

The Paradoxes of Ethnographic Intelligence

A Case Study of British India

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This paper uses the concept of ethnographic intelligence to describe how British colonial officials in India failed to defeat secessionist subversion. It argues that after 1857, significant changes took place in Indian society and that the long-term political implications of these were incorrectly assessed. Obsessed with preventing a violent uprising on the lines of 1857, colonial authorities underestimated the threat of non-violent seditious activity. They lost access to Indian society just when they needed it most. Furthermore, by creating an elaborate intelligence bureaucracy, the authorities narrowed the scope of security efforts, even as the scale of the secessionist threat grew.

Imperial Muddles

This paper uses the concept of ethnographic intelligence to explain why Britain had to relinquish its Indian empire in 1947. It argues that imperial policy towards Indian nationalism suffered from a chronically poor sense of timing. Misjudgments led to moderate nationalist leaders being marginalized and militant ones being strengthened. Over time, the secessionist agenda of the

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latter gained respectability among the Indian masses. Despite having detailed knowledge of secessionist plans, the British authorities failed to prevent their success. This was because they lacked knowledge of the reasoning that underwrote these plans. Instead of facing up to the cognitive divide between them and the Indians, British officials relied on pre-conceived analytical models to monitor subversion.

What resulted was a situation where the intelligence system of British India lost the ability to recognize gaps in its own coverage. This development originated from, and was sustained by, two paradoxical factors. First, as the need for information on secessionist activities increased, its availability decreased. With militant nationalism making inroads into the Indian polity, voluntary flows of information to the British-dominated colonial Government dried up. Second, as the popular base of the secessionist movement widened, the Government's response narrowed to encompass merely the containment of violence. Thus, information was evaluated from the perspective of whether it indicated a threat to British life and property, not long-term British policy.

Eventually, the Government of India succeeded in containing secessionist terrorism¹, but failed to contain secessionist subversion. By missing the wood for the trees, it sleepwalked into a situation where its own legitimacy was irreparably damaged. Consequently, when India attained independence on 15th August 1947, the event marked a triumph of subversion over authority. This paper uses 'ethnographic intelligence' as an analytical tool to study counter-subversion. It demonstrates how cultural barriers can distort threat appreciation and lead to misdirected countering action. In support of its arguments, the paper cites declassified reports of the colonial Intelligence Bureau (IB) and provincial Police of Bengal. At the centre of its findings lies a single theme – knowledge of an enemy does not automatically translate into

¹ The expressions 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' are used, throughout this paper, not in any sense adhering to a consistent contemporary definition, but rather in the sense applied by the British colonial establishment of the time. Such usage does not imply that the paper endorses the colonial regime's viewpoint, or the repressive methods it employed against the Indian people. Instead, the paper merely seeks to convey the historical record accurately, as depicted in declassified intelligence files.

power over him. Owing to their vast bureaucratic apparatus, the British had abundant information, but did not recognize its strategic value until it was too late. Information was plentiful, insight was scarce.

Ethnographic Intelligence – New Term, Old Concept

The term ‘ethnographic intelligence’ (EI) became a buzzword after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Faced with an insurgency that combined nationalist agendas with sectarian and Pan-Islamist ones, the U.S-led military coalition needed to adapt swiftly. Its intelligence effort had hitherto been focused on tracking the activities of conventional, i.e., symmetrical opponents. While analysis of vehicle heat signatures and battlefield imagery had proven crucial to the initial success of U.S forces in occupying Iraq, such data was useless in sustaining the occupation once the distinction between combatants and non-combatants got blurred. What was needed in the post-invasion phase of the Iraq conflict was knowledge of how Iraqi society was structured;² in other words, its ethnography.

The only precise definition of EI was supplied in 2004 by Dr. Anna Simons of the U.S Naval Postgraduate School. She described EI as ‘information about indigenous forms of association, local means of organization, and traditional methods of mobilization’.³ Such information could help American analysts ‘see’ hostile networks whose existence they would otherwise remain unaware of. A U.S psychological operations specialist, Lieutenant Colonel Fred Renzi, further elaborated the EI concept in a 2006 *Military Review* article.⁴ Since then, ethnographic intelligence has been regarded as a new term to denote the kind of local knowledge which was possessed by 19th century colonial officials. Writers on counterinsurgency have suggested that

² Robert Tomes, ‘Schlock and Blah: Counter-insurgency Realities in a Rapid Dominance Era’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2005), pp. 48-51

³ Quoted in Fred Renzi, ‘Networks: Terra Incognita and the Case for Ethnographic Intelligence’, *Military Review*, September-October 2006, pp. 16-17

⁴ Ibid.

answers to today's intelligence challenges might be found by studying the colonial period.⁵

This paper adheres to the minimalist definition advanced by Simons. It conceives of ethnographic intelligence as a triangulation of knowledge about the *core values* of a society, the *action units* prepared to defend these values, and the *mass communication methods* they employ. Between them, these three factors cover 'indigenous forms of association, local means of organization, and traditional methods of mobilization'. As the term implies, EI denotes knowledge gained by first-hand observation of an alien society. It is an information-heavy product, which requires sophisticated analysis in order to become policy-relevant. Central to the quality of such intelligence is the degree of access that the producer has to the society under observation. Another important factor is the interpretative ability of the producer – can s/he decode subterranean messages whose import is confined to those with a shared religious, linguistic or ethnic identity?

Intelligence and Colonial Conquest Prior to 1857

It is often overlooked that the British conquest of India took place because of a power vacuum that facilitated widespread domestic intrigue.⁶ Following the death of the Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, the Mughal Empire went into terminal decline.⁷ New regional powers sprang up across India, seeking to establish their own spheres of influence. The British East India Company, which had already been trading with the Mughal realm for a century, was courted as an ally.⁸ Having established quasi-

⁵ Nicola Perugini, 'Anthropologists at War: Ethnographic Intelligence and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan', *International Political Anthropology*, Vol.1, No. 2 (2008), p. 221

⁶ Ronald Robinson has written about a 'grand illusion' that dominates popular discourse on the British Raj. He argues that instead of being run by Britons, the Raj was actually run by Indians who acted on behalf of Britons. Cited in James Onley, 'Britain's Native Agents in Arabia and Persia in the Nineteenth Century', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2004), pp. 130-131

⁷ Jock Haswell, *Spies and Spymasters: A Concise History of Intelligence* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), pp. 34-35

⁸ Kapil Raj, 'Colonial Encounters and the Forging of New Knowledge and National Identities: Great Britain and India, 1760-1850', *Osiris*, 2nd Series,

diplomatic relations with prominent Indian principalities, the Company began to appreciate the fractious nature of Indian polity and felt emboldened to wade deeper into intra-Indian disputes.⁹

Initially, the British did not have to seek out information; it came to them through a process of alliance-building.¹⁰ Since they were careful to respect local traditions, and did not pose an obvious threat to Indian rulers, they were able to study indigenous power equations at close quarters.¹¹ As a purely commercial enterprise began to mutate into a military one, the East India Company gradually shut off informational flows to the Mughal court. Key nodes in the Mughal intelligence network – the provincial news writers – were bribed or threatened into silence.¹² This meant that the Company remained well-informed of opportunities for expansion, while its enemies were not.

