

“Subjects,” “Liberty,” and “Equity”: Queen Victoria’s Proclamations and Bengali Writers

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ON a blazing afternoon in the first week of May 2012, the U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton pulled up at the Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata.¹ Trailing her heavy security detail, Secretary Clinton waved to the penned-in photographers as she went up the elegant marble steps, a formal wave laced with a charming, albeit somewhat rehearsed, smile. She stepped inside the circular Queen’s Hall, gazed up at the queen’s freestanding statue sculpted by Sir Thomas Brock, standing in full regalia right under the main dome filtering in muted light through a circular stained-glass window. Admiration over, she started looking around. Secretary Clinton picked out what she wished explained, a marble plaque that had lines from the queen’s message sent to the Proclamation Durbar of January 1, 1877, held in Delhi shortly after she assumed the title of empress of India. The inscription was in English (there were Persian and Hindustani versions in the hall too), and Secretary Clinton stopped at the sentence that read:

We trust that the present occasion may tend to unite in bonds of close affection ourselves and our subjects; that from the highest to the humblest, all may feel that under our rule the great principles of liberty, equity, and justice are secured to them; and to promote their happiness, to add to their prosperity, and advance their welfare, are the ever present aims and objects of our Empire.²

I chanced to be accompanying the guest, and thought I detected an amused smile playing on the secretary of state’s lips. “‘Liberty’ and ‘equity’ seem to sort oddly with subjection,” I ventured, whereupon I heard a muffled laugh from behind me. It was the U.S. ambassador to India, Nancy Jo Powell, who looked more amused than I had reason to expect. The remark was not particularly amusing, but our audience was American, and the United States had been a republic long before it

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was a democracy with full adult franchise. The legatees of constitutional liberalism in Britain, on the contrary, were yet to be full citizens of a republic.

A state visit is a solemn affair, and I had to desist from carrying on. One could have said that in 1876–77 the Deccan plateau was being starved to death by the British policy of exporting grain out of India. An estimated 320,000 tons of food-grain were shipped out in 1875, a year prior to the great Madras Famine, which lasted until 1878 and killed a chilling number of the queen’s Indian subjects, estimates varying from six to nine million.³ The government of Bombay did not suspend collection of enhanced revenue during the drought years, sparking off the so-called “Deccan Riots,” or the 1875 revolt of Kunbi peasants and Koli fishermen.⁴ The timing of the fancy Durbar, though not graced by the queen in person, was no sign of the imperial aims of prosperity and welfare of her Indian subjects, now united in bonds of “close affection” to their empress.

The British government in India made a habit of getting the timing of its displays of royal pomp wrong. Victoria died in January 1901. Two years later Lord Curzon convened the Delhi Durbar to mark the coronation of Edward VII and Alexandra of Denmark as emperor and empress of India. There were calibrated displays of opulence—the Indo-Saracenic amphitheater designed by Swinton Jacob, the grand entry of canopied dignitaries astride gorgeously draped elephants, an art exhibition, sports tournaments, a jewelry court, balls, buffets, and spectacular shows.⁵ The Durbar came hard on the heels of the famine and epidemic of the El Niño years of 1899–1900.⁶ But people’s misery did not deter powerful Indian subjects from contributing to the show and lavishing gifts on the rulers.⁷ The sycophancy of rich Indians at such events was attacked in Rabindranath Tagore’s scathing 1902 essay “Atyukti” (“Exaggeration”) in which he states bluntly that the Durbar coming up in Delhi would be a deceitful species of overstatement. As for Indians, if they preferred habitual begging at the door of their royal masters to assuming responsibility for bettering their own lot, then, Rabindranath prayed, let famines and epidemics swiftly descend on the land, and do Indians the favor of wiping them off the face of the earth. So concluded the angry essay by the grandson of the fabulously wealthy entrepreneur Dwarkanath Tagore, Victoria’s clever “Brahmin” whose displays of generosity earned him the nickname of the “Prince.”⁸ Unseasonable shows of British imperial power were not restricted to India. Between 1845 and 1879, Ireland saw some of the worst famines in its history. It led the republican leader

Maud Gonne to describe Victoria as the “famine queen” in a 1900 essay when the queen was visiting Dublin.⁹

Our American guests at the Victoria Memorial Hall were visibly tickled by the text of the queen’s message sent to the Proclamation Durbar, but I could not honestly pretend that the memorial was a badge of shame. I was reminded of the short trip that the Marxist historian Christopher Hill had made to Kolkata decades back, when he had addressed the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta on the English Revolution, the one that beheaded a reigning monarch and briefly turned England into a republic. When the memorial was pointed out to him, so goes the apocryphal story, he showed no eagerness to stop by, muttering to himself that the monument should have long been blown up. I was not inclined to such incendiary passions, not at least in matters of historical monuments.

