Title: ‘The only safe haven of refuge in all the world’: Paris, Indian ‘revolutionaries’, and imperial rivalry, *c*. 1905–40

Abstract: Focusing on British Indian subjects who travelled to France in the early twentieth century and who resided in Paris, this article argues that these migrants occupied a position that was simultaneously privileged and invidious. It urges that closer attention be paid to the group for two reasons. First, British Indians in Paris were able to negotiate contentious and potentially hazardous political situations according to context and audience, sometimes mobilizing their status as British subjects as a means of achieving limited preferential treatment from the French state, at other times making use of a certain conception of Frenchness to garner support among socialist and anti-imperial movements. Second, the policing of the group reveals collaboration and competition between imperial nation-states and between different anticolonial movements, analysis of which can nuance the growing body of historical research on the policing of foreigners and colonial subjects in Europe.

Key words: interwar Paris; Indian nationalism; anticolonialism; policing; inter-imperial rivalry

‘The only safe haven of refuge in all the world’: Paris, Indian ‘revolutionaries’, and imperial rivalry, *c*. 1905–40

On 30 August 1938, Ali Khan Imtiaz, an Indian student from Lahore who had been studying in Paris since 1935, wrote to the British Foreign Secretary to request his assistance:

I have been living in Paris for the last three years as a student. All of a sudden on 1 July of the year I was taken to the Police Station although my passport and my identity papers were in perfect order after examination. The next morning I was given an expulsion order which naturally came to me as a great shock. (Imtiaz, 1938)

Mr Imtiaz, the son of Umar Daraz (who had been granted the title of Khan Bahadur for his service as a sub-registrar and magistrate to the British (Buck, 1914: 28)), was not without influential supporters. A family friend, a barrister in Lahore, petitioned the viceroy about this peremptory order and, as a result of intervention by the British Embassy, Imtiaz was allowed to return from Belgium (where he resided temporarily after his expulsion) to Paris (Chand, 1938). His return was, however, brief, and he was expelled again on 6 December 1938. At this point, the British Embassy declined to become involved for a second time, contesting Imtiaz’s claim that he had been expelled to Belgium in December within two hours of being taken to the police station, and confirming to the Foreign Secretary that the reason for the expulsion was that Imtiaz was ‘a political extremist, or, at any rate associat[ed] with political extremists’ (Phipps, 1938). He was refused the right to go back to conclude his affairs in Paris and instead found himself forced to return to India (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, 1939). Although Imtiaz maintained that he had never been political, an anonymous agent working for the Service de Contrôle et d’Assistance en France des Indigènes des Colonies françaises (CAI) — a service created by the Ministère des Colonies to supervise, and also to carry out surveillance of, French colonial subjects and *protégés* in metropolitan France — had filed a report suggesting otherwise. The report alleged that Imtiaz was in contact with Indochinese anticolonial agitators as part of the Oriental Society, a small group set up in Paris in 1925 with the aim of correcting misinformation in the European press about Asia (CAI, 1938). This report was alluded to by an official at the French Ministère des Affaires étrangères when Eric Phipps (the British ambassador to France) sought further information about the matter, and it was deemed sufficient evidence to convince the India Office that Imtiaz was a dangerous anticolonial (Phipps, 1938).

The case of Imtiaz generated a thin file in the India Office Records (L/P&J/12/494), a short report (CAI, 1938) which is now held in the archives of the CAI,[[1]](#footnote-1) and a dossier of thirty-one documents in the Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris (I W 938 43170). There were no further investigations by the British police forces or by the CAI following Imtiaz’s second, and definitive, expulsion. The incident nevertheless provides a striking illustration of how Indians who made their home in metropolitan France, being effectively subject to two imperial systems, could attempt to capitalize on their status as imperial subjects of a rival empire in order to assert control over their own lives; and how they could, conversely, fall foul of competing imperial agendas. While Imtiaz was initially able to appeal to the British Foreign Secretary and the British Embassy to intercede against a foreign power, the second expulsion was upheld as the British had become convinced of the danger that he posed to their empire in India — not because of any Indian nationalist activity by Imtiaz but because he had been seen with Indochinese activists who were being closely monitored by the French CAI. Focusing on British Indian subjects who travelled to France in the early twentieth century and who resided chiefly in Paris, this article argues that the group occupied a position that was simultaneously privileged and invidious in what Goebel (2015) calls the ‘anti-imperial metropolis’. It urges that closer attention be paid to the group (which was small in number, largely consisting of young male students) for two reasons. First, British Indians in France were transnational actors who, to adopt Clavin’s phrase, ‘honed their ability’ (2005: 423) to cross national-imperial borders, negotiating personal and political subjectivities according to their socio-political contexts and audiences, sometimes mobilizing their status as British subjects as a means of achieving preferential treatment from the French state, at other times making use of a certain conception of Frenchness to garner support among socialist and anti-imperial supporters. Second, the policing of the group reveals collaboration and competition between imperial nation-states and between different anticolonial movements, analysis of which can nuance the growing body of historical research on the policing of foreigners and colonial subjects in Europe (see Kitson, 2014; Lewis, 2007; Rosenberg, 2006). In 1927 the civil liberties activist Roger N. Baldwin idealized Paris as the ‘only safe haven of refuge in all the world’ (1927: 460). This was a rhetorical fantasy rather than the reality for the thousands of non-European migrants who resided in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century; but, as the following discussion will demonstrate, the gap between ideal and reality was especially pronounced for British Indians.

