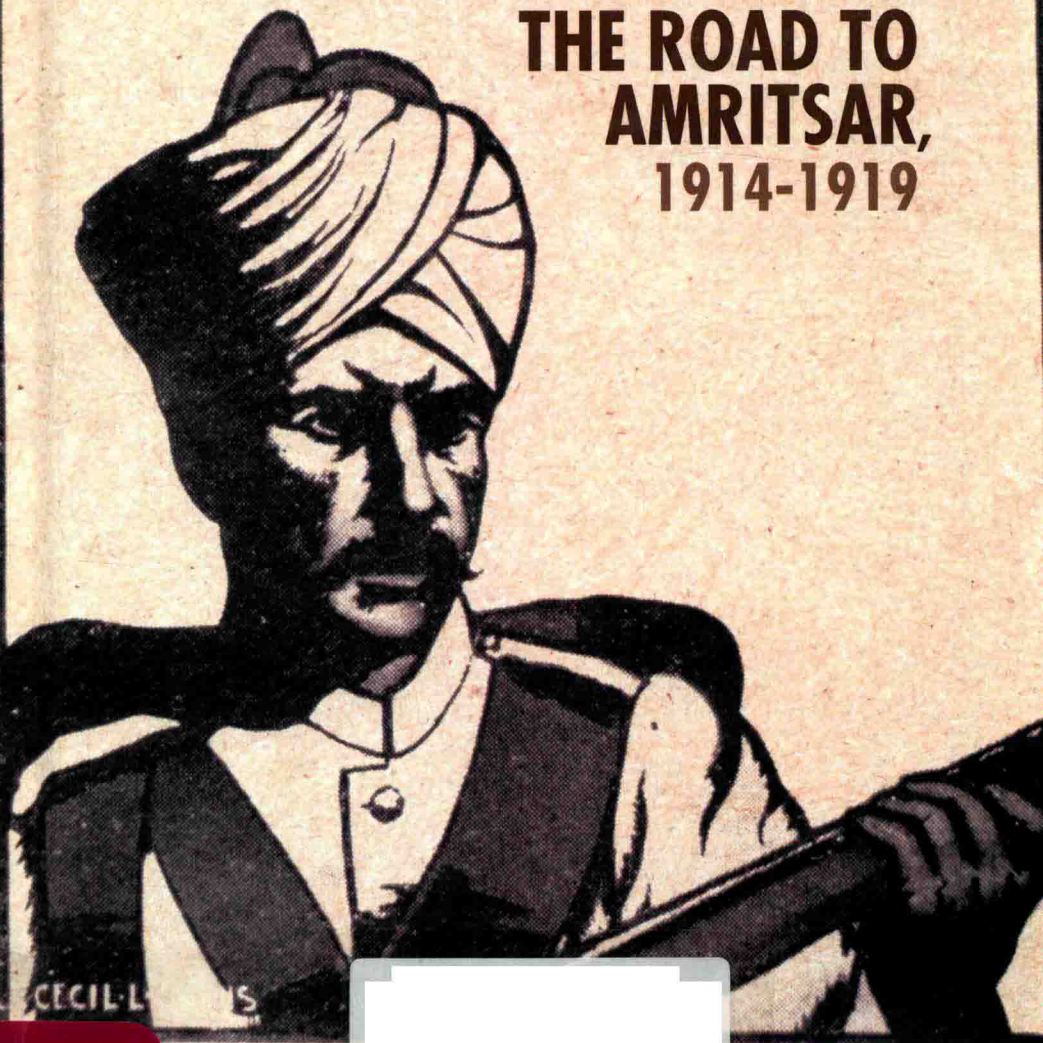
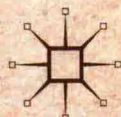


# GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN BRITISH INDIA

THE ROAD TO  
AMRITSAR,  
1914-1919



ROBERT MCLAIN



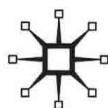
# **Gender and Violence in British India**

***The Road to Amritsar, 1914–1919***

Robert McLain

palgrave  
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GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN BRITISH INDIA

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# **Gender and Violence in British India**

*For Amy, Evan, and Mollie*

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## Resituating Gender and Violence during the Great War

