, and the contrary view held by Lowes Dickinson that it is indeed a novel in which the surface is in touch with the depths:

Whereas in your other books your kind of double vision squints—this world, and a world or worlds behind—here it all comes together.

The case of *Rex v. Aziz* gives us a good opportunity to look at this relationship of surface and depths. Mr Das refuses to listen to speculations about the evidence that might have been given by the elder of the two ladies who visited the Marabar Caves.

"An extraneous element is being introduced into the case", said the Magistrate. "I must repeat that as a witness Mrs Moore does not exist. Neither you, Mr Amritrao, nor Mr McBryde, you, have any right to surmise what that lady would have said. She is not here, and consequently she can say nothing."

Mr Das is emphatic because he is upholding a principle of justice which the Turtons and Burtons had recently put into jeopardy. The second Rowlatt Act allowed courts (I quote Horniman's summary) "to accept in evidence, in certain circumstances, the recorded statements of persons dead or missing or otherwise incapable of giving evidence, without [their] having been subject to the test of cross-examination". In the storm of protest roused by this and other provisions of the Act (never, in the event, enforced) Indians repeatedly invoked the rational principles of earlier British rule against the prejudices of the newer imperialism. It was the same kind of confrontation as had taken place in the 1880s when the Ilbert Act, allowing Indians to try cases involving Europeans, aroused bitter resentment among the English community; and this too is echoed in the novel when the ladies of Chandrapore sent a telegram to the Lieutenant Governor's wife protesting against Das presiding over the trial. Ronny Heaslop cannot quite approve of this move, because he likes to think that his old Das is all right. So, in a rather different sense from Ronny's, he is; and never more so than when he here rejects the distortion of the judicial process implicit in the second Rowlatt Act.

But in another sense, Mr Das is all wrong. It is true Mrs Moore is not "there"; she has left India and, we subsequently discover, she has been buried at sea. But absence, as Professor Godbole has already insisted, implies presence: "absence is not non-existence, and we are therefore entitled to repeat, 'Come, come, come, come.'" When Mahmoud Ali's hysteria causes Mrs Moore's name to "burst on the court like a whirlwind", the crowd outside takes up the "invocation" with its rhythmic chants of *Essmiss Essmoor*. Then, in the silence of the whirlwind, the still small voice of truth speaks through Adela, as the delusion of her prepared "information" yields to her vision of the picnic *sub specie aeternitatis*. She withdraws the charge, and Aziz is saved. Mrs Moore has given her evidence.

There is no shying away from this being, if not an actual miracle, at least an intrusion of the numinous. For a miracle is needed to save Aziz; the fair-mindedness, rectitude, intelligence and moral courage of Mr Das do not suffice against the terrible persistence of Adela's echo. Already when he had visited India in 1912 to 1913, Forster had felt how frail were the arches of good race relations raised against the oppressive

Indian sky. Things had been easier in the days of the Nabobs, of Macaulay, of the Aryan Samaj, but since the 'eighties officials like McBryde—the best of a bad bunch in the novel—had taken the Mutiny records for their Bible, rather than the Bhagavad Gita. And in 1919 Forster felt the powerlessness of the liberal virtues in the face of an escalation of violence such as occurred at Amritsar. The arrests of two doctors led to five European deaths and a brutal attack on Miss Sherwood; these in their turn led to nearly four hundred Indian deaths. So in *A Passage to India* the paper tigers of Mohurram generate a fear that gives scope to the callousness of Callendar, which unleashes a savagery in the crowd—"the spirit of evil again strode abroad". At the end of the Caves section, Fielding reflects sombrely among the broken arches of destroyed friendships:

"It is no good," he thought, as he returned past the mosque, "we all build upon sand; and the more modern the country gets, the worse'll be the crash. In the old eighteenth century, when cruelty and injustice raged, an invisible power repaired their ravages. Everything echoes now; there's no stopping the echo. The original sound may be harmless, but the echo is always evil." This reflection about an echo lay at the verge of Fielding's mind. He could never develop it. It belonged to the universe that he had missed or rejected. And the mosque missed it too. Like himself, those shallow arcades provided but a limited asylum.

The universe to which Fielding and Aziz belong is the world of moral and aesthetic discriminations. Official responsibilities compel discrimination: Fielding, by virtue of his position as Principal, has to find out if the Russell's Viper was brought into the college by a student, just as Ronny, early in the novel, has to find out if a Pathan has committed rape. And because of this commonsense recognition that there are human agents of evil, Fielding—to the rage of Hamidullah—inclines to blame the guide for the assault on Adela. Aziz, for his passionate part, has to invent enemies ("a black cobra, very venomous") to reinforce his friendships. His possessiveness of Fielding is exclusive. Fielding must not be kind to the "treacherous harridan" Adela, if he is to remain Aziz's friend. "We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing."

MRS MOORE, who lives in the other universe, that of the religious consciousness, is indeed left for a time with nothing, but she knows that this kind of evil, a vision of a world from which God is absent, is less deadly than the echo which stimulates Adela's racial fear and makes her see Aziz as evil personified. In 1919, Forster was ponder-

ing the Alexandrian Neo-Platonists for whom the good was not something to be carved out of life by discrimination, but a transforming vision whereby a world from which God had appeared to be absent became filled with his presence. At the time that the reverberations of the Amritsar disaster confronted him with meaningless, gratuitous evil (in the way that Hiroshima and Belsen did a later generation) he may have remembered the reactions of his fellow-traveller in 1912, Lowes Dickinson, to Hindu mysticism:

Is this all comprehensive Hinduism, this universal toleration, this refusal to recognise ultimate antagonisms, this "mush" in a word, as my friends would dub it—is this, after all, the truest and profoundest vision?