Adopting micro-historical and comparative approaches, this article brings together two fields of scholarship: the historiography of the British and French empires, and postcolonial histories of anticolonial nationalism. Since Cooper and Stoler called for the metropole and colony to be treated ‘in a single analytic field’ (1997: 4), what Wilson characterized in 2004 as the ‘new imperial history’ has demonstrated how colonial contact took place not only on the peripheries of empires; rather, the metropoles of Britain and France were as much shaped by the colonies as the colonies were by the metropole.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the same time, practices of writing history — which in the immediate post-colonial period tended to be, as Cooper suggested, ‘nationally bound’, with the first histories of anticolonial nationalisms challenging complacent assumptions about the unidirectional spread of ideas from the metropoles to the global south — have moved on to examine other circuits of knowledge beyond those ‘shaped by the Metropole–colony axis alone’ (2005: 22). A focus on the local alongside the global has foregrounded the practices of colonialism in particular sites outside the framework of nation-states while also showing that contact between peripheries, either in the colonies or in colonial centres, could serve as a means of precipitating change (Barth and Cvetkovski, 2015; Fischer-Tiné, 2007; Pairaudeau, 2016: 15–18). Both in the ‘new imperial history’ of the French empire and in histories of anticolonial nationalism and of Pan-Africanism, the role of Paris as a hub has loomed large. Over thirty years ago Liauzu’s *Aux Origines des Tiers-Mondismes* established France, and Paris specifically, as ‘le centre constitutif d’une intelligentsia coloniale’ (1982: 137); since the publication of Stovall’s *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (1996), the centrality of Paris to any discussion of what Stovall describes as ‘a new type of black community, one based on positive affinities and experiences rather than the negative limitations of segregation’ (1996: xv), has become axiomatic (see, for example, Berliner, 2002; Blake, 1999; Edwards, 2003; Jules-Rosette, 1998; Stovall, 2012; Sweeney and Marsh, 2013). More recently, Boittin’s *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (2010) has explored both anti-imperialism and black communities in Paris, emphasizing how black colonial migrants (Africans and Antilleans), along with that other marginalized group, women, transformed Paris after the First World War into a site of transnational connections and, in so doing, ‘colonized’ the capital of metropolitan France between the wars (2010: 215). The importance of Paris to transnational networks is not, however, limited to the historiography of the ‘French imperial nation-state’ (Wilder, 2005). Research into the lives of colonized peoples from other historic European empires, notably work by Aitken and Rosenhaft on Africans from Germany’s former colonies, and Shaw on Afro-Brazilian culture, has revealed the significance of the cosmopolitan community which developed in Paris during and after the interwar period (Aitken and Rosenhaft, 2013; Shaw, 2011), while in his 2015 monograph, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*,Goebel explores how interaction between revolutionaries and intellectuals from France’s colonies, as well as those from China, Latin America and India, led to a cross-fertilization of political ideas in the interwar period, forming the antecedents of the ‘new world order’ which would emerge after 1945. The constellation of political figures who were resident in Paris between 1919 and 1940 is striking, and Goebel’s argument that the social experiences of migration to France were an important catalyst for anticolonial nationalisms is convincing in respect of migrants from France’s colonies whatever their legal status, be they colonial subjects, *protégés* or citizens (2015: *passim*). Nonetheless, while showing how migrants from the French empire interacted and collaborated with those from independent Latin American states, from China and from the British Empire, the argument leaves much unsaid about the Indian ‘revolutionaries’ who used Paris as a refuge between the beginning of the twentieth century and the defeat of France in 1940.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This article aims to contribute to the growing historiography of the ways in which states have responded to migrant minorities, be it through legislation (most notably exclusion orders), policing, or attempts to influence public opinion. In the historiography of France specifically, attention to black colonial subjects from France’s overseas empire has brought to the fore political and policing continuities between the Third Republic and the Vichy regime (Gordon, 2005: 202; Camiscioli, 2009: 77; Stovall, 2012: 289). The treatment of British Indians problematizes the notion of continuity and reveals the mutability of conceptions of otherness, both in public discourses and in policing. For imperial subjects crossing between imperial nation-states, it was not only a question of how they were policed and monitored within urban spaces but also one of how their lives were shaped by the diplomatic relationships between states.[[4]](#footnote-4) Police and governmental co-operation in the surveillance of imperial subjects has been uncovered by Brückenhaus, his 2017 monograph arguing that inter-imperial collaboration was a central, underappreciated factor in the transnationalization of anticolonial movements, precipitating mobility as activists searched for host countries amenable to their ideologies. As studies tracing the lives of black activists have discussed, the political revolutions of left and right in the aftermath of the First World War encouraged movement, with many political exiles and circulating activists becoming invited guests of the Comintern and the Soviet Union (Rosenhaft and Aitken, 2013: 9) In this respect Brückenhaus’s meticulous investigation of policing provides an illuminating insight into the types of official and unofficial co-operation which occurred between the governments of western Europe. As will be shown, however, official or unofficial co-operation on the issue of Indian migrants and revolutionaries did not necessarily result in joined-up policing, serving as a useful reminder of Arnold’s caveat that ‘the role of the police was never restricted to that laid down by law-makers’ (1986: 3). In the case of British Indian subjects, international priorities could be, and were, overlooked. It is the central argument of this article that Indian migrants and revolutionaries present an exceptional case, both in terms of how they were doubly monitored (by the British police force and its agents, and by the French police and the network of undercover agents working for the CAI), and in terms of how they could cultivate specific intellectual and social milieux in France, thanks in no small part to the intellectual influence in France in the 1920s and early 1930s of Gandhi’s *Swaraj* (self-rule) movement. In making this argument, the article throws into relief the vexed political and inter-imperial relationship between Britain and France where India was concerned, and the consequences which it had for travelling imperial subjects.

Indians in France

Establishing a reasonably accurate figure for the population of British Indians residing in France during the interwar period is complicated by the fact that official reports tend to be incomplete and contradictory (Fabry, 1927; Goebel, 2015: 26). In 1925, a police report estimated that roughly 500 British Indian subjects lived in Paris. The same report added that, in contrast with poor colonial workers from Indochina or Algeria, these British Indian subjects ‘sont pour la plupart des jeunes gens fortunés venus faire leurs études dans nos facultés, ou des négociants installés à demeure et spécialisés dans le commerce des bijoux et des perles fines’, and that the socio-economic profile of this established Indian community was such that ‘ils se désintéressent en général de la politique et on conçoit mal, dans ces conditions, l’intérêt d’une agitation conduite dans ce milieu pour l’émancipation du peuple Hindou’ (Préfet de Police, 1925). A tiny enclave of sixteen Indians was also noted living in Marseille, the natural port of entry to the metropole from India (CAI, 1925a). These reports are limited in terms of what they reveal about the overall Indian population in France, making no mention of the small numbers of Indians who lived, often clandestinely, in the port cities of Bordeaux, Nantes, Lorient and La Rochelle where there had been an Indian presence since the eighteenth century, or troupes of Indian dancers who regularly travelled and performed across France and Europe and had done so since the middle of the nineteenth century (Servan-Schreiber and Vuddamalay, 2007: 10). Later police reports, notably at the time of Gandhi’s visit to Paris in December 1931 following the failure of the Round Table Conference in London, suggest that, as with other migrant communities, the number of Indians in Paris remained stable at around 500 during the 1920s before falling in the early 1930s after the economic crisis. A report of 4 December 1931 notes that the ‘colonie hindoue’ (the terminology used to classify Indians no matter what their religion) by this point numbered approximately 200 (Directeur, 1931a).