Wherever they encountered a regime undivided by court intrigues, the land borders of British India stopped advancing. They then waited for political circumstances to change in their favour. One example of this is the Sikh kingdom of Ranjit Singh. Not until his death in 1839 did the East India Company attempt to annex Punjab, and even then it took the better part of a decade to do so. Similarly, Afghanistan, Nepal and Burma proved resistant to the strategy of ‘divide-and-conquer’.¹³

By 1857, the East India Company had come to rule 60 per cent of the subcontinent in all but name. The events of that year (the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ and the larger revolt which followed it) precipitated the imposition of direct rule from Britain. The Revolt was fuelled by a combination of political grievances and religiously-motivated hostility. Past mutinies within the Company

Vol. 15, *Nature and Empire: Science and the Colonial Enterprise* (2000), p. 121

⁹ Michael H. Fisher, ‘Indirect Rule in the British Empire: The Foundations of the Residency System in India (1764-1858)’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1984), pp. 399-403

¹⁰ G. J. Bryant, ‘Asymmetric Warfare: The British Experience in Eighteenth-Century India’, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 68 (2004), pp. 432-433

¹¹ Surendra Nath Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1957), pp. x-xii

¹² Robert Johnson, *Spying for Empire: The Great Game in Central and South Asia, 1757-1947* (London: Greenhill, 2006), pp. 69-73

¹³ Christopher Bayley, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 140-141

army had revealed faultlines in the relationship between British officers and their Indian subordinates. The latter were not prepared to accept that military professionalism required compromises with religious purity. Insensitive treatment of the issue by British officials exacerbated tensions.¹⁴ When the Company began encroaching into the territory of neutral Indian principalities, a convergence of interests appeared between the mutineers and some Indian princes.

The Revolt of 1857 was suppressed because the British could take advantage of internal rivalries amongst the Indians. According to one estimate, 80 per cent of the forces that reconquered the rebellious region were composed of Sikh, Afghan and Nepali mercenaries. Their prime motivation was not to help the British, but to loot as much as they could from the ruins of the Mughal Empire. The Sikhs had an additional incentive: they wanted to avenge the centuries of humiliation which they had suffered at the hands of Mughal rulers.¹⁵ Support for the British was also forthcoming from a number of Indian princes. All those local rulers whose territory had not already been seized by the East India Company remained neutral.

After the Revolt, the British created a system of patronage that was designed to keep traditional opinion-shapers happy. Ethnographic research established that Indian society was a deeply feudal and venerated hierarchy. Local chieftains and monarchs wielded tremendous influence over the rural population. Accordingly, the new colonial regime renounced further conquest of princely states. Landowners within the rebellious areas were co-opted by having their confiscated estates returned to them. Through such measures, the Government hoped to create 'breakwaters in the storm', which would protect it from future rebellions.¹⁶

The problem was, Indian society was itself undergoing seismic transformations which undermined the efficacy of this

¹⁴ Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, pp. 2-4

¹⁵ Julian Spilsbury, *The Indian Mutiny* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007), p. 74, p. 108 and pp. 344-345

¹⁶ Ian Copland, *The princes of India and the endgame of empire, 1917-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 16 and pp. 21-22

patronage system. It was the failure of the British to take these transformations into account that ultimately cost them their Indian empire.

A Transformation of Core Societal Values: The Emergence of Indian Nationalism

Until 1857, Indian nationalism was nonexistent. During the Revolt, efforts were made by Hindu and Muslim rebel leaders to emphasize their common interest *vis-à-vis* the British.¹⁷ These were dwarfed by the degree to which other Indian warlords either stayed out of the rebellion, or otherwise actively helped the British. Over the following decades, however, this loyalty was forgotten by successive generations of colonial officials, who chose to remember only the unpleasant aspects of 1857.¹⁸ A racial divide evolved between Europeans and Indians, and was institutionalized in a series of discriminatory laws. Resentment against such discrimination laid the foundation for Indian nationalism.¹⁹

Initially, the nationalist movement was reformist in character. Its proponents were westernized Indians who professed loyalty to the British Empire. Among them was an economist named Dadabhai Naoroji, who supplied the first intellectual critique of British rule. In May 1867 he propounded what became known as the 'Drain Theory' of colonial exploitation. According to this, the British had constructed an elaborate system of taxation and unrestricted free trade whose net effect was to devastate the Indian economy. Frequent famines and chronic malnutrition were the result of a deliberate program of pillage, and not mere misfortune. Popularized by secessionist leaders several decades later, the Drain Theory served to radicalize the Indian peasantry.²⁰

¹⁷ M. Farooq Solangi, *1857 and the Muslim India* (Islamabad: Alvi Publishers, 1990), p. 5 and pp. 27-29

¹⁸ Johnson, *Spying for Empire*, p. 82

¹⁹ Bruce T. McCully, 'The Origins of Indian Nationalism According to Native Writers', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1935), pp. 309-312

²⁰ Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N Panikkar and Sucheta Mahajan, *India's Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), pp. 91-101

In 1885, the nationalists organized themselves as the Indian National Congress. They did so with the encouragement of a former British civil servant, who had grown concerned about the objectiveness of colonial officials. It was felt that many British administrators were distorting their reports about the popular mood.²¹ A pro-Government Indian organization could serve as an intermediary between the imperial power and its subjects, or so the logic went. In fact, for 20 years, the Congress supinely pleaded with the authorities to increase Indian representation in Government, without avail. Frustrated over the lack of results, a number of Congressmen began to favour more extreme agendas, including secession from the Empire.

Since it was a moderate, Anglicized and non-secret organization, the Congress was not an intelligence target for the first two decades of its existence. Developments however, subsequently conspired to strengthen the militant fringe within the nationalist movement. In 1905, the Government of India opted to partition the province of Bengal. Its decision represented a threat to the interests of the Bengali Hindu middle class and led to the emergence of what was described as a local 'terrorist' movement.²² Although the terrorists were not motivated by secessionist goals, their anti-establishment views coincided with those of militant Congressmen. Henceforth, the latter became more strident in criticizing the authorities.