This book investigates the multiple and contradictory ways in which the Great War tore at the gendered ideologies of the Indo-British relationship. It is my contention that the war of 1914–1918, along with the intense stress it placed on the British Raj's dominant notions of colonial masculinity and femininity, ultimately culminated in the killing or wounding of over 1,600 Indian civilians by Gurkha soldiers under the command of General Reginald Dyer at the Punjab town of Amritsar in April of 1919.<sup>1</sup> The killings at Amritsar marked a defining moment in Anglo-Indian relations, but too often the event is portrayed only as a catalyst for a triumphant interwar march toward Indian independence, or alternately as a singular lapse of judgment by one man, General Dyer, that undermined generations of generally well-intentioned colonial leadership in South Asia. I take issue with both of these views in that Amritsar is best viewed from the other direction, not as a beginning but as a tragic coda to the accelerating social and political anxieties that wracked the late-Victorian and Edwardian imperial and domestic public spheres just prior to the war.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, World War I has much left to tell us about the indissoluble bond between gender and violence as conceptual guarantors for the empire's political and military power, both at home and abroad.<sup>3</sup> Conventional imperial wisdom held that the Briton alone possessed the inherently "manly" traits of logic and self-control necessary for good governance. This complemented the belief that India's western-educated nationalist elite suffered from a crippling effeminacy of body and mind that precluded political power and independence. In between these masculine/feminine margins lay the subcontinent's "martial races"—the Punjabi, Sikh, and Gurkha soldiers of the Indian Army whom the Raj considered



masculine enough to fight side-by-side with, but who needed the guiding hand of the steady British officer to control their wild and child-like natures. By 1914, these variegated masculine/feminine identities had been firmly established in the political and popular culture of the colony.

The arrival of the war and India's tremendous role in it threatened to upset these delicately balanced equations of imperial gender and power. Both regional and all-India nationalists increasingly used the conflict to challenge the tenets of colonial masculinity and resituate themselves as members of a "loyal opposition" rather than as radicals intent on destroying foreign rule. Indeed, the unusually hot summer of 1914 witnessed a striking imperial unity. Mohandas Gandhi had just arrived in London from South Africa, where he had lived for over 20 years, quite literally at the moment England had issued its declaration of war against Germany. He immediately rallied Indian students living in the metropole, organizing them into an ambulance corps for service on the Western Front. Donations and telegrams of support poured in from India's conservative and loyal princely states, which, under autonomous rulers, technically controlled about two-fifths of the country.<sup>4</sup> By the end of October 1914, a complement of over 24,000 Indian soldiers began to arrive in France, staving off disaster for a decimated British army. By 1917, this initial good feeling had deteriorated into an increasingly bitter dispute regarding the extent of post-war political reform in India. Moreover, the clash over India's future drew extensively on the existing tropes of the effeminacy of the "educated" classes and the wildness of the hyper-masculine martial races in declaring the colony unfit for "self-rule." The rhetorical ferocity of this debate, I argue, ended in the physical violence at Amritsar.

To be clear, I begin from the assumption that the alchemy of gender and violence was indispensable not only to the establishment and maintenance of imperial power, but also to the emotional appeal of nationalist anti-colonial resistance, whether in its "moderate" constitutional form or in the guise of bloody, revolutionary terror. Put more directly, it is historically improbable that modern empires could have endured solely by referencing the iconography of the European "man on the spot" and his counterpart, the dutiful imperial woman. Colonial power ultimately, and always, rests on the threat of coercion.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Irish, Indian, African, and Asian nationalists drew sustenance from the likeness of an irredentist manhood brought low by colonialism, yet salvageable through either a gradual and indirectly resistant demonstration of masculinity and self-sufficiency or, more extremely, murderous opposition. It follows, then, that if the maintenance of colonial masculinity implied the threat of violence, so too

did challenges to its ideological potency. Both imperial coercion and the resistance to it, embodied in the multiple epistemological and physical violences of colonialism and anti-colonialism, relied on sheer bloody-mindedness as a functional means to an end.

This “functionality” and its means/ends rationality suggest two interconnected problems as well, both of which explain the lack of theorization about the mechanics of colonial violence in the imperial setting. First, violence was, and is, Janus-faced in nature. Violence was by definition conservative when protecting the empire, radical when in pure opposition to it, and surprisingly “moderate” when seeking a path somewhere between accommodation and rebellion. Gandhi intended his pledge to defend England in 1914 to be an indicator of the colony’s suitability for autonomy. Ironically, it meant fighting for the empire as a means of eventually breaking away from it.<sup>6</sup> In this formula, India would reach par with the white settler colonies of South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, all of whom emerged from the war with stronger nationalist identities and better economic positions vis-à-vis the metropole.<sup>7</sup> More importantly for our purposes, it shows the limits of Gandhi’s concept of non-violence, or *ahimsa*. Second, the inherent ambiguity of colonial violence, and its functional role in the differential equations of colonial power, leads historians into an old trap, namely explaining the phenomenon as a by-product of imperial ideology rather than as a subject worthy of deeper consideration on its own merits, or demerits, as the case may be. Simply put, as a “signifier,” violence encompassed every masculine and feminine trope in the colonial environment; its cruel versatility demands that we at least consider how violence and gender operated across differing imperial terrains and chronologies.