The 1877 message sounded morally grand, but it was shrewdly designed to reassure imperial stakeholders in India and Britain. On November 1, 1858, the queen in council issued a proclamation assuming charge of the Indian territories, until then administered “in trust” by the East India Company. The word “trust” impressed no one. The British had quelled the great 1857 Rebellion, and she could afford to take a benign and conciliatory tone in the 1858 proclamation. It deplored “the evils and misery . . . brought upon India by the acts of ambitious Men” and the “false reports” that had incited Indian soldiers to “open Rebellion.” It assured a royal pardon for rebels who would “return to the path of Duty.” Further, the Crown—not the British government, but Her Imperial Majesty—promised not to attempt religious conversion or extend territorial possessions, and declared that “all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the Law.” The “false Reports” are a clear allusion to rumors of forced religious conversion that had partially fueled the 1857 Rebellion, at least in the sepoys’ barracks. The proclamation hence assured that all subjects would be treated equally by the law, irrespective of “their Religious Faith or Observances.”¹⁰ The guarantees of nonaggression and of honoring standing treaties were given to the “Native Princes of India” assembled at the Durbar in Allahabad, not to all “subjects.” The pledged justice in this so-called Magna Carta of India was not “universal”: it had strict transactional reference as far as the princes were concerned.¹¹ It was certainly not Ernesto Laclau’s “empty signifier”—a signifier without a definite referent, compatible with certain species of populism.¹² Indian subjects willingly suspended disbelief and treated the promise of legal equity as a gift and relief,

not as a term delimiting political subjecthood, or one especially intended for princes who commanded local allegiance. As we gather from Miles Taylor’s work, reconciling the native princes of India to her rule had been an obsession with the warrior queen since at least the 1850s.¹³

The moral ground taken at the 1877 Delhi Durbar was even higher. Were all invitees convinced by what Viceroy Lytton had to say (he claimed that the empress’s laws would “impartially protect all races and all creeds”),¹⁴ or what the proclamation declared, or what the royal message for the event promised? The queen wished to style herself the “Empress of Great Britain, Ireland and India,” but Benjamin Disraeli stalled potential trouble from Whigs concerning the use of the title in the internal dominions by restricting the appellation to India. The Royal Titles Bill was debated and passed in April 1876. Viceroy Lytton, on the other hand, seized the opportunity to ensure the fealty of the native princes through a symbolic show of imperial might, and to demonstrate to Indian subjects that the British monarchs were the legitimate successors to the Mughal rulers. Sixty-three Indian princes were present at the main tent in Delhi. There were celebrations in Calcutta (now Kolkata) where sixty-one “native gentlemen” were honored. A meeting was held on the steps of the Town Hall in Madras (now Chennai). In Bombay (now Mumbai), an amnesty was declared for several prisoners. At every event and location the proclamation was read out.

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Writers in Bengal seem to have welcomed direct rule by the queen. Bengal was one of the richest parts of the world in the eighteenth century and had been subjected to the worst forms of pillage by the company’s servants. Few Bengali writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could have had any memory of the manner in which Bengal had been plundered since 1765, when the Treaty of Allahabad was signed by the East India Company with the titular Mughal king Shah Alam II. That followed the company’s decisive victory against the combined armies of Mir Qasim, the nawab of Bengal till 1864, Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula of Awadh, and the Mughal ruler Shah Alam II at the Battle of Buxar in October 1764. The company dictated terms of the settlement after the decisive victory. The treaty allowed the company to collect revenue in three *subahs* including Bengal. English bullion was no longer needed to be brought in to pay for Indian textiles and spices. Instead, the cost of the exports was wrung out of subjects of the

Mughal monarch and local rulers. The exports enriched England and company shareholders, and company servants in India made huge profits from private trade. The three million sterling pounds received as political gifts by Robert Clive and the company between the Battle of Palasi [or Plassey] in 1757 and the Treaty of Allahabad in 1765 was less than a derisory fraction of the plunder that followed.

Several of the consequences of the diwani sealed in 1765 rudely forced themselves on the consciousness of Bengali writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first state trial in India under the rule of the empress was the one that involved an anonymous translation of Dinabandhu Mitra's (1830–1873) *Nil darpan* (*The Indigo Planting Mirror*). *Nil darpan* was written in 1858–59 (published 1860), close to the time India was proclaimed part of the empire. Reverend James Long had a translation of the play done, either by him or, as some guess, by Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873). It was printed by Clement Henry Manuel and published from his press in 1861. It led to a libel suit brought by the newspaper *The Englishman* and the European indigo planters. The hearing started on July 19, 1861, and continued until July 24, at the end of which Long was convicted, jailed, and fined, the fine being paid by the young Bengali author and patron of letters Kaliprasanna Singha (1840–1870). The play was crucial to the early history of the public stage in Kolkata. More important, it brought out the Bengali elite, despite a few zamindars siding with the planters, in support of the Indigo Revolt—a convergence of interests that the Great Rebellion of 1857 was unable to achieve. The revolt also brought Hindu and Muslim peasants closer, an alliance that grew rarer as one moved into the twentieth century. The uprising started in the undivided district of Nadia in 1859 and soon spread to Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bardhaman, Pabna, Khulna, and Narail (the last three districts are currently part of Bangladesh). Several planters were executed and their *kuthis* or depots-cum-revenue offices, which also housed private prisons, burnt down. Brutal reprisals followed, and the hanging of the leader Biswanath Sardar became part of the collective cultural memory of Bengal.¹⁵