So in the "Caves" section Fielding, for whom a mystery is a muddle, is exasperated by Godbole's "mush"—"When evil occurs it expresses the whole of the universe. Similarly when good occurs"—yet is driven, at the end of his spiritual tether, to acknowledge that the muddle may after all be a mystery; a transforming and sacramental vision remains possible.

Thus it came about that the philosophical thought of the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior and the Gokul Ashtami ceremony in which Forster in 1921 participated as the Maharajah's Private Secretary supplied the completion of the book's design through the "Temple" section. Godbole's moment of illumination evokes afresh the presence of Esmis Esmoor to heal, though only for a time, the rifts made by the Marabar Caves affair. As a counterpoise to the desolation of the Caves section, the Maharajah's quirky philosophy was rather lightweight, and if anywhere a scrap of justification could be found for Forster's misgiving, "This is a failure", it would lie here. If only Forster's Anglo-Indian and Indian friends at the time had not regarded Gandhi as a bogeyman, Forster might have discovered in Gandhi's thought an essentially Indian way of overcoming the echo; and his dismissal of nationalist sentiment might have been less facile. But in 1921 that was too much to ask.

MOSQUE, CAVES, TEMPLE: India in 1912, the Amritsar affair and its aftermath, Dewas State Senior in 1921. The correspondences between Forster's experiences and his novel are not of course quite as neat as this, but they are close enough to suggest that news of the Amritsar Massacre gave Forster much more than some details of the Marabar Caves affair. Renewing as it did the trauma of the War itself, it supplied the pivotal experience of Forster's last novel, and gave the book its final form.



Column

I MAKE NO EXCUSE for returning to the subject of Watergate, even though a monthly columnist like myself is necessarily left far behind in the wake of events, and even though those events are amply covered day by day in the press and on television. But by now we perhaps already know enough to form some general picture of what Watergate means and some general hypothesis of what actually happened, and it is doubtful if any further revelations, however startling they may be in detail, will substantially change what we already know. *The Times* (of London) indeed believes that, with Mr Mitchell's testimony and his flat denial that President Nixon either knew anything about Watergate or the attempt to cover it up, the Watergate Saga has reached and passed its climax and all that remains is for Americans to try and repair the damage that has been done.

It took a long time for this stage to be reached, just as it took a long time for the Dreyfus case to develop into *L'Affaire* which convulsed the whole of France. When the news of the raid on the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee was first published, it seemed at first a minor episode in American domestic politics and certainly had little or no effect on the Presidential election campaign which was then in progress. President Nixon lost no votes by it and Senator McGovern tried in vain to make it an election issue. By now it would probably have been forgotten, if it had not been for the nagging enquiries of the *Washington Post*, which has played something of the same part in Watergate as Clemenceau's *L'Aurore* did in the Dreyfus case.

So from a minor incident, Watergate grew into a scandal, but still a purely and characteristically American scandal, which foreigners might follow with fascination, together with a certain smug feeling of self-satisfaction that such things are possible "only in America"; but certainly with no sense that they might be affected by it. For a time it even appeared that President Nixon might emerge from the Affair politically unscathed, his achievements in Viet Nam, in Moscow, and Peking weighing more in the balance than any minor peccadilloes committed by over-enthusiastic assistants in their zeal to secure his re-election.

A third stage in the Affair was reached with the opening of the Senate committee's hearings, which have undoubtedly increased public suspi-

cion of the part played by the President and emphasised the ugly dilemma with which he is faced; that if he knew about Watergate and its aftermath, he had betrayed his trust as President, and if he did not, he was not competent to be President. Mr Nixon's own efforts to face this dilemma did nothing to restore public confidence in him; and their effect has hardly been improved by his daughter's assurances that Daddy is a wonderful President and a great American. There was a time, during the 1930s, when opponents of President Roosevelt used to denounce the iniquities of "the sick man in the White House"; but today President Nixon is, politically speaking, a sicker man than President Roosevelt ever was, and his sickness threatens to infect the entire government of the United States.

And with this one might say that the Affair has reached a fourth stage, with the realisation, abroad as well as at home, that Watergate may for some time to come deprive the United States government of the possibility of effective political action, at a time when the most urgent problems are pressing for a solution. This is a prospect which brings no comfort even to Mr Nixon's bitterest enemies, unless they also happen to be enemies of the United States, while her friends and allies can only contemplate it with dismay. Even the most cautious financial commentators have agreed that Watergate made a significant contribution to the recent fall in the value of the dollar and the accompanying fall in sterling. As we watch the Senate hearings unfold on television, we now have the uneasy feeling that the testimony of Mr Mitchell or Mr Ehrlichman or Mr Haldeman or any of the Christian Science Mafia which Mr Nixon has organised in the White House will have an effect on the future not only of Americans but of ourselves.

HOW HAVE AMERICANS reacted to the situation created by Watergate? One of the most striking expressions of the feelings of uneasiness and apprehension with which they are afflicted is to be found in a recent column by Stewart Alsop in *Newsweek*. Mr Alsop was discussing the possibilities which the future held for Mr Nixon and it was noticeable that he took it for granted that none of them was likely to be very agreeable. One of them was impeachment; he ruled this out because it "could tear the country apart like no event since the Civil War", and create a conflict which would be even more disastrous if impeachment failed to secure the necessary two-thirds majority in the Senate. Most observers would by now probably agree with this view of Mr Alsop's, not because of any firm belief in Mr Nixon's innocence, but because