Another development which strengthened the drift towards secessionism was a failed insurrection in the Punjab in 1915. Over the previous years, Indians based in the United States made contact with Irish dissidents and German intelligence officials. With the start of the First World War, they decided to attack the British when they were distracted.²³ A mutiny was planned within regiments of the Indian Army stationed in Punjab. Although the

²¹ William Golant, *The Long Afternoon: British India 1601-1947* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p. 68

²² 'Memorandum on the history of terrorism in Bengal, 1905-1933', prepared by the Political Department of the Bengal Government, Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) Collection, India Office Records, File No. L/P&J/12/397, Document No. P&J(S) 1000 1933, p. 2

²³ Matthew Erin Plowman, 'Irish Republicans and the Indo- German Conspiracy of World War I', *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2003), p. 81

conspiracy was infiltrated and foiled, it engendered a siege mentality within the Government. This was to have lasting consequences, as it led to the Government, upon advice from intelligence officials, introducing a draconian piece of legislation in 1919. Known as the Rowlatt Act, this provided for the continued use of wartime powers of arrest and detention.²⁴

Protests against the Act were organized across India. On 13th April 1919, a force of 90 Indian and Nepali soldiers, under orders from a British officer, shot dead 379 unarmed persons at Jalianwalla Bagh in the town of Amritsar. Several of the victims had nothing to do with politics, and were singularly unfortunate in merely being in the vicinity of a protest meeting, scheduled to take place that day.²⁵ When details of the incident became known, they had a volcanic effect. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to say that, after 1919, Indian reformists stood fatally discredited. Henceforth, the nationalist movement would be dominated by secessionist ideologues, of whom the most prominent was a lawyer called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

Although Gandhi constantly obfuscated on his long-term views of Anglo-Indian relations, he now appears to have been irreconcilably hostile to the British Empire. For all his aversion to violence, he conceptualized the secessionist movement as a 'war'. Truces with the Government were only tactical measures to allow Indians to recover from the privations caused by Government counter-action. Once the required momentum had been built up again, anti-British agitations would be resumed as soon as a suitable pretext offered itself.²⁶

As a younger generation of activists took over the Congress leadership under Gandhi's tutelage, they absorbed his commitment to secession. However, their own inclinations led them to question the value of even appearing moderate, as Gandhi chose to. After 1920, the Congress expanded its network across

²⁴ Richard Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), pp. 298-300

²⁵ Alfred Draper, *The Amritsar Massacre: Twilight of the Raj* (London: Buchan & Enright, 1981), pp. 87-91

²⁶ Bipan Chandra, 'The strategy of the Indian National Congress', in John L. Hill ed., *The Congress and Indian Nationalism: Historical Perspectives* (London: The Curzon Press, 1991), pp. 90-91 and p. 95

India to become a full-fledged political party.²⁷ In 1930, the party described its objective as the attainment of complete independence for India.²⁸ Any form of existence under British rule, no matter how benevolent, was regarded as unacceptable. Needless to say, by this time the Congress was well and truly an intelligence target.²⁹

A Transformation of Action Units: The Congress as an Instrument of Subversion

The Revolt of 1857 failed largely because there was no unifying leadership among the rebels. Action was undertaken on an instinctive basis by mutinying regiments of the Company army.³⁰ Subsequently, gangs of marauders stepped in to loot anyone they could, whether European or Indian. Their depredations made the return of British rule seem almost a blessing. Meanwhile, owing to their superior situational awareness, thanks to the electric telegraph, British forces were able to regain the initiative.³¹

What changed over the following decades was that, after 1920, the Indian National Congress functioned as a Pan-Indian subversive machine. Its leadership role was reluctantly accepted by other anti-Government bodies, including terrorist groups.³² The latter found the Congress to be an excellent front for their

²⁷ Gopal Krishna, 'The Development of the Indian National Congress as a Mass Organization, 1918-1923', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1966), pp. 419

²⁸ 'A Note on Subversive Movements and Organizations (other than Terrorist) in India', prepared by H. Williamson, Director IB, September 1933, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/397, Document No. P&J(S) 1144 1933, p. 1

²⁹ Scotland Yard 'Special Report' on Indian National Congress, dated 17th June 1928, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/361, Document No. P&J(S) 940 1928. Also see 'List of present members of London Branch, Indian National Congress', File No. L/P&J/12/363, Document No. P&J(S) 306 1930

³⁰ C.A Bayley ed., *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1986), pp. 49-57

³¹ V.K Singh, 'Did the Telegraph save the British in 1857?', *USI Journal*, Vol. 137, No. 568 (2007), accessed online at http://usiofindia.org/article_Apr_jun07_11.htm, on 14th March 2008

³² Note on 'Activities of Revolutionaries in Bengal', 31st August 1924, IPI Collection IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/253 [No document number]

activities, and infiltrated it heavily. Their influence led to the Congress drifting away from the pacifist methods advocated by Gandhi, to a more activist stance as diversely epitomized by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Bose. Between them, Gandhi, Nehru and Bose dominated the Congress agenda after 1930, and ensured that it never swayed back to its reformist origins.

This is not to suggest that the three leaders acted in concert or that their worldviews were similar. Gandhi was committed to secessionism, but refused to endorse the use of violent methods. Nehru shared Gandhi's views on the utility of practicing moderation, but wanted to discomfit the Government by preaching extremism. Bose on the other hand, preached extremism and sought opportunities to practice it as well.³³ Only the lack of sufficient coercive power to physically expel the British from India kept him within the law. Even so, his intellectual influence on the Congress was tremendous. Under his presidency, the party veered away from any prospect of compromise with the Government, at a time when official efforts were being made to resurrect the reformists.

By the start of the Second World War, the Congress was virtually unrecognizable from the house-trained elitist debating society it had been in 1885. With Bose having fallen out with Gandhi and Nehru, the party was only divided between moderate secessionists and militant secessionists. Of reformists or other pro-Empire leaders there was no sign. There was broad agreement that the war represented an opportunity to extort independence out of the British. Although initially unhappy about taking advantage of the Government's vulnerability, Gandhi yielded to the militant mood of younger Congress activists. The latter had in any case, launched independent efforts to subvert the loyalty of Indian soldiers.³⁴ These were unsuccessful, but similar programs

³³ Johannes H. Voigt, 'Co-operation or Confrontation? : War and Congress Politics, 1939-42', in D.A Low ed., *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle 1917-47* (London: Heineman, 1977), pp. 351-352

³⁴ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 13th March 1930, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/389, Document No. P&J(S) 1269 1930

of anti-Government subversion among the peasantry proved effective.

Under Gandhi, the secessionists made a subtle but important shift in the nature of Congress activism. Instead of encouraging greater westernization of Indian society (as the reformists did), they advocated traditionalism. Ostensibly, the motive behind this maneuver was to re-vitalize the rural economy and diversify modes of production. While such positive effects were generated, a more insidious process was also at play. Congress managed to resurrect a vision of what Indian society was like prior to the arrival of the British – a vision which appealed to many.³⁵ Nationalism among the masses was strengthened by conjuring up images of a romanticized past.