The eponymous hero of Rabindranath Tagore's great novel *Gora* (1910), a young and self-respecting Hindu educated in Kolkata, encounters the atrocities of the indigo planters, who forced poor peasants to cultivate indigo in the village Char Ghoshpur. When the outraged Gora complains in person to the English magistrate, he is sentenced to a month of rigorous imprisonment without even the pretense of a

hearing.¹⁶ Attorneys faced punishment or harassment if they represented any farmer accused of disobedience or dissent, and Gora, who was not even a farmer, had to represent his case himself at court. The events of the novel are set in the 1870s and 1880s: Gora is a young man born in 1857, and the novel mentions Bankimchandra’s journal *Bangadarsan*, which folded in 1883, as still running.¹⁷ There is also an allusion to the Civil Marriage Act of 1872, which allowed dissenters who did not renounce their faith to marry under the act, as having been passed in the not too distant past.¹⁸ The dates suggest that the action takes place close to the 1877 Durbar at which the queen’s proclamation and message were read out. It comes as no surprise that Lalita, the spirited young woman who is one of the more intransigent characters of the novel, should sum up the imperial judiciary of the time as one paid for by Indians’ taxes so as to harass them and to force them to stump up cash for greedy lawyers in order to get the justice that was apparently their due.¹⁹

Many educated Bengalis, including those enthusiastic about modern literature and the periodical press, made use of the Permanent Settlement of 1793 to collect land revenue and turn themselves into hereditary owners of enormous estates, while others grasped the discriminatory opportunities of land subfeudation and comprador profiteering. But the scope for public appointments that the Government of India Act seemed to promise was reason enough for them to see in the imperial takeover signs of a more enlightened, or at least less anarchic, regime. Particularly appealing to those educated in the Western curriculum was the possibility of legal redress and even of direct appeal to the Crown. Dinabandhu Mitra had gone to James Long’s free school in Kolkata and then to Hindu College (founded in 1817), where he mastered more English than was needed in his job as postmaster and inspector in the railways. In the author’s preface to *Nil darpan*, he prudently appealed to the benevolence of the queen, who had decided to nourish her Indian children herself rather than employ wet nurses to suckle them. Dinabandhu contrasted her promised fairness with the cruelty and greed of the indigo planters and the company administration:

Oh, ye Indigo Planters! Your malevolent conduct has brought a stain upon the English Nation, which was so graced by the ever-memorable names of Sydney, Howard, Hall, and other great men. Is your desire for money so very powerful, that through the instigation of that vain wealth, you are engaged in making holes like rust in the long acquired and pure fame of the British people? Abstain now from that unjust conduct through which you are raising immense sums as your profits. . . . You are now-a-days

purchasing things worth a hundred rupees by expending only ten;—and you well know what great trouble the ryots are suffering from that. Still you are not willing to make that known, being entirely given up to the acquisition of money. . . . But *misery and happiness revolve like a wheel*, and that the sun of happiness is about to shed his light on the people of this country, is becoming very probable. The most kind-hearted Queen Victoria, the mother of the people, thinking it inadvisable to suckle her children through maid-servants, has now taken them on her own lap to nourish them.²⁰

The text itself, like the preface, contrasts the promised equity of British rule with the brutality of the planters and the glaring injustice in the indigo legislations. Here is a passage from act 1, scene 4:

Sabitri. . . . Can any one take away a woman from a house in the British Dominion?

Reboti. O my Mother! Every violence can be committed in the ryot's house. Taking away the women, they bring the men under their power. In giving advances for Indigo they can do this; only they cannot commit this before one's eyes. Don't you know, my mother, the other day, because certain parties did not agree to sign a fictitious receipt of advances, they broke down their house and took away by force the wife of one of the Babus.

Sabitri. What anarchy is this! Did you inform Sadhu of this[?]

Reboti. No, my mother. He is already become mad on account of the Indigo; again, if he hear [*sic*] this, will he keep quiet? Through excessive anger he will rather smite his head with the axe.

Sabitri. Very well, I shall make this known to Sadhu through my husband; you need not say anything. What misfortune is this! The Indigo Planters can do anything. Then why do I hear it generally said, that the Sahebs are strict in dispensing justice[?] Again, my son Bindu Madhab speaks much in praise of them. Therefore I think *these are not Sahebs*; no, *they are the dregs, (Chandāl) of Sahebs*.²¹

The last line in the original could be read and translated in a slightly different way: “So, are these (planters) not *sahebs*, or are they simply the dregs?” (*Chandals* were considered untouchables, outside the pale of the society of caste Hindus. Hence a *chandal* was someone uncivilized, and the word was used to denote contempt.)²² Clearly, the playwright shared *Sabitri*'s sentiments. They were looking for the equity and justice that were, in principle at least, already open to Victoria's British subjects.

Dinabandhu Mitra was not the only Bengali writer who had a sharp sense of the disproportion between imperial promise and colonial practice. The eminent journalist and poet Iswarchandra Gupta (1811–1859) wrote a series of poems on affairs related to governance, many of them in his periodical *Sambad prabhakar*. He died in 1859, shortly after the Crown took over direct administration of the Indian colonies from the company.