My approach is bound to vex readers in two ways. First, there exists a lingering tendency to view hegemonic colonial violence as more “legitimate” because it ostensibly involved the preservation of “Order” by forces of the State. Second, despite the fact that gender as a “useful category of analysis” has become well-established in “new imperial” history, there will always be scholars who reject or downplay its analytical value. Herein lies the crux of the problem: too often the paternalistic, protective *language* of empire differed dramatically from the *actuality* of colonialism’s intense physical brutality, both in contemporary accounts and in later histories that relied on imperial word-of-mouth. As Mary Renda has so effectively argued in her study of early twentieth-century US intervention in Haiti, imperialism was, and is, “masked as benevolent by its reference to paternal care and guidance,” yet it is “structured equally by its reference to

paternal authority and discipline. In a sense, paternalism should not be seen in opposition to violence, but rather as one of several cultural vehicles for it.”<sup>8</sup> Purnima Bose and Laura Lyons’ claim that “brutality . . . far from being an anomaly, is a constitutive part of colonialism” takes on a tangible form when one consults the litany of carnage that is part and parcel of empire, whether in the indirect form of Indian famine policies or in the overt use of airpower to strafe civilians in “rebellious” villages in the mandate of 1920s Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

Violence, moreover, was never limited to faceless, institutionalized governmental forms, for cruelty in the colonial setting often expressed itself in intensely interpersonal ways reminiscent of racial violence in the American South. Jordanna Bailkin’s study of European homicides committed against Indians reveals that white authorities often downgraded murder charges through a rhetorical strategy that removed the *intent* to kill—the argument being that the robust Anglo-Indian had simply failed to recognize the frailty of the “native” before striking them.<sup>10</sup> Indian Viceroy Lord Curzon (1899–1905) privately expressed his loathing for the open disdain his countrymen expressed toward “natives.” Nor, as Ivan Evans has suggested, was this limited to India. In prewar “shooting of native” cases, white *platteland* Afrikaners who murdered blacks often faced a cursory examination, whereas black assaults on whites usually drew a stiff sentence.<sup>11</sup> Such individualized violence unsurprisingly came in the midst of “rape panics,” in which white women were supposedly threatened by “native” men. In the case of Amritsar there existed a similar “panic,” animated by months of heated rhetoric and an actual assault on an Englishwoman just prior to the mass shooting. These historical claims make even greater sense when placed against the tumult of the Great War era, when *fin-de-siècle* anxieties over the erosion of British power abroad, not to mention tensions at “Home” regarding Ireland, labor, women, and “traditional” societal and familial roles, lay thick and heavy in the British and imperial presses.

What makes the larger context of empire so disturbing though is not just its concomitance with violence, but also its genealogical links to the modern, mechanized mass homicides of twentieth-century Europe. Indeed, Hannah Arendt argued that imperialism’s emphasis on civilization, bureaucratic rationality, and racial difference was in fact a milepost on the road to the “Final Solution.” In her estimation, the murder of the Jews and racial Others amounted to nothing more than a form of “continental imperialism,” an inward-looking intra-European version of empire that carried out the same types of annihilative violence that stalked nineteenth-century Asia and Africa. Continental imperialism, however,

lacked the “geographic space” that provided for colonialism’s forgotten massacres, many of which received little notice in Europe.<sup>12</sup> The slaughter of Hereros, Hottentots, and Congolese was too geographically distant, and the belief in biological superiority and Social Darwinism so entrenched that most Europeans, particularly the outward-looking bourgeoisie who believed that colonial projects ensured national survival, simply accepted direct and indirect violence as part of the natural order of things. Horror and revulsion only came later, after the ideologies of empire were adapted to *Endlösung* and the victims shifted from being faceless and “uncivilized” “others” to neighbors who spoke the same language. While Arendt notes that British rule stopped far short of Belgian and German levels of atrocity, she nonetheless pointed to proposals by white officials in India to initiate famines, or “administrative massacres,” as a way of maintaining control over the country. Cooler and more humane heads prevailed, however, and the proposal was never carried out. Still, Arendt charged that once the “English conqueror in India became an administrator who no longer believed in the universal validity of law, but was convinced of his own capacity to rule and dominate . . . the stage seemed to be set for all possible horrors.” The ideological techniques and physical technologies of nineteenth-century imperialism had become commonplace, “lying under anybody’s nose” and freely available for creating a race-based totalitarian government.<sup>13</sup> Her words continue to resonate.