Through an extensive propaganda apparatus, the Congress depicted Gandhi as a God-like figure who possessed miraculous healing powers. His profile, and that of the party, rose immensely among the illiterate rural population.³⁶ In 1937, the Congress stood for elections to the provincial Legislative Assemblies of British India. It won in six provinces and went on to form Governments there. Even this move however, only ended up strengthening the forces of subversion. Having seen how members of the party could be catapulted into positions of influence, Indian Policemen became wary about antagonizing them. During the Quit India agitation of 1942, junior Police officials hedged their bets against a British withdrawal by providing secret assistance to Congress activists.³⁷

The soft approach of the Security Forces (SFs) emboldened secessionists. Knowing that they would not be brutalized or killed in custody, many joined Gandhi's Quit India agitation. Gandhi himself had come to feel that a loosening of the proscription on violence was now in order, if the secessionist movement was to continue. Accordingly, he announced that henceforth, blame for any violent incidents would rest with the Government, even if the

³⁵ William Golant, *Long Afternoon*, p. 71

³⁶ Elliot M. Zashin, *Civil Disobedience and Democracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1972), p. 186

³⁷ Bipan Chandra, 'Strategy of the Indian National Congress', p. 83 and pp. 88-89

perpetrators were Congressmen.³⁸ By doing so, he in effect came clean about his end-game, which was to end British rule in India through any means. Bose meanwhile had traveled to Germany, to enlist Nazi help in raising an army of liberation from among Indian Prisoners of War.

Working with the German and Japanese Governments, Bose created an 80,000-strong force called the Indian National Army (INA).³⁹ It consisted of POWs who had been ‘turned’ whilst in captivity and motivated to fight for Indian independence. For the first time since 1857, a substantial number of military personnel joined the Indian secessionist movement. The psychological effect of this development upon British imperial policy was immense – it forced a realization that India was as good as lost. Between themselves, the Congress and the INA had exposed the powerlessness of the Indian princes. By acquiring a support base amongst the Indian peasantry, the Congress subverted the princes’ authority over their subjects. It had become an opinion-builder in its own right.

The Transformation of Mass Communication Methods: Creation of a Martyrdom Cult

Of all the interest groups that fought the British during 1857, only the fanatical Wahhabi cult seems to have operated a sophisticated mobilization system. The zealotry of its members meant they were disciplined enough to live innocuously within British-administered regions, and yet retain their sense of mission. Other clandestine networks, whether composed of Muslims or Hindus, collapsed in the face of brutal but highly effective British counterintelligence tactics. The Wahhabis, fired by a millennial worldview that placed them beyond the reach of temporal punishment, regarded the British victory as merely a setback. While some members of the cult took to the field against the

³⁸ P.N Chopra and S.R Bakshi, eds., *Quit India Movement: British Secret Documents* (New Delhi: Interprint, 1986), pp. 7-10

³⁹ Note on ‘The All India Forward Bloc’, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/648, Document No. P&J(S) 1648 1945

British, and suffered horrendous losses with equanimity, others stayed behind to function as organizers.⁴⁰

During the early 20th century, the Indian secessionist movement developed a similar mix of over-ground and underground components to sustain itself. Held together by their common Hindu identity, Congress activists and revolutionary terrorists in Bengal forged an alliance against the Government. This arrangement was gradually copied in other provinces, on a strictly informal basis.⁴¹ Since the Congress was officially committed to a policy of non-violent resistance, its members could not carry out terrorist attacks. To get around this self-imposed restriction, the party formulated “a most interesting definition of non-violence”.⁴² It held that while “members of the party are not to indulge in direct methods; if, to help Congress, they can persuade someone else to do acts which they are not supposed to do themselves, there is no objection”.⁴³

In effect therefore, the Congress outsourced violent activities to terrorist groups with whom it enjoyed a deniable relationship.⁴⁴ The latter provided muscle-power to support social and economic boycotts called by the party leadership. It is uncertain how much top-level leaders like Gandhi and Nehru knew about these methods of mobilization. Local party activists however, had no compunction about using terrorist groups to enforce anti-Government directives. To quote the Director of the Intelligence Bureau: “[h]ouses are burnt, crops are destroyed, threatening letters are written and received in large numbers, and dacoities [acts of banditry] are becoming distressingly frequent – in short, a state of open warfare is evidently springing into being between

⁴⁰ Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* (London: Abacus, 2007), pp. 124-125

⁴¹ Extracts from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 10th August 1933 and 14th September 1933, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/392, Document Nos. P&J(S) 916 1933 and P&J(S) 1063 1933

⁴² At least, that was how the IB chose to describe it.

⁴³ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 5th January 1933, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/369, Document No. P&J(S) 95 1933

⁴⁴ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 3rd November 1932, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/369, Document No. P&J(S) 1325 1932

those who have paid their revenue and those who refuse to do so”.⁴⁵

By fusing non-violence towards the British with violence against pro-Government Indians, the secessionists raised ‘cause consciousness’ among the masses. Further radicalization took place through the print media. Literacy rates among Indians had improved enormously since 1857, and the relaxation of official censorship led to an ever-widening torrent of pro-secessionist literature. Attacks on Government officials were given publicity, with attempts being made to rationalize them. Most Congressmen themselves had no reservations about glorifying the actions of terrorist groups. Upon being threatened with arrest for inciting violence, they merely responded by inserting a couple of lines urging restraint into otherwise inflammatory speeches.⁴⁶

The net effect was to convey an impression that there was no question about the legitimacy of the secessionist goal. Any dispute revolved only around the best means of achieving it. A ‘cult of martyrdom’ was woven around slain terrorists, who were posthumously claimed by over-ground secessionists as their own.⁴⁷ Enraptured by the adulation showered upon these individuals, many Indian youths drifted towards the armed underground.⁴⁸ Their recklessness was reinforced by a program of societal indoctrination devised by Gandhi. Exploiting the innately fatalistic nature of Hinduism, he urged his followers to revel in injuries inflicted by the Police.⁴⁹ A kind of open competition ensued, with political agitators seeking to score brownie points within their neighbourhoods by courting official displeasure.