He wrote a sarcastic verse-encomium celebrating the display of fireworks in Kolkata. The town is awestruck by this power of the queen, and all that her representatives do in India to suit their white privilege, while the “belak (black) native” burns, not like the fireworks, but under the horrors inflicted on them.²³ Iswarchandra also wrote a well-known poem around the time the Indian colony was merged with the empire, titled “Nilkar” (“The Indigo Planter”). Addressing the queen as “Ma” or mother, it starts with an apparent plea for mercy “Kotha roile ma / Victoria ma go ma / katara karo karuna” (“Where are you mother, / Victoria, Oh mother, / Have pity on the wretched”). But the tone is less obsequious as Iswarchandra turns to the subject of *nilkars* or indigo planters.

Tumi biswamata Victoria, thako bilate.
 amra ma sab tomar adheen deen chiradin
 subhadin din ma bharate.
 company raj utthiye nile,
 ke bujhe tomar lile?
 nile ma ei bharater bhar.
 peye subha samachar.
 ma tomar habe bhalo, asate dilem alo,
 such rekhe samabhabe, sada kalo,
 bheda rabe na ar.
 jata niler sada, muluk chanda, sada keha noy,
 karo na niler karma, ki adharma,
 mane hoy kali prakas.²⁴

A flattened prose translation, cleared of the quibbles typical of Iswarchandra’s satirical verse, would read like this:

Oh mother of the world Victoria, your home is in England. You rule us, your ever-poor subjects. Grant us better days here in India. You have put an end to Company rule—it is not for us to fathom your wish. You have taken charge of India. The good news brightens our hopes, and we pray that you prosper. We will be happy under your rule; white and black will be treated as equals. Indigo stains the whites who plant it. Indigo is sin, pray rid the land of the curse. The mind’s dark takes the form of indigo.

This part of the poem also alludes to the docility of subjects. Bengalis are like domesticated cattle with unthreatening horns—a sly way of saying that submitting to certain forms of authority is no virtue.

Indians who believed in the proclamation and the promises made in the queen’s message to the 1877 Durbar may not have been entirely deluded. The Indigo Revolt, the strong and relentless campaign against the oppression of planters by Harischandra Mukherjee (1824–1861) in

his paper *The Hindoo Patriot*, and pressure from outraged Christian missionaries led to the setting up of the Indigo Commission in March 1860.²⁵ The problems that led to the Revolt of 1859 were addressed in its report and in a law passed in 1862 that virtually ended the indigo terror in Bengal.²⁶ Other instances of more reasonable governance followed. Lord Ripon was appointed viceroy in 1880. One of his earliest initiatives was drafting the 1883 Ilbert Bill, which would have empowered senior Indian judges to try British subjects. Although the bill never matured into an act, Ripon successfully rescinded the loathed 1878 Vernacular Press Act of Bulwer-Lytton, which restrained periodicals and newspapers in “Oriental languages” from criticizing the government. The act left the convicted editors, printers, and publishers with no option of legal redress since seditious intent was determined by the police, not the courts of law. Like the repeal of the Vernacular Press Act, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 that followed peasants’ disturbances in Pabna was another apparent move toward a more benevolent regime. It was drafted to protect the Bengal peasantry from unreasonable rent-hikes imposed by zamindars or landowners created by the Permanent Settlement. The 1793 settlement detailed the rights of landowners but left tenants’ rights undefined. To take another example, the Indian Famine Codes of the 1880s were devised to measure levels of food insecurity. Such steps partially justified the reliance of Indians on the queen’s promises of 1858 and 1877.²⁷

A breach of the principles of natural justice was hence seen as a shocking betrayal of her promises. When in 1883 Surendranath Bandyopadhyay (or Banerjee; 1848–1925) was jailed on contempt charges, a general strike was observed in Bengal, Punjab, Bombay Presidency, and the United Provinces.²⁸ The minor lyricist Krishnadhan Chattopadhyay (dates uncertain) composed a Bengali song set to the evening raag Behag, bemoaning the absence of the promised mercy: “Oh where art thou Lord Ripon, our master, to whom do I complain / O mother Victoria, come and see for yourself what justice rules your Bharat.”²⁹ There may be a tinge of sarcasm in the closing couplet, but it is hard to tell, given the tone of lament, as if the promise of the 1858 proclamation and the royal message to the 1877 Durbar were genuinely believed in. Mir Masharraf Hosssain (1847–1911), who wrote a classic Bengali account in three volumes of the Battle of Karbala (1885–91), published a song in Dhaka set to the morning raag Lalit that was a more candid appeal to the invisible queen to protect her subjects: “You live beyond the seas / We never get to see you / Save us