The arrival of Indian migrants in Paris after 1919 was due in part to the political and geographical factors that made the city into a global centre for anticolonial and revolutionary activity, not least the ‘Wilsonian moment’ at the peace conference of 1919 that had appeared to sanction the right to national self-determination (Liauzu, 1982: 102; Manuela, 2007). The importance of Paris as a sympathetic home for Indian nationalists, however, predated 1914. The Paris Indian Society was established in 1905. Its creator, S. R. Rana, was also the vice-president of the Home Rule Society of London, a secret society which, inspired by the Irish example and in the wake of the partition of Bengal (1905), argued for a complete withdrawal of the British from India. Founded by Shyam Krishnavarma in the same year that he started the nationalist journal the *Indian Sociologist*, it became the focal point of a more radical approach to the British occupation of India, linked with the faction in India that launched a nationwide agitation movement for *Swadeshi* (self-sufficiency outside of British rule) in contrast to the peaceful approach to the partition of Bengal favoured by the Indian National Congress (Bakhle, 2010: 53).Krishnavarma’s house in Highgate, called ‘India House’, served as a meeting place and hostel for Indian students studying in London, and was viewed by the authorities as the British centre of Indian revolutionary activity (Bakhle, 2010: 52). As police surveillance of Indian revolutionaries intensified, Krishnavarma moved to Paris to escape prosecution, and Paris became the centre of anti-British activities, be they violent — with bomb-making learned from Russian exiles — or nonviolent. Krishnavarma, for example, effectively subverted the Press Act of 1910 by printing revolutionary literature in France and then shipping it from Marseille to the French Indian enclave of Pondicherry for distribution across India (Sareen, 1979: 40–42). *The Times*, during its reporting of the *affaire Savarkar* (1910), which is discussed below, was trenchant in its assessment of this grouping of Indians in Paris, urging its readers to remember that ‘there is a small but very active colony of disaffected Hindus in Paris under the leadership of Mr Krishnavarma’ (*Times*, 1910).

Despite the longevity of an Indian presence in Paris, British Indian subjects were to find that they were in something of an anomalous position and their rights, or lack of them, reflected the uneven imperial power relationship between Britain and France in India. They were not French colonial subjects, *protégés* or French citizens,[[5]](#footnote-5) and were therefore, like Egyptians, classified by the French authorities as foreign, rendering them subject to surveillance such as that of the Surveillance Spéciale des Etrangers dans les Hôtels de Paris. Yet they were not entitled to the same level of diplomatic representation as ‘foreigners’ from such sovereign states as China or Latin American countries, for they were British subjects. Indeed, Indians were the recipients of an even greater degree of scrutiny by state agencies than were other migrants after 1908, when the British and French authorities began to cooperate on the issue. Via the British Embassy in Paris, British authorities made use of contact with the French Sûreté Générale to ensure that any ‘revolutionary’ activity by Indians resident in Paris was scrupulously monitored. In May 1908, for example, the British police, by means of the British Embassy, requested that their counterparts in Paris keep track of the movements of R. D. Tata, who ran the Tata commercial presence which had been established at 47 rue Lafitte, Paris, in 1898, although the resulting report delivered to the Directeur of the Sûreté Générale revealed that Tata’s associates were all business contacts or acquaintances whom he had made thanks to his French wife (Sûreté Générale, 1908a; Sûreté Générale, 1908b; Sûreté Générale, 1909). Brückenhaus’s study of policing provides insights into the types of official and unofficial co-operation which occurred between the governments of western Europe; where Indian ‘revolutionaries’ were concerned, however, the factors behind French co-operation were not as simple as might first appear. Indians found themselves the object of attention in ways that Egyptian nationalists (also British subjects) did not (Brückenhaus, 2015: 171). As Brückenhaus has observed, co-operation was frequently recorded by the French authorities as being in the French imperial interest even if the arguments positing this interest had often been provided by British officials (IOR, 1925b). This is certainly the impression which emerges from the British archives. But when the French colonial archives and those of the Préfecture de Police are interrogated in tandem with those of the British, what emerges (aside from practical concerns about law and order in Paris) is the crucial role played by the geographical reality of the French colonial presence in India, which stimulated anxiety about British Indians and the threat that they could pose to *la plus grande France*. To view inter-imperial co-operation as being driven at the behest of the British, as Brückenhaus (2015) implies, is to overlook the reality of imperial security issues as they were understood by officials throughout the French empire during the wider interwar period.

By the twentieth century the French presence in India was small, comprising the territorial remains of trade and colonial activities prior to the end of the Seven Years’ War. During the eighteenth century there had been a strong possibility that India would succumb to the control of the French; nevertheless, the terms of the Treaty of Paris of 1763, which ended the Seven Years’ War (and whose terms were reconfirmed by the Peace of Paris of 1814–15), reduced the French empire to ‘islands’ of French authority isolated on the peripheries of a British-dominated territory. The five French *Établissements*, or *comptoirs* as they were more popularly known, Pondicherry, Karikal, Mahé, Yanaom and Chandernagor, were small enclaves with a surface area totalling 515 km2 and with a combined population recorded officially in 1936 as 298,851 inhabitants (Meile, 1948: 143). The *chef-lieu*, Pondicherry, was not a cohesive unit, consisting of outlying hamlets which were effectively stranded in the neighbouring British territory, and all the *comptoirs* were dependent upon the surrounding British Indian towns for essential supplies and communications. Circumscribed territorially, and geographically disparate, the *comptoirs* (particularly Chandernagor, which was little more than a suburb of Calcutta) had porous borders which allowed the smuggling of people, arms and goods (Marsh, 2007: 35–36; Pitoëff, 1991; Yechury, 2015). Moreover, the French enjoyed a politically ambivalent status in India. They were an independent imperial power but strategically subordinate to their larger neighbour, the British, with the treaties of 1814/15 and 1876 giving the widest possible powers of extradition to the Government of India, a status that would become particularly problematic as Bengal became the home to the *Swadeshi* movement after 1905 (David, 1991).