As a non-state actor, all that the Congress had to do in order to discredit the authorities was to disrupt governance. Leaders like Subhash Bose urged college students to boycott classes and

⁴⁵ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 24th December 1930, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/368, Document No. P&J(S) 2128 1930

⁴⁶ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 19th November 1931, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/390, Document No. P&J(S) 1765 1931

⁴⁷ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 24th September 1931, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/390, Document No. P&J(S) 1486 1931

⁴⁸ Michael Silvestri, ‘The Bomb, Bhadrakok, Bhagavad Gita, and Dan Breen: Terrorism in Bengal and Its Relation to the European Experience’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 21 (2009), p. 15

⁴⁹ Golant, *Long Afternoon*, p. 62

prepare for an upcoming war with the British.⁵⁰ Parallel courts manned by Congressmen were set up, and petitioners asked to shun the official judiciary.⁵¹ Incidents of industrial sabotage became increasingly common during the 1930s, especially as Indian capitalists provided massive financial support to Congress programs. Their motive was partly ideological (motivated by genuine sympathy for secessionism), and partly mercenary. By sponsoring political instability, they hoped to drive British businesses out of India and buy up their assets at throwaway prices.⁵² The Congress itself welcomed capitalist support, since it provided leverage to destabilize the economy should another European war occur.

When he had no popular issue to use against the Government, Gandhi whiled away his time in social work. Much of this was apparently innocuous but was in fact, rich in symbolism.⁵³ Through his advocacy of spinning indigenous cloth, for example, he increased awareness of Naoroji's Drain Theory. Other interventions on behalf of exploited workers enhanced his own political profile and by extension, that of the secessionist movement. The result was that even persons who were uninvolved with politics became aware of a widespread resistance to British rule. During early 1857, a similar program of societal awakening had been carried out on a much smaller scale. Lotus flowers, regarded as a symbol of war by Hindus, had been secretly couriered between regiments of the East India Company army. Although not a word is known to have been spoken about the impending mutiny, the cultural context heightened anticipation of a showdown.⁵⁴ By openly eulogizing terrorists and exploiting worker-employer grievances, the Congress party achieved a much bigger mobilization.

⁵⁰ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 17th October, 1929, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/367, Document No. P&J(S) 1782 1929

⁵¹ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 27th November, 1930, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/368, Document No. P&J(S) 2049 1930

⁵² Note by the Intelligence Bureau, Government of India, Home Department, 'Congress and Big Business', 28 February 1944. Reproduced in Nicholas Mansergh ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-47, Volume IV, The Bengal Famine and the New Viceroyalty*, (London: HMSO, 1973), pp. 765-772

⁵³ Chandra, 'The strategy of the Indian National Congress', pp. 96-97

⁵⁴ Spilsbury, *Indian Mutiny*, p. 11

Combating Secessionism: Missed Opportunities

None of the three developments listed above were secret. Knowledge of them existed in both an informal, diffused sense of awareness among colonial officials, and in formal intelligence reports. After 1857, Europeans in India had no illusions about the extent of their popularity among natives. As early as 1883, one British writer had predicted that worsening rural poverty and growing urban literacy would foster a pan-Indian rebellion against the imperial power. He argued that unless British public opinion accepted the need for reform in India, moderate Indian nationalists could be driven towards militancy.⁵⁵ This is exactly what happened.

For reasons that will shortly be explained, the colonial authorities let slip two strategic opportunities to derail the Indian secessionist movement. The first came in 1907, when the Congress formally split into moderate and extremist factions.⁵⁶ The moderates, who remained committed to the original program of reform within the Empire, were the majority. Their position was strengthened by the Government, which made small concessions in order to isolate the extremists. During secret negotiations, Government emissaries promised that more concessions would follow aimed at increasing Indian participation in decision-making. Armed with this assurance, the moderates took on the extremists in ideological debates, only to find the Government renege on its word.⁵⁷ Thereafter, Congressmen were never prepared to trust British interlocutors, suspecting that they were only being used to create dissension within the nationalist movement.

The second missed opportunity was in 1930, just after the Congress had declared its goal as complete independence from the British Empire. Chastened by the outrage which followed the 1919 Amritsar Massacre, the Government had become cautious about quelling political agitations through massive repression.

⁵⁵ Shyama Roy, *Violent Struggle and India's Freedom Movement (1857-1945)*, (New Delhi: Janaki Prakashan, 2007), p. 2

⁵⁶ Ray T. Smith, 'The Role of India's "Liberals" in the Nationalist Movement, 1915-1947', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 7, (1968), pp. 610-614

⁵⁷ Chandra et al, *India's Struggle for Independence*, p. 137

When Gandhi launched a campaign of civil disobedience, aimed at eroding Government authority, he was conciliated instead of being severely punished. The Viceroy treated him as a negotiating partner who commanded widespread support among the Indians, thereby inadvertently delivering such support. During the 1930s and '40s, efforts were made to co-opt the Congress and induce it to embrace constitutionalism. These came too late: under the combined influence of Gandhi, Nehru and Bose, the Congress had become resistant to conciliatory overtures. Any concessions made by the Government were regarded as nothing more than opportunities to further undermine British prestige in India.

With the benefit of hindsight, it now appears as though the colonial intelligence apparatus did not appreciate the implications of its own information. While the Congress was perceived as an instrument of subversion, it was also given respectability through negotiations. The Intelligence Bureau was well-informed about factional rivalries within the party, but could not turn this knowledge to the Government's advantage. Most importantly, it knew that terrorists were using the Congress as a front for their own operations.⁵⁸ Assessments compiled during the 1930s warned that violent secessionism was gaining large numbers of adherents.⁵⁹ They did not highlight a second, equally important issue: Indian supporters of the Empire were increasingly rare.

Dependence on Archaic Analytical Frameworks

Ultimately, British counter-subversion in India failed to contain secessionism because it was based on archaic analytical frameworks. Ever since 1857, it had been official policy to promote divisiveness between Hindus and Muslims. The idea was to depict the imperial power as a stabilizing force in India. A key plank of the Government's anti-Congress strategy was the Muslim League, set up in 1905 to promote pro-British views. The League was intended to be a counter-weight to the Congress.⁶⁰ Its

⁵⁸ 'Joint Committee on Indian Constitutional Reform', IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/397, Document No. P&J(S) 1236 1933, pp. 1-2

⁵⁹ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 11th December 1930, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/390, Document No. P&J(S) 37 1931

⁶⁰ Narinder Singh Sarila, *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2005), pp. 65-66

leadership was suspicious of the latter's demands for democratic governance, anticipating that numerical superiority would give Hindus control over any political dispensation. However, this did not automatically make them advocates of continued British rule over India. It just meant that they would not accept a Congress Government ruling over Muslim majority regions.⁶¹ Unlike in 1857, internal rivalries between the Indians did not lend themselves to advancing British objectives. This paper will now explain why British officialdom misread the political dynamics of India so badly as to lose the country.