mother, your loyal subjects / We implore you. / O merciful keeper / Redeemer of your subjects' distress / You who relieve the misery of the poor / Mother, bringer of blessings.”³⁰ The same writer recorded the excesses of indigo planters in his novel *Udasin pathiker maner katha* (*The Thoughts of the Indifferent Wayfarer*) (1890) and had compiled extensive notes toward a history of the Indigo Revolt.³¹ Hossain died in 1911 before he could complete the project. It was the year the *swadesi* movement was withdrawn with the repeal of the act that had partitioned Bengal. When beseeching a queen who ruled India from across the seas, Hossain does not seem bothered by the more radical strain in *swadesi* that called for a boycott of all British manufactures. More important, he is certainly not overtly perturbed by the fact that India is being ruled by an absent empress whose primary commitment is to her British subjects. In 1873 the great novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (or Chatterjee; 1838–1894) published the essay “Bharatbarsher swadhinata o paradhinata” in his periodical *Bangadarshan*. Like his friend Dinabandhu Mitra, Bankimchandra was a servant of the Crown. The topic was an unlikely one for an Indian deputy magistrate, but then Bankimchandra was no ordinary deputy magistrate. When posted in Khulna in 1858, he had a planter arrested and summoned by the high court. The man had a reputation for burning down villages and shooting peasants. He was back in Khulna in 1861, at the height of the revolt. Bankimchandra investigated the planter Henry Morrel and his retainer Denis Healy. They were terrors of the districts of Khulna and Jessore, and Bankimchandra's persistence as investigator as much as the revolt put an end to Morrel's bullying, although many rebels were imprisoned and at least one leader hanged.³²

The title of Bankimchandra's essay, “Bharatbarsher swadhinata o paradhinata,” roughly translates into “India's autonomy and subjection.” Bankimchandra argues, contrary to what the ideological forebears of politicians currently helming affairs in Delhi would have us believe, that India was *not* a dependent country under Muslim rulers. Victoria's ancestors were German, but England is not ruled by the Germans. Ethnic identities are irrelevant: it is only when the ruler of a country runs her territories from a foreign land that the country may be considered *paradhin*, a subject “nation.”³³ Hossain's longing to set eyes on India's absent protector seems innocent of such considerations and betrays a naïve faith in the queen's formal reassurances. In fact, the experience of defeat and oppression seems all the more tolerable because of the physical absence of the redeemer. It comes as no surprise that Hossain should have composed another hymn to Queen Victoria, set to the raag Chhayanaṭ this

time, on the occasion of the golden jubilee of her reign in June 1887. Readers may find this a bit incredible, but the song confidently declares on behalf of all Indian subjects that in the fifty years of Victoria's rule, Hindus and Muslims alike have been enjoying freedom: "Sonaar Bharatbarsha, sbaadhin sataardho barsha" ("golden India, the golden jubilee of freedom").³⁴

However, some learned writers in Bengal, aspiring to a version of modernity compatible with strands in India's intellectual heritage halted by colonial violence, had more credible reasons to trust in brighter times after the end of company rule. The great textual scholar and novelist Haraprasad Sastri (1853–1931) delivered a lecture on modern Bengali literature at Kolkata's Sabitri Library in 1881 in which he portrayed a scary picture of the anarchy that followed the decline of Mughal power, the debacle at Palasi, the withering away of local dynasties that were ruling parts of India, Lord Wellesley's policy of Subsidiary Alliance and the 1793 Permanent Settlement (which Haraprasad termed the Permanent Unsettling or Mismanagement—"Chirasthaayi a-banda-basto"), and subsequent laws and impositions amidst which literature could hardly flourish. The coming of Western education early in the nineteenth century was welcomed by the antiquarian and Sanskritist, but he more than implied that it was only after the imperial takeover that there was a peace in Bengal conducive to the flourishing of literature—by which Haraprasad meant the high culture of letters—that could draw on ancient Indian and modern European sources.³⁵

Such a reasoned account, even if of arguable historical accuracy, did not serve the more ambiguous ends of poets. Victoria's second son, Prince Alfred, the duke of Edinburgh, visited India for three months in 1869–70. On the occasion, the major poet Bengali poet Nabinchandra Sen (1847–1909), again a civil servant under the Crown, composed an encomium that was a somewhat subtler variation on Hossain's theme. The English have rescued India from the depredations of Muslim rulers, writes Nabinchandra, but the land is now in ruins because of the queen's loutish deputies, whose will is the law and whose only grace is the color of their skin. The poem does not simply justify the ways of the empress by blaming her minions: it seems to imply that there is something unnatural in the imperial claim itself. The trope is that of a personified India petitioning the prince. India is the queen's daughter and hence the prince's sister, although denied his royal privilege. India pleads with the prince to relay her complaint to their common mother. The queen as mother was a popular trope of Indian literature by then, made memorable for

later generations in Bengal by Bipinchandra Pal’s (1858–1932) 1891 biography, *Rajnimata Victoria* (Victoria, the Mother Empress).³⁶ Nabinchandra’s figure of the political matriarch, however, was harder to label. India deserves and demands justice, more so because the queen is absent. Motherliness should lavish more love on the helpless daughter living far away. Victoria seems to reverse the order of nature: she shows little tenderness, mercy, or care for her abandoned and abused child.³⁷