Violence in the name of “Order” and “Civilization” resides in the very ontology of empire—it cannot be parsed out. More to the point, it is a deeply flawed view that looks back on empire as a generally benign phenomenon punctuated by occasional violence that was always, somehow, exceptional to the overall tenor of colonialism. I utterly reject the notion that varieties of ruling practices and physical terrains make generalization about imperial violence impossible; multiple sites of empire simply mean multiple sites of violence. The frequency with which individual officials and soldiers rode, marched, or sailed to and from postings in Ireland, Africa, India, and Australasia is striking. And while it did produce varying practices of governance, what is more remarkable is the predictability of violent response to both real and perceived threats to imperial rule, whatever “style” of governance might be in vogue in a particular region. The urge to preserve “Order” was typical in colonial societies where a heavily outnumbered ruling class perceived the indigene, whether Irish, African, or Asian, as lacking the even more purposeful rioting of an English laborer. The child-like colonial subject had to be controlled by a chastising parental violence inasmuch that children, like “natives,”

understood the language of bodily force. Losing control of “natives” meant putting individual Europeans in danger, particularly when such resistance threatened to spill over into the European domiciled “civil lines.” The import of colonial discipline was not lost on Michael O’Dwyer, the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, or Reginald Dyer, the commander at the city of Amritsar, also in the Punjab. Both were raised entirely or partly in Ireland and had experienced its tumult. O’Dwyer’s memoirs recounted agrarian attacks against his family’s estate, while Dyer’s family, survivors of the 1857 Indian Army Mutiny, had sent him from India to Ireland to complete his education. It was in 1886 that a 21-year-old Dyer learned the value of riot control, when sectarian fighting shook Belfast on the occasion of William Ewart Gladstone’s First Home Rule Bill. It requires no evidentiary leap of faith to see the impact of their Irish experience on their later actions.

To be sure, one may reasonably claim that the “new” empires of late nineteenth-century Europe were always violent in varying degrees, but particularly at moments of inception, crisis, and dissolution. Indeed, while the real sticks and stones of empire may have broken bones, it was the enduring constructs of the colonial subject that allowed the hand to grasp the weapon and legitimate firing it. More precisely, the alloyed concepts of Indian effeminacy/fragility and British masculinity, when viewed holistically, represent far more than historical abstractions. The culture of paternal colonial masculinity metastasized ostensibly political questions such as “native self-rule” as threats to the English hearth and home and, by way of implication, to the very existence of the empire. The petty and dehumanizing aspects of colonial subjectivity, so often expressed in terms of masculinity and a “civilizing” mission, are intimately connected to the physical assaults embedded in the building and maintenance of empire, both in its British guise and its revamped twenty-first-century form. The difference between the word and the deed of imperialism is so stark that one wonders what there is, ultimately, to argue about.<sup>14</sup>

### Excavating Masculinity and Femininity in the Prewar Empire

By the latter half of the eighteenth century, the growing commercial presence of the British East India Company [EIC] in South Asia led to the systematic study of the region’s history and culture.<sup>15</sup> These early efforts, often financed by the company or conducted independently by “gentlemen scholars” in the service of the EIC, relied on Hindu experts (*pundits*) to translate and interpret classical Sanskrit texts.