Ethnographic Intelligence Paradox One: Access to Indian society reduced even as the need for it grew

It is interesting to note that expansions of the colonial intelligence bureaucracy *preceded rather than followed* growth phases in the secessionist movement. For thirty years after 1857, there was neither an all-India intelligence network nor a nationalist organization. As has already been stated before, the Congress, when it was set up in 1885, was intended to fulfill the role of a loyal opposition. Secessionism was nowhere on its agenda. Even so, in December 1887, the Government created a Central Special Branch, which acted as an embryonic political Police force. Its job was to coordinate the activities of numerous provincial Special Branches, which handled the vast bulk of data collection. The Branches functioned as tripwires, meant to warn of civil unrest. They monitored political organizations and their publications, religious sects and their doctrines, the movements of criminals, the state of public opinion, illegal trade in firearms, the availability of food and water, and inter-regional migration patterns.⁶²

In short, a system was constructed to acquire information that would normally form the bedrock of ethnographic intelligence. However, its utility was hampered by a politically retrograde trend that was playing itself out across India. After the 1857

⁶¹ Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1997), p. 570

⁶² Percival Griffiths, *To Guard My People: The History of the Indian Police* (London: Ernst Benn Limited, 1971), pp. 344-345

Revolt had been crushed the then Governor-General of India, Lord Canning, had warned that Britons were likely to forget how much they owed their victory to Indian support. His prediction came true: during the tranquil three decades after the uprising, a deep racial divide took root between Europeans and Indians. Inter-community marriages, once an indicator of how well Britons had integrated into India, were frowned upon.⁶³ Both sides aggravated the estrangement. Europeans came to regard Indians as treacherous and uncivilized, while Indians regarded the former as unclean because they were either infidels (to the Muslims) or outcasts (to the Hindus).⁶⁴

The ease with which well-placed Britons could pick up court and bazaar gossip diminished, as politically astute Indians replaced candour with sycophancy. No social class was more guilty of the latter than local monarchs – the *rajās* and *maharajās* who the Government trusted to contain subversive movements. Eager to curry favour with the new masters of India, Indian princes rushed to Anglicize themselves. Some took pride in declaring how far removed they were from the Indian psyche.⁶⁵ Although such pronouncements enhanced their respectability with the Government, they did little to rally public opinion in favour of the British. Seen from this perspective, it is hardly surprising that the colonial regime came to depend increasingly on secret intelligence to obtain what had previously been open knowledge. With native society closing itself off to Europeans, and *vice versa*, paid informers were the only means of acquiring information.

Reflecting this trend, in 1903, the Central Special Branch was strengthened and renamed as the Department of Criminal Intelligence (DCI). Since there was no organized subversive threat to the colonial regime as yet, the DCI divided its resources between political and criminal surveillance. The latter accounted for most of its work during its early years.⁶⁶ Given the intricate organization that underlay colonial policing systems, surveillance

⁶³ Consequently, the 'affective knowledge' which had greatly helped the early British conquests of India no longer existed. Bayley, *Empire and Information*, pp. 7-8

⁶⁴ S.M Burke and Salim Al-Din Quraishi, *The British Raj in India: A Historical Review* (Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1994), pp. 51-61

⁶⁵ Copland, *The princes of India*, pp. 26-27

⁶⁶ Poplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence*, pp. 42-45

of criminals was a relatively mundane activity. It was perhaps with this in mind that the Secretary of State refused to sanction posts for Hindu or Muslim analysts in the DCI. He felt that the British officer who headed the Department should by himself be capable of “gauging native feeling and opinion”.⁶⁷ Two years later, the partition of Bengal led to the emergence of a terrorist movement. In a further two years, the Congress had split into reformist and secessionist camps.

For most of its duration, British rule in India was marked by a belief that Indians were incapable of being good intelligence managers. Although their services were required for low-brow tasks like agent-running, it was thought that Britons could monopolize analysis. Such views were based partly on reality, and partly on racial prejudice.⁶⁸ On the one hand, almost no Indians had experience of high-level administration in departments dealing with security. This automatically came in the way of their professional advancement, even when no racial barriers existed. On the other hand, it had been precisely such barriers that prevented Indians from reaching intermediate posts which would have qualified them for managerial responsibilities.⁶⁹

Thus the colonial intelligence system essentially remained two-tiered, with Indians producing information and Britons evaluating it. Although some European Policemen were prepared to ‘go native’ in the pursuit of information, few actually had a talent for it.⁷⁰ In the main, it was the Indian constable or sub-

⁶⁷ Griffiths, *To Guard My People*, p. 347

⁶⁸ This might have been because, in the aftermath of 1857, the British propounded a theory that Indians could be either brave or clever, but not both. According to this ‘Martial Race’ Theory, intelligent Indians were automatically cowards, while brave ones were stupid. Thus, neither possessed the balanced personality required of an intelligence officer. Jeffrey Greenhut, ‘Sahib and Sepoy: An Inquiry into the Relationship between the British Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army’, *Military Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1984), pp. 15-16

⁶⁹ ‘Minute from Military Secretary W. Johnston – Terrorism in Bengal, Conference at Government House, etc.’, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/398, Document No. P&J(S) 907/34

⁷⁰ T.E Lawrence himself complained once that merely dressing up in Arab clothes did not make him think like an Arab, and that attempting to do so drove him to near-madness. Pankaj Mishra, ‘More Trouble Than It Is Worth’, *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 11, No. 3, (2005), p. 443

inspector who first came into contact with subversive activity. These individuals remained loyal to their employers, but had little reason for sentimental attachment to the British Empire. Their contribution to its existence earned them the status of collaborators and led to social ostracism. Close relatives of Policemen were pressured into disowning them, and family criticism strained their professional loyalties.⁷¹

Simultaneously, a perceptible change took place in the quality of British intelligence personnel. Prior to 1857, when the East India Company was still an expansionist power, its officials were driven by a quest for plunder. Their motivation was high, since risk-taking often produced significant monetary benefits.⁷² After direct British rule was established in 1858, this dynamic no longer operated. India became a place where civil servants could draw massive salaries through the discharge of relatively routine duties. Service in the subcontinent became a sinecure for social climbers and career bureaucrats, who lacked the daring or commitment of their predecessors. Many were content to serve out their time in the country, without seeking to understand its people.⁷³ Consequently, British knowledge of the popular mood in India began to atrophy.

Ethnographic Intelligence Paradox Two: As the threat range widened, the focus of concern narrowed

Another problem was caused by the growing range of manifestations that the secessionist movement took. Although the two main players were the Congress and revolutionary terrorist groups, other important actors included the Indian Communists and the Ghadar Party. The latter was a group of overseas-based Indians who were keen to promote an insurrection against the

⁷¹ The psychological pressure on Indian Policemen increased considerably from 1920 onwards. 'Histories of the Non-Co-operation and Khilafat Movements', prepared by the Intelligence Bureau in 1925, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/129, [No document number], p. 56

⁷² This was pointed out to the researcher by officers of post-colonial Indian Intelligence. They argued that the potential rewards of risk-taking during the heyday of imperialist conquest dwarf those offered to intelligence professionals today.