There is a direct reference to the 1858 proclamation in Manomohan Basu’s (1831–1912) “Victoria-geeti” or “Victoria Song,” published in a collection in 1886–87. Manomohan was a popular playwright, an author of textbooks, and an informed urban version of the rural balladeer entertaining residents of a colonial city eager to have a finger in the imperial pie. His was a far more politically canny composition than Krishnadhan’s or Mir Mosharraf’s lyrics. It does not look back, as was usual in the writings of Hindu Bengalis, to an unfallen Bharat before the advent of Muslim conquerors, but rather lays present ills at the door of direct British rule. It starts with an invitation to the empress: “Kothay ma Victoria, dyakh aasia / India tor cholchhe kyamon” (“Where are you Mother Victoria, do come and see for yourself how things are in your India”). The lines, set to a familiar meter in *baul* songs, goes on to list the racism, lawlessness, and oppression of Indian workers such as those slaving in tea plantations, extortion through taxes and so-called “contributions” under various pretexts, the trigger-happy police, the unjust law courts, and the notorious “home charges.” These were remittances that replaced dividends to the company’s shareholders and were used to pay for infrastructure such as the railways, the cost of the imperial administration including that of the India Office, wars, campaigns, and pay and pension to civil and military officers: “Pradhan loot, damka kale—jaare bale / ‘home charge’ aar ‘contribution’” (the major sources of loot are your draining ploys of home charge and contribution). The thirty-third quatrain refers to the 1858 proclamation: “That extraordinary, merciful / Proclamation of ‘fifty eight / Is shattered by a few bullies / Busy favoring their own kind.” The allusion to Lord Ripon follows in the next but one quatrain: “Jnara tor pradhan nayeb—karta saheb / ke dekhte paay taader badon? / kebal Maa, Ripon chhara, taader saaraa / kakhonoi Maa paaini tyamon” (“We get to see the faces of the [British] ruffians, O Mother, not those of your chief stewards and agents. The sympathetic Ripon was the only exception: he would respond when petitioned”).³⁸

The fantasy of a benign queen who evenhandedly ruled subjects at home and abroad justified the humiliation that a superseded race suffered at the hands of her unruly bailiffs and coarse grooms. Paradoxically, the imperial mission was a necessary alibi of the social privilege that came with Western education for certain castes and classes of Indians, and of the commercial opportunities that were opened up for complicit subjects. Victoria's absent presence was a necessary figment of an immature hegemony, but one that was hard to sustain in the face of soaring food prices, punishing taxes, rural debt, and the inordinate misery that followed in the wake of the First World War, which killed 74,000 Indian soldiers, until recently subjects of a queen who had promised them prosperity and welfare. Against this background, the new wave of Indian nationalism in the 1920s spawned a different register in invocations of the queen in Bengali literature.

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Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938), one of the best-known writers of Bengali fiction (he was certainly the most popular), wrote the story “Mahesh” in 1922, the year the Non-Cooperation movement was called off by Mohandas Gandhi. He had joined the Indian National Congress exactly a year earlier, in 1921, at the invitation of Chittaranjan Das (1870–1925) and was almost immediately elected president of Howrah District Congress, a post from which he later resigned. Saratchandra had served as volunteer when a protest march was staged in Kolkata against the Rowlatt Acts in 1919. A year later he had joined the Non-Cooperation movement, spinning the *charkha* and wearing *khadi*.³⁹

“Mahesh” is set against a drought in which an impoverished Muslim peasant, Ghafur, fails to pay the landowner his dues. He and his daughter go without food, but Ghafur refuses to sell his bull, Mahesh, whom he treats as his son. He calls him Mahesh, the name of the Hindu god Mahadeva, who uses Nandi the bull as guardian of his abode in Kailasa. Our current political leaders are drumming up sectarian frenzy about the smuggling of cattle from West Bengal into Muslim-dominated Bangladesh, unaware that Muslims in Bengal have a long tradition of caring for cattle. Bengali literature is full of Muslim writers and characters who love their cows, bulls, and bullocks, and “Mahesh” stands in a long line of such recent classics as Syed Mustafa Siraj's (1930–2012) story “Goghna” (“Guest”), in which a poor Muslim farmer is forced to sell his bullock and retches up his insides when he realizes that he has tasted

its meat served at dinner in the buyer’s home.⁴⁰ Three years after Siraj’s death in 2012, the teacher, farmer, and powerful writer of short fiction Ansaruddin (b. 1959) published his first novel, *Go-rakhaler kathakata* (*The Narrative of the Cowherd*), which has an episode in which cowherds led by Fakir Ali save cows from a flood and even manage to have a calf delivered.⁴¹

Mahesh cannot bear the drought. Starved and thirsty, he raids the zamindar’s estate, goes marauding through flower beds and drying corn, eats up the flowers, and even attacks the landowner’s youngest daughter. When the landowner sends for him, Ghafur answers, “I haven’t eaten. I’ll go later.” When the messenger says that the master has ordered to haul him over by force, Ghafur replies, “Under the queen’s reign, no one is a slave. I pay my rent, I won’t go.”⁴² This is insufferable, and Ghafur has to pay the price. He is beaten up but does not complain. However, he loses his head when Mahesh pushes his daughter, Amina, to the ground. Her pot of water is broken, and the parched bull drinks up the precious water Amina must have begged for. Ghafur picks up the plowhead and strikes the poor animal dead. The tanners take the carcass away after a couple of hours. As night darkens, father and daughter turn their back on the village and start on foot to join the queue of job-seekers at the jute mill several miles away. They leave their pitiful belongings behind to pay for the penance that the Hindu elders would demand to absolve the village of the sin of slaying the sacred bull.