The case of Charu Chandra Roy, Vice-Principal of Dupleix collège in Chandernagor, demonstrates the precarious position of French imperial rule in India. Accused of an act of terrorism and identified by the British as taking refuge in the French colony, Roy was arrested in 1908 after co-operation between the French and the British authorities. The arrest provoked something of an uproar in mainland France (noted by Duke, 1908). The chauvinist Paris-based newspaper, *La Politique coloniale*, objected vehemently with a headline asking ‘Sommes-nous chez nous dans l’Inde française? Une extradition illégale’ (*La Politique coloniale*, 1908), while the Ligue des Droits de l’homme (founded in 1898) wrote to the Ministre des Colonies, protesting against the ‘violation monstrueuse de notre droit et même du droit des gens’ (Président, 1908). As it happened, the charge against Charu Chandra Roy was changed from murder to political conspiracy and the entire case then collapsed because of lack of evidence, but the exchanges between the French embassy and the Foreign Office demonstrate how beholden France felt to its larger imperial neighbour, even if it was against normal diplomatic behaviour to extradite citizens on the grounds of political actions. On 12 October 1908, the French Ambassador contacted the Foreign Office to ask if references to the affair as a political one could be dropped in order to avoid objections in France. In doing so, he neatly obfuscated Charu Chandra Roy’s legal status as a French *citoyen* by stressing that he was ‘un sujet indigène’ (technically an elector, but one who had not renounced his personal status to become a full citizen) (Ambassade, 1908). Meanwhile, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal had made it clear in a confidential letter to the Secretary to the Government of India that it would be ‘intolerable’ if it was ‘to be contended that persons waging war in any form against the British Government were not subject to extradition’, and proposed, as an act of retaliation, that Chandernagor be surrounded by a cordon of police (Duke, 1908). The threatened blockade did not materialize, yet the precariousness of the French status was clear.

Although its status was politically ambivalent, *l’Inde française* played a strategically important role, disproportionate to its territorial size, in the functioning of the French overseas empire during the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century (Weber, 1991, 1996).Pondicherry was a vital port of call on the route to French Indochina. It had been crucial in the conquest of the region, with the *comptoir* supplying literate *magasinisers* (storemen managing military supplies) and men further down the social scale who served as soldiers in the French occupation (Pairaudeau, 2016: 1–4). After 1919, it became again an important port of call between the metropole and Indochina, the Ministre des Colonies now identifying French territories in India as playing a key role in the transportation of anticolonial material to French Indochina (Ministre des Colonies, 1924). As a result, and independently of London, the French authorities took steps to prevent international communist revolutionaries from using the port to export dangerous anticolonial tracts. On 1 December 1923, for example, before the British government requested it, the French authorities banned the importation into Pondicherry of the activist M. N. Roy’s émigré Indian communist party newspaper *Vanguard*, along with the *International Press Correspondence* (*Journal Officiel*, 1923).[[6]](#footnote-6)

The existence of this French colonial presence in India provided British Indian subjects pursued by the authorities not only with a literal refuge (such as Charu Chandra Roy had attempted to use to his advantage in 1908), but also with a rhetorical means of challenging British rule. Like the inhabitants of France’s former slave colonies (Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana and Réunion) and the Quatre Communes of Senegal, *indigènes* of the *comptoirs* had been granted the political franchise in 1848. But *indigènes* as *electeurs* did not enjoy all the rights of *citoyens*; they were not made subject to the French Civil Code as the authorities feared that interference with religious and caste structures would provoke social unrest. Full citizenship became available to *indigènes* only after a decree on renunciation was introduced in *l’Inde française* on 21 September 1881 (Pairaudeau, 2016: 34–43). Nevertheless, the step towards enfranchisement which 1848 constituted was exploited discursively by Indian nationalists as a means of contrasting a ‘benevolent’ French republican colonial rule with that of the British. So-called universal male suffrage in *l’Inde française*, even if it was anything but universal in reality, was held up by Aurobindo Ghose in 1893 as a model example of progress that Indians should follow (Heehs, 2005: 118), and it would be a leitmotif in various Indian nationalist tracts throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In 1936 Gandhi evoked Pondicherry as an icon of freedom, stating on his visit to the town: ‘Je suis surpris et heureux de constater que les libertés pour lesquelles nous luttons aux Indes depuis tant d’années sont déjà depuis longtemps accordées aux Indes françaises’ (Raingeard, 1954: 4035). For British Indians who travelled to France, the political reality of the metropole would test the notion that France offered the alternative and more benign version of imperialism which they and their compatriots had idealized in India. It would also reveal that the imperial settlement in India had consequences for how Indians in France were viewed by the French and British authorities.

Political asylum in France, 1900–1914

On 1 February 1910, *L’Humanité*, the socialist daily newspaper, reprinted a letter which, accompanied by a cheque for 5000 frs for the victims of the recent Parisian floods, had been sent by Shyam Krishnavarma to the President of the Republic. Krishnavarma ended by thanking the President for the warm welcome that he had received as a political exile: ‘J’ai trouvé sur le sol de votre pays si dévoué à la cause de la liberté un asile et une hospitalité généreuse’ (*L’Humanité*, 1910a). Since its creation in 1904, *L’Humanité* had actively supported the Indian nationalist cause; the regular contributor Jean Longuet (Karl Marx’s grandson and a socialist lawyer) had published a laudatory interview with Krishnavarma in February 1909, concluding with the description of Krishnavarma as ‘l’un des plus irréductibles adversaires du plus puissant empire du monde’ (Longuet, 1909). Five months after Krishnavarma praised France’s generous hospitality, the case of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar would call into question the country’s status as a haven for Indian nationalists.