⁷³ Dennis Kincaid, *British Social Life in India, 1608-1937* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1938), pp. 216-223

British, on the lines of the 1857 revolt. They had been responsible for the abortive 1915 rebellion in the Punjab. During the 1930s, all four of these actors came together at different times to discuss strategy. The Intelligence Bureau (IB), as the Department of Criminal Intelligence was now called, knew about the ideological cross-pollination taking place among the secessionists.⁷⁴

The IB appears to have been both alarmed and confused by the knowledge. From 1935 onwards, the IB monitored developments in the secessionist movement without being able to get ahead of them. That year, the armed underground agreed, upon advice from the Communist International, to adopt a 'Trojan Horse' policy. Terrorists, Communists and Ghadar Party members would infiltrate the Congress and capture positions of influence within the organization.⁷⁵ They would then mount an all-India campaign of radicalization. Highly motivated cadres would infiltrate the Indian military, and form revolutionary cells. Their task would be to increase soldiers' awareness of the secessionist movement.⁷⁶ Since the Army was considered to be the Government's weapon of last resort, compromising it was a high priority for the subversives.

Slowly, gaps started to appear in the IB's coverage of secessionist activities, given the sheer range these compassed. The agency realized that Congress was only part of the problem, but was unable to situate it within the broader secessionist movement. Accordingly, it adopted an analytical model which presumed the existence of a highly structured, well-planned conspiracy to end British rule. The IB decided that the Congress doctrine of non-violence was just an elaborate hoax, and that the party was preparing to lead a massive insurgency.⁷⁷ Pacifists like Gandhi were either insincere or insignificant. Haunted by the

⁷⁴ 'A Note of Terrorism in India (Except Bengal)' prepared by H. Williamson, Director IB, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/397, Document No. P&J(S) 1000 1933, p. 1

⁷⁵ 'Note on the Policy and Activities of the Terrorist Parties in Bengal from 1937 to August 1939', IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/395, Document No. P&J 1286 1940, p. 1

⁷⁶ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 10th July 1930, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/389, Document No. P&J(S) 1472 1930

⁷⁷ Extracts from Weekly Report of the Director, IB, 25th April 1929 and 9th May 1929, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/389, Document Nos. P&J(S) 938 1929 and P&J(S) 944 1929

prospect of another mutiny within the Army as had occurred in 1857, the authorities decided to “watch the shores rather than the sea”.⁷⁸ They thus surrendered the civilian population of India to the psychological grip of secessionist ideologues, in order to keep the Army immune from subversion.

By hypnotizing themselves with thoughts of combating a future violent rebellion, intelligence analysts underestimated the ongoing campaign of non-violent subversion. In fact, the secessionist movement was less regimented than the IB and its consumers believed. Strong differences of opinion existed not only between those who advocated violence and those opposed to it, but even amongst the former. Terrorist groups were unable to coordinate their activities owing to inter-personal rivalries and ideological rifts.⁷⁹ What made these contradictory influences still come together in a manner harmful to the Government was the broader context. In the final analysis, all factions of the secessionist movement shared a common hostility to British rule.⁸⁰ Even if they could not agree on how it was to be ended, through experimentation they were pushing developments in a direction which weakened the Government’s position. By the time the agency acknowledged that radicalization within society was bound to affect the armed forces, matters had moved on.⁸¹

Seen against Bose and Nehru, Gandhi appeared to be almost a moderating influence on the secessionist movement. His rejection of conspiratorial methods meant that he kept the Government fully informed of his activities.⁸² This greatly facilitated surveillance of the over-ground component of the secessionist movement, but with unexpected drawbacks. The Government was overwhelmed with trivia about planned Congress rallies and the speeches of secessionist leaders. Meanwhile, a comparable depth of coverage was not available on

⁷⁸ Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence*, pp. 89-90

⁷⁹ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 18th December 1937, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/394, Document No. P&J(S) 1253 1937

⁸⁰ ‘A Note on Subversive Movements and Organizations (other than Terrorist) in India’, p. 1

⁸¹ This concern arose in the Government around 1943. Chopra and Bakshi, eds., *Quit India Movement* p. 305

⁸² Richard Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 80

'hard targets', i.e., those surrounded by good counterintelligence systems.⁸³ One of these was Subhash Bose. So alert was he to Government surveillance that despite being a high-priority target, he remained virtually inscrutable. One Police spy assigned to watch him got so desperate, he literally pleaded with Bose for information to feed his handlers.⁸⁴

Intelligence coverage of Indian secessionism thus became dichotomous. It was split between political intelligence on the Congress, and security intelligence on terrorist groups. Ideally, a fusion of the two would have produced ethnographic intelligence, and thus helped ascertain the bigger picture. The colonial Government however, persisted in viewing each in isolation. Given the IB's presumption that at some point, the secessionist movement would take a violent turn, it focused more on counter-terrorism. Although the agency was unable to intercept Bose as he escaped for Germany in 1941, it subsequently did a good job of monitoring his supporters. A planned uprising by them was thwarted in mid-1943 through surveillance of suspected terrorists in Bengal.⁸⁵ Despite this success, the IB and Government of India could not resist the impact that relentless secessionist propaganda had on Indian society.

The full implications of this only became evident after the war, when the Government debriefed captured members of the Indian National Army. Interrogators found that the prisoners were motivated by strong belief in the rightness of their actions. These actions were strictly speaking, treasonous, but the INA members were confident that they could win over other Indian soldiers to the secessionist cause whilst in captivity.⁸⁶ Admiration of Bose

⁸³ Owing to Soviet advice, Indian secessionist groups had started to develop a keen interest in counterintelligence tactics. Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 19th May 1934, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/393, Document No. P&J(S) 495 1934

⁸⁴ R.N Kulkarni, *Sin of National Conscience* (Mysore: Kritagnya, 2004), pp. 40-41

⁸⁵ Note on 'The All India Forward Bloc', IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/648, Document No. P&J(S) 1648 1945

⁸⁶ Note by Military Intelligence (Extract), 'South East Asia Command and India Command Weekly Security Intelligence Summary No. 189', 15th June 1945. Reproduced in Nicholas Mansergh ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-47, Volume V, The Simla Conference* (London: HMSO, 1974), pp. 1127-1129

was so high that it in effect, rivaled that of Gandhi.⁸⁷ Based on these reports, the IB assessed that even sections of Indian society which had hitherto supported British rule had now turned hostile.⁸⁸ Indications were that if harsh punishment was meted out to INA members, there might well be an all-out mutiny of the Indian armed forces. Should that happen, the best that Britain could hope for was to evacuate Europeans from India, using reinforcements from other parts of the Empire.⁸⁹ Given this bleak scenario, the Labour Government of Clement Atlee sensibly decided to carry out an orderly withdrawal from the subcontinent.