Additionally, British officials surveyed sources from the Mughal Empire, hoping to gain insight into how to rule newly acquired territories and further build a base of knowledge regarding Indian society.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, while the pundits aided the efforts of EIC officials to understand the country's religious complexities and legal system, Mughal sources made the epistemological case for a gendered hierarchy that distinguished between the "manly" imperial court of the north and the "effeminate," primarily southern, Hindu. It was all too easy for a developing British imperial culture, already armed with its own domestic and military codes of manliness, to glom on to established Mughal notions of martialized masculinity and culture. These hybridized codes of masculinity, as Ashis Nandy has argued, became sharper in colonial society over the course of the long nineteenth century, with both European and Indian emphasizing a hyper-masculine persona as a means, respectively, of control and resistance.<sup>17</sup>

Among the first works to call attention to Indian decadence were Alexander Dow's *History of Hindostan* (1770), and Robert Orme's three-volume *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan from 1745* (published from 1763–1778). Dow established a strong link between the "enervating" effects of the Indian climate and the general "languor" of the "Hindoo." As Dow saw it, the Muslim conquest of the subcontinent made perfect sense, since the country's tropical milieu had sapped the Hindu of the vigor needed to repel outside invasion. This debilitation, of course, made the country's aboriginal inhabitants the ideal subjects for Muslim conquest and the rule of "oriental despotism."<sup>18</sup> The next six centuries of Mughal domination, when combined with climatic factors, had thoroughly stamped out any desire for freedom and independence in the Hindu. The British, in Dow's opinion, were in fact doing nothing more than assuming the mantle of power from the tyrannical Muslim rulers and beginning the "arduous" and "almost impossible" process of returning to India the "Public Virtue" that it had lost.<sup>19</sup> Robert Orme picked up the strands of Dow's work in describing the Hindu as the "most effeminate inhabitant of the globe" and an easy mark for the "fierce" and "hardy" Muslim warrior. Furthermore, Orme paid special attention to the Bengali, whom he determined to be "of weaker frame and more enervated character" than even his fellow Indians.<sup>20</sup> As should be clear, Dow and his reliance upon a framework of climatic degeneracy, effeminacy, and general impotence had a formative effect on the ideologies that eventually guided the Raj.<sup>21</sup>



Early nineteenth-century experts reiterated the concept of the effeminate Bengali with a strikingly casual certitude. EIC official James Mill and his *History of India* (1818) confirmed Hindus as “litigious, untrustworthy, and predisposed to lying,” a defect made more marked by their “softness both in their persons and in their address” when compared to the “manlier races” of Europe.<sup>22</sup> Mill had produced an essential text for early to mid-nineteenth century thought on the colony, lending an additional sanctity of truth to existing suspicions and providing conceptual sustenance for future generations of administrators and self-made colonial “specialists.”<sup>23</sup> That Mill could dismiss with the stroke of a pen several centuries of rich historical and literary tradition testifies to the deep power of imperial texts to forge dominant colonial masculinities and attitudes. For many officials the initial reality of India lay as much in words as in actual experience. Mill’s eight-volume history, which had entered its fourth edition by the 1840s, surveilling the land from a position of manly rationalism and supposed objectivity, passed judgment on an area many times the size of England and far more populous. Even more remarkably, Mill’s lack of first-hand experience did nothing to diminish the influence of his work. Even 70 years after Mill’s death, Lord Sydenham, a hardliner who would later lead the charge against wartime political concessions for the colony (see Chapter 5), recalled in his memoirs that he “had studied India on paper” before departing for the governorship of Bombay in 1907.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, it would be a mistake to see British writers as dictating the construction of the effeminate Bengali and the masculine Englishman in a monolithic manner, for colonial gender roles proved just as unstable and subject to challenge as their domestic counterparts. As early as the 1860s the literary Tagore family of Jorasanko organized *melas* (gatherings or fairs) that attempted to reinforce indigenous culture and re-establish Indian manliness in a “space ‘unconstrained’ by colonial interference.” The gatherings drew upward of 20,000 visitors at the height of their popularity. They prominently displayed Indian handicrafts and agricultural products, in addition to staging patriotic essay and song contests.<sup>25</sup> The mela’s utilization of gymnastics and athletic competitions indicates that Bengal’s intelligentsia recognized at a very early juncture the need to perform Indian masculinity. The organizers pointedly invited British officials so that they could personally witness the physical prowess of the supposedly “emasculated” Bengalis. And while the Tagores admitted in an 1867 article that the “educated” babu required much physical improvement, they contrarily claimed that there existed plenty of muscle among the *lahitiya*ls—the men from the lower rungs of society who acted as enforcers and

protectors for the landowning *zamindars*. Following this line of thought, one author wondered why “Bengali low class men can be employed for such purposes” yet not “be brought up for the better purpose of being soldiers?”<sup>26</sup> This refrain re-emerged during the war scares with Russia and, more tellingly as we shall see, from 1914–1918.