On 8 July 1910, while the steamer the *Morea* was docked briefly in Marseille, Vinayak Damador Savarkar climbed through the porthole of a bathroom window and swam to shore in an attempt to seek asylum (Parker and Quinn, 1910). The young Indian nationalist was being transported to India to be put on trial, having been arrested in London for his links with the revolutionary activities of India House. Savarkar had previously attained some notoriety with his 1909 publication *The Indian War of Independence* which offered a history of the uprising of 1857 from an Indian nationalist perspective (Dirks, 2001: 127). Accounts of what exactly happened when he escaped from his police escort and swam to shore differed between those offered by the accompanying British police and that of the *gendarme* whom he approached on the dockside, but the *gendarme*, failing to understand what was said to him (and possibly being under the impression that Savarkar was a deserting sailor[[7]](#footnote-7)), handed Savarkar back to the police escort which had given chase. The next day the steamer continued on its journey to India. The incident initially excited little interest in Britain, the *Daily Mail* very briefly reporting the events on 11 July (*Daily Mail*, 1910), but in France the story was picked up by *L’Humanité*, where Jean Longuet published his own account in a front-page article under an unequivocal title that posited the actions of the British as an attack on human rights and classified Savarkar as a political refugee: ‘Un attentat aux droits des gens: On a livré un réfugié politique’ (Longuet, 1910a).

Following the publication of Longuet’s castigating account, *L’Humanité* ensured that the story remained in the news, frequently on the front page, throughout July, August and September, with articles by Jean Longuet and by Jean Jaurès — leader of the *Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière*, SFIO, the French Socialist Party, and founding editor of *L’Humanité* (Longuet, 1910b; Longuet, 1910c; Jaurès, 1910a; Jaurès, 1910b; Cama, 1910; *L’Humanité*, 1910b; *L’Humanité*, 1910c; *L’Humanité*, 1910e; *L’Humanité*, 1910f). Protests were not confined to the left-wing press. On 23 July 1908, *Le Temps*, the newspaper of record, questioned the right of the British steamer to enter French territorial waters without having first notified the French government, and asked pointedly: ‘Savarkar ayant abordé sur le sol français, n’était-il pas immédiatement couvert par le droit d’asile?’ (*Le Temps*, 1910). Regional newspapers, such as the influential *L’Ouest-Éclair*, warned that France’s status as the bastion of *les droits de l’homme* was under threat (*L’Ouest*, 1910); politicians, notably Jaurès, challenged the Ministre des Affaires Etrangères to intervene. The French Ambassador wrote to the British Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, requesting that Savarkar be returned to France and informing him that

Il est aujourd’hui reconnu que le Gouvernement de la République n’avait reçu du Gouvernement de Sa Majesté le Roi aucune demande d’extradition ni d’arrestation provisoire concernant le Nommé Damodar Savarkar [*sic*], qu’il n’existait aucun mandat judiciaire autorisant l’arrestation de cet individu sur le territoire français […] qu’enfin son arrestation et sa remise aux autorités du paquebot anglais par un agent subalterne sont irrégulières — aussi bien au point de vue du droit français qu’à celui du droit des gens. (Cambon, 1910)

The British contested this claim, pointing out that the Director of the Sûreté Générale in Paris had been warned in June of the docking of the *Morea* in Marseille, that he had agreed, in response to fears expressed by the Head of the Police in London, to help ‘avoid any incident of Hindus in France’ trying to stage a rescue attempt (Henry, 1910; Hennion, 1910; French, 1910), and that it was a French police officer who had returned Savarkar to the steamer. The detailed exchanges between Paris, the India Office, the Foreign Secretary and the French Embassy in London reveal the sensitivity and delicacy of the matter — a consequence partly of the perceived co-operation of the *gendarmerie* with the British police, and partly of the fragile state of the Entente cordiale between Britain and France. As the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, warned on 29 July: ‘The utmost respect must be shown for the principles of international law, especially when those afford rights and advantages to individuals. Nothing is of greater consequence in this case than that Great Britain should maintain an attitude of dignity and of dispassionate submission to the law of nations. The petty annoyance of a criminal escaping may have to be borne’ (Churchill, 1910). In October 1910 the French and British governments agreed to take the case to the Court of Arbitration in The Hague. On 24 February 1911, The Hague tribunal decided that the return of Savarkar to the ship by the French police had occurred in accordance with the earlier agreement in which the Sûreté had promised their assistance in preventing attempts to free Savarkar in Marseille; in other words, an agreement of transnational policing was perceived to have been in operation. The tribunal rejected French claims that the June agreement related only to an attempt to free Savarkar (not to him escaping) and that the police officer had not realized the identity of the escapee (Arbitral Tribunal, 1911). Savarkar was found guilty in an Indian court and sentenced to fifty years’ imprisonment on the Andaman Islands (Brückenhaus, 2015: 176).

The different interpretations of events put forward by the British and French governments are not of primary interest here; the diplomatic wrangling which attempted to define co-operation in policing, with direct consequences for Savarkar, has been explored already by Brückenhaus (2015). What is of significance to the present analysis is how the close-knit Indian society in Paris made use of imperial rivalry in order to guarantee that the Savarkar case became headline news in France — galvanizing support from, and exploiting intellectual contacts with, civil liberties and socialist groupings with whom the Indian activists shared agendas in France, Britain and more widely. Beginning in France, the intensive press campaign travelled across the Channel, the left-wing activist Guy Aldred using his paper, the *Herald of Revolt*, to call on the British proletariat to support Savarkar (Brückenhaus, 2015: 175). The campaign was also given backing by the International Socialist Congress in September 1910. Central to the visibility of the story in French newspapers during the summer months were the links that Indian nationalists had established with *L’Humanité*, and with Jean Longuet in particular. Although, as British Intelligence reported, the Indian Society in Paris was aware that French support for Savarkar was motivated, as had been seen with the intervention by the *Ligue des droits de l’homme* in the case of Chara Chandra Roy, more by ‘national pride than from any desire to help Savarkar’ (Criminal Intelligence, 1910), this did not prevent the nationalists from effectively exploiting French pragmatic self-interest. Bhikhaiji Rustom Cama (‘Madame Cama’), a member of the Paris Indian Society and founding editor of the nationalist newspaper the *Bande Mataram*, wrote to *L’Humanité* to advance Savarkar’s cause. In a carefully crafted letter, published in full on the front page of the 23 September 1910 edition, she aligned Savarkar’s case with key arguments of the SFIO. Playing on fears of the erosion of national sovereignty in the wake of the Entente cordiale, and on French pride in civil liberties and *civilisation*, she asserted:

On sait bien que la situation internationale dans laquelle se trouve la France est très délicate. Mais le gouvernement français ne droit pas céder à l’Angleterre dans une affaire qui porte sur l’honneur du pays et sur les droits fondamentaux de l’homme. L’entente cordiale droit faciliter sa tâche au lieu de baisser son prestige aux yeux du monde civilisé. (Cama, 1910)

Moreover, she ridiculed *Le Temps*, a frequent target of journalists of *L’Humanité*,as being complicit in a government cover-up (‘L’argumentation du *Temps* est donc un prétexte puéril pour esquiver les difficultés de cette question’), a claim reinforced by the paratextual comments accompanying the letter, which called *Le Temps* ‘le journal officieux du gouvernement’ (Cama, 1910).

While Mme de Cama’s letter shows how French rhetoric could be mobilized by Indian nationalists to advance their cause, interventions by Jaurès and Longuet conversely reveal how neatly the Indian cause could be subsumed under particular French national and political agendas. Longuet adopted an explicitly universalist rhetoric, emphasizing the rights of man and viewing the Savarkar case as ‘Un attentat aux droits des gens’ (Longuet, 1910a). The events of Marseille concerned not only India but civilization more widely, an argument which relied on the implicit belief that France was the birthplace of such rights. For Jaurès writing in October 1910, the lack of respect for Savarkar’s rights which the affair had revealed was a cause of great concern, although the real aim of his article ‘Déplorable affaire’ was to instrumentalize the affair as a means of promulgating his vision of France as a bastion of socialist civilization — a vision that also compelled the inveterate antimilitarist to voice his support for the Entente cordiale, which he postulated as a necessary bulwark against German sabre-rattling (Jaurès, 1910a). It was not only the Indian nationalist cause that *L’Humanité* espoused. The decision by the French government to prevent the Egyptian Nationalist Congress from holding its meeting in Paris in 1910 (a decision in part taken so as not to antagonize the British in the wake of the *affaire Sanakar*) was interpreted by *L’Humanité* as another sign of the pernicious influence of what it termed the British ‘political police’ in French affairs. Publishing open letters by both the Comité organisateur du Congrès national égyptien and Farid Bey, head of the Egyptian National Party, both of whom characterized the decision as an ‘atteinte à la liberté’, *L’Humanité* endorsed Bey’s claim that the published justification for the governmental decision resonated with ‘en substance toutes les accusations portées contre [le Congrés national égyptien] par Sir Edward Grey’ (*L’Humanité*, 1910d). There was robust support for Egyptian nationalism in *L’Humanité* during the febrile atmosphere of the summer months following Savarkar’s failed escape, but it was the alignment of socialist and republican ideals behind Indian nationalism — or, to be more accurate, the subsuming of the Indian narrative under a French republican one — which proved the more enduring connection. This peculiar sympathy within intellectual milieux towards the Indian nationalist cause was to burgeon further after 1919, during a period in which other nationalist causes received less attention.

The *affaire Savarkar* was ultimately decided by international arbitration, but not before officials in London and Paris had created a diplomatic impasse by their attempts to parry the demands of their respective counterparts. In an attempt to find a quick solution to this impasse during the summer of 1910, William Lee-Warner, an administrator in the Indian Civil Service, proposed that the Treaty of Paris (1815) be used to expedite the matter. The Treaty had returned the *comptoirs* to the control of France with strict stipulations that France could neither maintain troops nor erect fortifications in any part of the *subah* of Bengal, and had set terms for the extradition of Europeans which enshrined the predominance of British rule (First Treaty of Paris, 1814). In a memorandum dated 26 July 1910, Lee-Warner speculated:

May we not further reply that, according to the spirit of Article IX. of the Convention of 7th March 1815, which arranged for the prompt extradition of Europeans and others whatsoever against whom judicial proceedings shall be instituted within the settlements of India for offences committed or for debts contracted, Savarkar, who is charged with abetment of murder in the Bombay Presidency, and who took ‘refuge out of the settlements,’[*sic*]ought to be extradited without difficulties, especially under the circumstances, even though his extradition is not literally from the French Settlements in India? (Lee-Warner, 1910)

Lee-Warner’s proposition was not taken up, but the fact that the settlement was evoked shows how the reality of a French political presence in India could be a consideration in the treatment of British Indians — whether on French soil in India, or in Europe — by Whitehall administrators.

‘The Right of Asylum for Indian Political Refugees’[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Savarkar case had revealed the realities of inter-imperial co-operation in Europe and thrown into question how far France constituted a safe haven for British Indian subjects. By the outbreak of the First World War, the Paris Indian Society had largely disbanded; only Mme Cama and S. R. Rana remained active in the capital. The French authorities resisted British pressure to extradite Mme Cama, correctly anticipating a major public outcry if they were to do so. But after her attempts to share ‘seditious’ literature with Punjabi troops freshly arrived in Marseille at the beginning of the war, she was interned in Vichy between October 1914 and November 1917, an internment against which the Ligue des droits de l’homme (notably the Bordeaux branch) protested (Commissaire, 1914). S. R. Rana and his family were deported to Martinique, a deportation which was also vehemently criticized by the Ligue des droits de l’homme (Sareen, 1979: 47). After 1919, when Indians, along with other colonized peoples (Afghans, Egyptians, Africans, and peoples of African descent) once more returned to France, those British Indians who resided in Paris were to find that the ambivalence of their position which had been revealed pre-1914 became more pronounced. British Indian subjects were closely monitored and liable to find their movement curtailed as a result of double surveillance and a tacit inter-imperial co-operation. At the same time, the Indian nationalist cause became distilled into one discrete story, Gandhi and *le gandhisme*, gaining levels of support and sympathy in the 1920s which quite surpassed those attracted by other nationalist causes caught up in the ‘Wilsonian moment’ in Paris (Latronche, 1999; Markovits, 2000; Marsh, 2007).