Counter-terrorism vis-à-vis Counter-subversion

Where did the British Empire go wrong in its treatment of Indian secessionism? An answer might be found in the writings of a veteran IB officer, who is widely regarded as independent India's leading expert on terrorism. He writes, "Terrorists strike where their intentions and capabilities meet the opportunities. The success of counter-terrorism lies in degrading their capabilities, forcing them to change their intentions, and denying them opportunities to strike."⁹⁰ It appears that, while the British colonial regime succeeded in the first and third tasks, it failed in the second.

Certainly, from a narrow body-count perspective, counter-terrorist efforts in British India were highly successful. To begin with, terrorist groups were overwhelmingly concentrated in the

⁸⁷ Note by Military Intelligence (Extract), 'South East Asia Command and India Command Weekly Security Intelligence Summary No. 194', 20th July 1945. Reproduced in *ibid*, pp. 1284-1285

⁸⁸ Correspondence between Government of India, Home Department to the Secretary, Political Department, India Office, 20th November 1945. Reproduced in Nicholas Mansergh ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942-47, Volume VI, The post-war phase: new moves by the Labour Government* (London: HMSO, 1976), pp. 512-515

⁸⁹ Correspondence between General Auchinleck to Chiefs of Staff (via Director of Intelligence, India and Cabinet Offices), 22nd December 1945. Reproduced in *ibid*, pp. 675-677

⁹⁰ Ajit Doval, 'Needed: War on Error', *Indian Express*, 30th August 2007, accessed online at www.indianexpress.com/news/needed-war-on-error/213413/2, on 15 March 2009

province of Bengal.⁹¹ Although other provinces began to show signs of restiveness during the 1930s, it was only in Bengal that an extensive support network existed. Within this province, a total of just 112 persons were killed in 375 attacks between 1907 and 1932. Over 50 per cent of these (70 in total) were killed in the twelve-year interlude following the Congress split in 1907 and preceding the 1919 Amritsar Massacre.⁹² Yet, the latter development so inflamed Indian public opinion that, thereafter, terrorist groups began to specifically target British noncombatants.⁹³ (Previously, they had restricted themselves to attacking Government officials and Police informers.)

Therein lies the rub: success in counter-terrorism came at the cost of success in counter-subversion. What would today be called the 'battle for hearts and minds' was lost because of the physical defences and discriminatory laws which safeguarded British lives. After the 1857 Revolt, Europeans in India lived in pristine, well-guarded enclaves, where no Indians apart from domestic servants were allowed. They thus lay beyond the operational reach of terrorist groups based in the squalid, labyrinthine alleys of Indian towns.⁹⁴ Furthermore, the 1878 Arms Act had made it mandatory for Indians to obtain a license before owning a firearm, while Britons were exempt from such restrictions. This, together with tight border controls, made it virtually impossible for terrorists to procure arms in any substantial measure.⁹⁵

Where such defences boomeranged on the colonial regime was in the changing international context which the British Empire found itself in during the 20th century. Here, the intelligence failure was not so much one of collection or even analysis, but of perception. No attempt was made to take stock of

⁹¹ 'DIB's view of the terrorist situation outside Bengal, Assam & Burma subsequent to August 1933 when "A note on Terrorism in India" was printed', IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/398, Document No. P&J(S) 1000/33, p. 1

⁹² Bengal Police Criminal Investigation Branch Report on 'Recruitment of Terrorists in Schools and Colleges', IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/391, Document No. P&J(S) 1059 1932, p. 2

⁹³ Silvestri, 'Bomb, Bhadrak, Bhagavad Gita, and Dan Breen', p. 3

⁹⁴ Extract from Weekly Report of the Director IB, 15th January 1931, IPI Collection, IOR, File No. L/P&J/12/390, Document No. P&J(S) 37 1931

⁹⁵ Zashin, *Civil Disobedience and Democracy*, p. 184

current political trends in India and project them onto future international scenarios. Consequently, the Government of India did not understand the nuances of the thinking which drove Indian secessionists. From the 1920s onwards, a general consensus built up that the next big push against British rule would have to take place during another European war.⁹⁶ Moral scruples about attacking the Empire when it was fending for its survival were overcome. Gandhi's decision to launch his Quit India agitation just when Britain's armies were on the run, from Singapore to Suez, indicated the degree to which Anglo-Indian relations had deteriorated.

The experience of British India offers a major point to ponder in the ongoing War on Terror. Should counter-terrorism aim to deny the political objective of a terrorist movement, or should it confine itself to discouraging the use of terrorist tactics? A preemptive crackdown on terrorist groups might lead to a drop in violence, but it might also force them to introspect about their military weakness.⁹⁷ By developing a better understanding of the context within which they operate, terrorists usually become more, not less, dangerous. They develop a keen sense of timing and learn to optimize employment of scarce resources.⁹⁸ Once the intention to attack is preserved, capabilities can be gradually rebuilt and fresh opportunities can be awaited. Denying the hope of ultimate success to terrorists requires knowledge of the social system within which they operate. Unfortunately, such knowledge progressively becomes rarer as the need for it increases.

A final point needs to be made about the importance of differing time-scales. Intelligence analysts need to take a similar view of time as their counterparts in a subversive organization. Failure to do so perpetuates an illusion of tranquility in what might be the eye of a very big storm. This is because hostile

⁹⁶ Roy, *Violent Struggle*, p. 55 and p. 140

⁹⁷ Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 219

⁹⁸ Brian A. Jackson, John C. Baker, Kim Cragin, John Parachini, Horacio R. Trujillo and Peter Chalk, 'Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1-Organizational Learning in Terrorist Groups and Its Implications for Combating Terrorism', accessed online at www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG331.pdf, on 15 March 2009.

memories can last very long without being detected.⁹⁹ An example is provided by a (perhaps apocryphal) story set in the 1857 Rebellion. As he was about to be hanged, a mutineer called upon his infant son to avenge his death. He asked that his son, Mazar Ali, grow up to kill either the British officer who had ordered him tortured, or his descendants. A few weeks later, the officer in question died in battle, and the episode was forgotten. That is, until 30 years later. In March 1887, an Indian soldier shot dead his adjutant. The soldier refused to reveal his motive for the crime. Shortly after his execution, a pamphlet mysteriously appeared in the regimental barracks, explaining the incident. The assassin's name was Mazar Ali. His victim had been the only son of the British officer who tortured his father.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ David Barno, 'Challenges in Fighting a Global Insurgency', *Parameters*, September 2006, pp. 21-24

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Ward, *Our Bones Are Scattered* (London: John Murray, 1996), pp. 538-539