Muslim peasant and woman, Ghafur and Amina are more than simply the oppressed: they are excluded from the imperial discourse of equity. Ghafur is denied the language in which he could have spoken as the non-other of subjection. He tried learning the language the imperial masters tried to teach him, and his only profit has been that he has now learnt to curse. The end of the story is known to every reader of Bengali:

Crossing the yard, when he reached the acacia, he stopped stock-still and burst out crying loudly. “Allah” he said, raising his face towards the black star-spangled sky, “punish me as much as you like—Mahesh died with thirst on his lips. Nobody left the tiniest bit of land for him to feed on. Pray never forgive those their guilt who never let him eat the grass nor drink the water you have given.”

The translation here is by Sasadhar Sinha (1902–1972).⁴³ Sasadhar went to school in Rabindranath Tagore’s Santiniketan. The Bengali novelist, Congressman, and writer of nonfiction Pramathanath Bisi (1901–1985) recalled Sasadhar’s boyish, if bullying, ways in his book

Rabindranath o Santiniketan (Rabindranath and Santiniketan) when Pramathanath himself was a young pupil of Rabindranath.⁴⁴ Sasadhar traveled to England in 1925 and completed his doctoral work in 1932 at the London School of Economics. He returned to India in 1933 to join the freedom movement. On being released from prison, he had to leave India. With the help of his Russian wife, he opened a bookshop called Bibliophile at Great Ormond Street in London (shifted in February 1936 to Little Russell Street). He stayed on till the end of the Second World War. After independence, Sasadhar served as director of government publications in the newly freed country and later joined the economics faculty at the University of London. He died in India in 1972.

Even in the 1930s, Scotland Yard was keeping tabs on Sasadhar and his Indian friends. A 1935 Scotland Yard note comments on the “revolutionary” books he was reading at the British Museum, having switched his attention from “books on pure philosophy.” Scotland Yard profiled Sasadhar’s customers at the London bookshop and tracked his association with the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association, whose secretary, Pramode Ranjan Sengupta, was an employee in the London bookshop.⁴⁵

All this might appear irrelevant gossip, but the gossip may have a plausible basis. Ghafur returns the heated answer to the zamindar’s messenger alluding to the evenhanded justice promised by Victoria, Sasadhar’s translation skips any mention of the queen or her reign. This is how Sasadhar translates the reply:

“We are nobody’s slave,” he replied, returning similar compliments. “We pay rent to live here. I will not go.”⁴⁶

Was Sasadhar making a translation decision irrespective of any response to the irony, which so amused Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Powell at the Victoria Memorial Hall, of the subject’s dream of equity and justice promised by Queen Victoria? Although arguably a possibility, a translator’s slip or an aesthetic decision seems unlikely. Sasadhar was a major translator of Saratchandra’s shorter fiction. In 1926 Saratchandra published the novella *Harilakshmi*, which Sasadhar could not have been unaware of. The plot is centered on a poor but dignified homemaker with a rudimentary education. She loses all her possessions in seeking legal redress against her rapacious brother-in-law. She ends up being a subject in her own home, a servant to her deceased husband’s brother. The woman is punished for daring to

say that India is not governed by her brother-in-law but by the British (“ingraj” or English is the adjective she uses), and that the recourse to justice is open to its Indian subjects.⁴⁷ The remark harks back, however obliquely, to the promises of the queen’s Proclamation of 1858 and of her message to the 1877 Durbar. Whenever he may have made the translation, Sasadhar, the radical suspect in the queen’s homeland, must surely have had compelling reasons for suppressing in his translation of “Mahesh” the allusion to the same set of promises. Sasadhar’s translation was published in 1970, a couple of years before his death. Sasadhar may have sidestepped the allusion for political reasons that are hard to guess today. It is also possible that he felt the queen’s proclamations had lost all relevance in the independent India that he served as director of government publications. Not all motives and decisions are worth considering, but the idea lost in translation most certainly is.

NOTES

1. For a short video clip of the event, see PIB India, “U.S. Secretary of State.”
2. For the text of the telegraphic message of 1877, see Thornton, *General Sir Richard Meade*, 310. As distinct from the message, the text of the queen’s proclamation pertaining to the Royal Titles Act signed at Windsor on April 28, 1876, was read out at the Durbar too. For the text of the proclamation, see Wheeler, *History of the Imperial Assemblage*, xvii–xix. The text of the proclamation was read out by the chief herald; see 76–78.
3. See Dyson, *A Population History of India*, 123–70 (especially 137). The viceroy used the presence of officials at the Delhi Durbar to summon a general council to discuss the management of the famine. See Wheeler, *History of the Imperial Assemblage*, 95–96.
4. See Kumar, “The Deccan Riots of 1875,” 613–35; Majumdar, “Discontent, Disturbances and Armed Resistance,” 881–957 (especially 938–40); Fukazawa, “Agrarian Relations,” 177–206 (especially 194–95); Bagchi, “Land Tax,” 20–28; Chandra et al., *India’s Struggle for Independence*, 28–31; and Rao, “New Insights,” 55–61.
5. See Wheeler, *History of the Imperial Assemblage*, 43–108 for an account. See also Codell, “Gentleman Connoisseurs and Capitalists,” 134–63; and Codell, “Photography and the Delhi Coronation Durbars,” 111–39.