Despite the Tagores’ suggestion that “natives” possessed a masculine and martial spirit, Bengali satirists themselves had begun using the self-reflexive term “babu” early in the century as a way to parody the province’s rising middle-class, a group that had initially adopted Persian mannerisms only to yield to Anglo affectations as British power increased.<sup>27</sup> Mrinalini Sinha further reminds us that the changing economic and material conditions of the later 1800s gave the “babu” greater specificity. An increasing number of Bengalis, pushed out of the business sector by Anglo-Indians, pursued a western education as a means of gaining administrative and professional positions in colonial government and society.<sup>28</sup> Many of these “educated Indians” emerged with an inadequate education and job prospects that were made worse by discriminatory practices.<sup>29</sup> Those who succeeded came to occupy what Anglo-Indians saw as archetypal “babu” jobs: lower-level civil service posts, positions in law, and, most dangerously of all, seditious journalistic endeavors. In the eyes of the Raj, the “educated classes” were the worst of the empire’s subcontinental subjects—unctuous, untrustworthy, and dangerously lacking the simple honesty of the sturdy peasant farmer as well as the rough and wild manliness of northern India’s “martial races” that served in the Indian Army.

The culturally thick replication of the effeminized “native” had a natural corollary in the reinforcement of British masculine identity and the underwriting of supposedly objective “manly” knowledge and power.<sup>30</sup> The cult of masculinity had a special resonance in late-Victorian Britain, permeating the public and private sphere and working in harness with social phenomena such as religion, as in the case of muscular Christianity.<sup>31</sup> More than this, manliness implied all that the “native” lacked, namely the shunning of emotion and the ability to exert steely self-control. As John Stuart Mill once suggested, England was “the country in which social discipline has most succeeded, not so much in conquering, as in suppressing whatever was most likely to conflict with it. The English more than any other people, not only act but feel according to rule.” As Michael C. C. Adams observed, this disciplining of the passions helped create the reserve and coolness under both literal and figurative fire that constituted “good form,” and allowed “a proper Englishman to block out the feminine . . . associated with the expression of sentiment.”<sup>32</sup> “Good form” meant



mastering one's emotions under the most stressful of situations and most decidedly *not* expressing feelings that might be construed as "feminine." In this ideological milieu, it was simply inconceivable for Government of India administrators to consider that any indigenous male could replace the imperial "man on the spot."<sup>33</sup> Only the Briton had the inherently masculine traits of detachment, logic, and common sense necessary for governing India's "credulous" and "excitable" peasantry. This same masculinity signaled a sexual self-control as well, one lacking in the effeminized and eroticized imaginary of colonial India. The alliteration of "educated," "emasculated," and "effeminate" thus came to represent virtually the same thing in British colonial vernacular—an effete, unmanly, and untrustworthy Indian upper crust. More tellingly, such "effeminate" Indians eventually comprised the bulk of the country's Indian National Congress [INC].

As much as masculinity was the portal to rule, it was equally a path to redemption, for the more radical members of the burgeoning anti-colonial movement welcomed the chance to rehabilitate Indian masculinity through a campaign of assassination and terror. The popular radical Aurobindo Ghose's series of articles for the Marathi paper *Indu Prakash* in 1893 laid bare the idiom of national humiliation and the need to retrieve "native" manliness by direct action. "Our actual enemy," declared Ghose, "is not any force exterior to ourselves, but our own crying weakness, our cowardice, our selfishness, our purblind sentimentalism." The country's path to salvation lay in a trial by fire and "our own reviving sense of manhood," not the "resolutions and constitutional platitudes" propagated by INC moderates.<sup>34</sup> What makes this so ironic is that Ghose had been thoroughly Anglicized as a young man. His father belonged to the politically moderate middle-class and reformist *Brahmo Samaj* movement and gave Aurobindo the middle name "Ackroyd" in honor of an English friend.<sup>35</sup> He forbade his children from speaking Bengali in the home and allowed his wife to forego *purdah*. Ghose later earned the Rawley Prize for Greek iambs and high marks in his classics Tripos at Cambridge. He possessed the ideal educational background for a colonial administrator, "trained for nothing but ready for anything" by dint of common sense and the value of classical instruction. Ghose easily passed the Indian Civil Service [ICS] written exam in 1890, yet protested its physical requirement, the horse-riding test, by deliberately refusing to take it. While Anglo officials argued that the ability to ride was essential to the duties of the ICS, particularly when visiting far-flung villages, Indians like Ghose chaffed at the requirement, pointing out that most "native" candidates would have no