British agents monitored the activities of Indians in Paris, as did officers of the Préfecture de Police de Paris; when Indians interacted with French colonial subjects, French agents of the CAI became involved. Collectively, the reports of these agencies provide a detailed picture of the small group of British Indian subjects who made Paris their home, but also generate a somewhat chaotic impression of intense scrutiny compromised by overlapping jurisdictions and contradictory information. Inter-imperial co-operation existed, resulting in expulsions that were advantageous to both the British and the French authorities (as will be seen in the case of M. N. Roy), but it could be haphazard and frequently produced unintended consequences. Moreover, even when stringent legislation existed for expelling revolutionaries whom the French deemed a threat, this was not backed up by systematic action (Gordon, 2005: 227).

Unlike the majority of migrants from France’s colonies, those Indians who were subjected to surveillance tended to be at least moderately secure in economic terms, being overwhelmingly either students from bourgeois backgrounds or merchants. Nearly all were male. A report by the Chef du Service des renseignements généraux to the Préfet de Police in November 1921 includes biographical *aperçus* of fifteen men whom it identifies as leaders of two ‘Hindu’ associations in Paris, ‘l’Association des Hindous de Paris’ and the ‘Chambre de Commerce hindoue en France’ (Chef du Service, 1921). The term ‘Hindou’ is somewhat slippery: although it was used by some officers to denote the religion of the subjects under surveillance, it was generally a synonym for ‘Indian’. Of these fifteen men, nine were dealers in jewels or pearls, three were students, one a teacher who had travelled to France to perfect his French, and one a worker for Tata. The fifteenth, Amitabha Ghose, founder of a trading company, is singled out as the most active member of the Association des Hindous. Ghose, an Indian nationalist from Calcutta, had fought at Verdun with the Pondicherry regiment which had been exceptionally created in 1916 (Chef du Service, 1921). Investigations into the activities of Indian nationalists had been sparked by an interview which he had given to Marcel Pays in the *Excelsior* newspaper on 31 August 1921. Entitled ‘“Swa-raj” après Sinn-Fein’, the article provides French readers with an overview of the nationalist movement in India by creating a direct analogy with the situation in Ireland (which in August 1921 was gripped by a bloody guerrilla war between the Irish Republican Army and the British security forces). The interview ends with an editorial disclaimer that distances the newspaper from Ghose’s anti-British rhetoric: ‘Ainsi parla M. Amitabha Ghose, dont nous enregistrons impartialement les déclarations, en nous abstenant de tout commentaire, car il s’agit d’une grande puissance amie et allié, qui fut, en somme l’initiatrice de l’Inde à la civilisation et aux idées occidentales’ (Pays, 1921). In the confidential police report, management of British prestige was not necessary. In terms of French security, the fifteen men were not deemed problematic: ‘Les renseignements recueillis sur l’honorabilité, la conduite et la moralité des Hindous dont il vient d’être parlé sont favorables en tous points. Par ailleurs ces étrangers sont tous représentés comme animés de sentiments francophiles’ (Chef du Service, 1921). Observing that the Association des Hindous comprised ardent nationalists and produced its own newspaper in France, the *Bulletin indien*, which was shipped regularly to Pondicherry, the police initially dismissed the organization as being a British problem. As the unidentified officer who wrote the November 1921 report added in a handwritten note, ‘J’ai cru devoir vous transmettre ces renseignements succincts sur l’existence et la disposition de ces associations déclarées d’hindous tous soutenus par l’amour de leur pays d’origine qu’ils voulaient voir délivré du joug anglais, mais qui ne manifestent, par contre, aucun sentiment hostile à l’égard de la France’ (Chef du Service, 1921). Systematic surveillance was initiated only when links were uncovered between Ghose and the Union Intercoloniale. Founded in 1921 by Nguyen Ai Quoc (the future Ho Chi Minh) and other activists with the goal of uniting colonial subjects in a collective struggle for independence from France, the Union Intercoloniale published a monthly journal, *Le Paria*, which was financed by the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). It was for shipping *Le Paria*, under the auspices of the Union Intercoloniale, to French West Africa that Ghose was prosecuted in 1922 (Communistes, 1922).

If the French authorities were anxious about the links that Ghose was forming with anticolonialists from French colonies, British agents demonstrated a remarkable lack of interest in Ghose and the Association des Hindous. In fact, the Association is mentioned in the British records only in passing, as evidence of a conspicuous split in the Indian community between merchants and students (Indians and Afghans, 1924b). As British agents monitoring Indians in Paris were concerned predominantly about the revolutionary potential of students, Ghose’s Association des Hindous, with its preponderance of jewel merchants, was dismissed as unthreatening. Students, invariably viewed as politically active by British Intelligence, were monitored very closely: fortnightly bulletins produced for the Indian Office commented on how regularly they attended lectures, and the seriousness with which they applied themselves to their education (no matter what subject they studied) was interpreted as a marker of the seriousness of their political intent. In contrast, Egyptians were characterized as dilettantes (Indians and Afghans, 1924a). Of particular interest to London was the ‘Association des Etudiants hindous de France’ and the work of its secretary, Prabodh Chandra Bagchi. From 1924 onwards British Intelligence, as a consequence of its close monitoring of Bagchi, was regularly able to notify London of arrivals of Indian students in Paris. Bagchi, a Sinologist who worked with the orientalist and Indologist Sylvain Lévi and was awarded a doctorate by the Sorbonne, was a noted nationalist who set up an association to aid Indian students who came to Paris and enrolled at the Sorbonne. In a report of 4 September 1924, the activities of the association were described:

Bagchi, the secretary of the Indian Association in Paris is endeavouring to extend his activities. He has arranged to hire a room at 17 rue Sommerard for the Association. This room will be paid for partly by the students and partly by the merchants, and is to serve as a reading room and meeting place. It might also be used by Indians as a temporary residence while they are looking for rooms in Paris. The majority of the Indian merchants refuse to take any interest in the Association. (Indians and Afghans, 1924b)