6. On El Niño years and famines, see Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 117–210, 311–40.
7. Apparently the viceroy had decided not to “extort” gifts, but many were “given.” Wheeler writes: “At the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi it was arranged that the Viceroy would receive no presents; accordingly none were received, although many were given.” See Wheeler, *History of the Imperial Assemblage*, 94.
8. R. Tagore, “Atyukti,” 441–55; see especially 445–46. On Dwarkanath Tagore, see Kling, *Partner in Empire*, 156, 169–75.
9. Maud Gonne’s essay “The Famine Queen” was published on April 7, 1900, in the nationalist newspaper *United Irishman* (Dublin). See Grant, *Last Weapons*, 16.
10. “Proclamation by the Queen in Council to the Princes, Chiefs and People of India.”
11. See Taylor, *Empress*, 8.
12. See Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 69–124.
13. Taylor, “Queen Victoria and India,” 264–74; and Taylor, *Empress*, 74–85.
14. See Wheeler, *History of the Imperial Assemblage*, 81.
15. See Kling, *The Blue Mutiny*; Bhattacharya, “The Indigo Revolt in Bengal,” 13–23; Chandra et al., *India’s Struggle for Independence*, 22–26; Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital*, 153–56; Kunal Chattopadhyay and Mamoon, *Indigo Rebellion*; and Ghildiyal, “Moral Economy and the Indigo Movement,” 67–72.
16. Tagore, *Gora*, 276–93.
17. Tagore, *Gora*, 323.
18. Tagore, *Gora*, 416–17.
19. Tagore, *Gora*, 292.
20. Mitra, *Nil Darpan or the Indigo Planting Mirror*, 1–2.
21. Mitra, *Nil darpan or The Indigo Planting Mirror*, 24.
22. Mitra, *Nil darpan*, 32.
23. Gupta, “Baji” (Fireworks), 82.
24. Gupta, *Sreshthta kabita*, 67. Four songs concerning the Indigo Revolt and the *Nil darpan* case are collected in Ray, *Swadesprem o swajatyabodher gan-kabita*, 100–102.
25. See Paul, “Hindoo Patriot,” 161–75; and Nakazato, “Harish Chandra Mukherjee,” 241–70. For excerpts from the *Hindoo Patriot*, see Ghose, *Selections from English Periodicals*, vols. 3–6.
26. See “Minute by the Hon’ble.”

27. For an account of these promises and an economic history of India in this period, see Dutt, *The Economic History of India*, vol. 2.
28. See Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, 84.
29. Ray, *Swadesprem o swajatyabodher gan-kabita*, 166.
30. Ray, *Swadesprem o swajatyabodher gan-kabita*, 372.
31. Hossain, *Udasin Pathiker Maner Kotha*.
32. See Sachishchandra Chattopadhyay, *Bankim-jibani*, 66–73; and Bagal, “Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay,” *Bankim Rachanabali*, 1: xiii–xiv.
33. B. Chattopadhyay, *Bankim Rachanaboli*, 2:210–14.
34. Ray, *Swadesprem o swajatyabodher gan-kabita*, 372.
35. Sastri, “Bangla sahitya”; see Chaudhuri and Sarkar, *Nirbachita Haraprasad*, 146–68. On Haraprasad’s broad view of *sahitya* as denoting a culture’s verbal artifacts, see Sastri, “Bangiya-Sahitya-Parishader sabhapatir abhivhashan,” 183.
36. Pal, *Rajnimata Victoria*.
37. Sen, “Maharanir dwitiya putra.”
38. Basu, “Victoria-geeti,” 264–67. On Manomohan Basu, see Bandyopadhyay, *Manomohan Basu*.
39. On this phase of Saratchandra’s life, see G. Ray, *Jibani*, 168–83; and Bandyopadhyay, *Saratchandra Chattopadhyay*, 51–52.
40. Siraj, *Galpa samagra*, 1:295–311.
41. See Ansaruddin, *Go-rakhaler kathakata*, 179–86 for the episode.
42. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, vol. 2 of *Saratsahityasamagra*, 1732 (continuous pagination). My translation.
43. Chatterjee, *The Drought and Other Stories*, 17–25 (see especially 25).
44. Bisi, *Rabindranath o Santiniketan*, 39–41.
45. See Shaw, “On the Wrong End of the Raj,” 222–316 (especially 293–97).
46. Chatterjee, *The Drought and Other Stories*, 24.
47. Chattopadhyay, vol. 2 of *Saratsahityasamagra*, 1720–28; see especially 1725.

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