The ‘Indian Association’ was reported on in fortnightly bulletins produced for the India Office. For all their regularity, however, the British reports were characterized by the accumulation of largely superficial details, and reveal how little was known in London of things that were common knowledge in the Préfecture de Police in Paris. The Association had its premises in the same building as Ghose’s Association des Hindous de Paris, and, as the Paris police reports make clear, many of the activities of the two associations overlapped in practice. In contrast with the British claim ‘that the majority of the Indian merchants refuse to take any interest’ in the student association, an image of a close-knit community emerges from the French reports (Chef du Service, 1921; Direction de la Sûreté Générale, 1926); in reality, 17 rue Sommerard in the fifth arrondissement became the centre of Indian activity in Paris. Kavalam Madhava Panikkar, the historian and diplomat, illuminates the activities of this community in his memoirs, recalling how the student association operated when he arrived in Paris in 1926: ‘There were over twenty Indian students reading at the famous Sorbonne University. They had a Hindustan Samaj [Hindu religious society] to which John [V. K. John] and I turned in our quest for convenient lodging’ (1977: 59). As Panikkar makes clear, the Association was the obvious first stop for newly arrived Indian students in Paris, providing practical advice, temporary lodging, and a means of negotiating the French academic system. Of the 36 individuals mentioned by name in French and British police reports, 23 lived at some point at 17 rue Sommerard (including Panikkar before he moved to 36 rue des Ecoles).[[9]](#footnote-9) The physicist Satyendra Nath Bose, who arrived in Paris in 1924, similarly made use of the organization, benefitting from an introductory letter to Marie Curie that was provided by Sylvain Lévi at the instigation of Bagchi (Wali, 2009: 279). The arrival of ‘S. Bose, a Bengali professor’ was noted in the report sent by the British agent in November 1924 (Indians and Afghans, 1924c). Whether or not arriving students were politically active, their association with Bagchi ensured that they were observed and signalled as ‘persons of interest’ to London.

A comparison of Parisian police reports with those produced by British agents working in Paris reveals not only the differing national-imperial agendas at play (such as the predictable focus of French agents on Amitabha Ghose’s links with groups deemed to threaten the stability of France’s empire), but also a considerable amount of confusion. This emerges particularly from British and French reports about the formation of the Comité Pro-Hindou in December 1924. Led by Henri Barbusse, the author of the Goncourt-winning novel *Le Feu* about the First World War, and a prominent member of the PCF, the Comité included the historian François-Alphonse Aulard, along with Victor Basch (President of the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme between 1926 and 1944, and member of the League against Imperialism which was created in Brussels in 1927), the novelist Georges Duhamel, and the critic Jean-Richard Bloch (a member of the PCF); it published a regular bulletin between 1929 and 1940. The first assessment of the Comité offered by the British Ambassador in Paris, Lord Crewe, was curious. Although Crewe described Henri Barbusse, the leader of the Comité, as ‘a pronounced communist’, he was sanguine about the potential of the group to foment action in India, concluding that the ‘greater number of the persons mentioned are of no special importance’ (Crewe-Milnes, 1924). A report from the following month, which claimed to quote Barbusse directly, nevertheless provoked anxiety in London. Barbusse reportedly expressed the view that the Comité ‘desired international support to all Colonial movements, although he realized that the real unity of exploited people was not a practical proposition. “We are now making our best efforts to start with India”, he stated, “and have formed an association of all sincere and liberty loving intellectuals of France who desire to see Eastern nations free as they themselves are”’ (H.A., 1925a). In other words, a French society was now actively seeking decolonization in British India. London was also alarmed by the anti-British propaganda about the situation in India which emanated from the group: a condemnatory report about British violence at Amritsar (1919) evoked particular dismay for its sensationalist representation of British atrocities, as the pencilled exclamation and question marks reveal (Memorandum, 1925 [?]).

British anxieties about the Comité Pro-Hindou would surely have increased still further if London had been privy to French police reports. In May 1925, in a twenty-six-page report on the Comité, the Préfecture de Police defined the organization as anything but a nonthreatening intellectual group, positing it as a front for a revolutionary communist organization instigated by M. N. Roy: ‘On peut affirmer sans crainte d’être démenti que Roy fut l’instigateur occulte de la création du comité “Pro Hindou” qui se constitua à Paris au mois d’Octobre de l’année dernière, sous le patronage official d’Henri Barbusse’ (Préfet de Police, 1925). M. N. Roy had arrived in Paris in 1924. He had started his political career as part of the Calcutta revolutionary movement but after leaving India in 1915 had been active in the USA, Mexico and various parts of Asia, travelling regularly between Russia and Germany after 1920. From 1922 onwards Berlin became his main headquarters. He made use of Pondicherry to smuggle his political writings, notably the newspaper the *Vanguard of Independence*, into India — which exercised both the British and the French authorities. Roy enjoyed protected status in Germany but was increasingly harassed by German police officers who were in all probability acting on information from British sources. Once in Paris, and liaising with the Algerian Ben Lekhal of the Union Intercoloniale, he set up a colonial bureau for the Comintern as well as the Comité Pro-Hindou. He was expelled in January 1925, along with his wife Evelyn Roy, ostensibly for travelling on a forged passport (IOR, 1925a). While his expulsion was certainly due to British pressure, it was judged to be in the French interest. The Chief of the CAI used Roy’s stay in Paris as proof that the Union Intercoloniale was ‘seeking rapprochement with all the Oriental revolutionary organizations’ to prop up the campaign against the Rif War (CAI, 1925b). According to a CAI report, a Union Intercoloniale protest in March against Roy’s expulsion drew 400 people, including ‘250 blacks [evidently mostly Antilleans], roughly 50 Arabs, twenty Vietnamese, and ten Malagasies’ (CAI, 1925b).

Roy’s expulsion has been adduced effectively by Brückenhaus as an example of inter-imperial co-operation (2015: 183–84), but the ways in which Roy and his supporters rallied pro-India sentiment in France is of equal interest for what it reveals of how Indians from a range of political persuasions could exploit discourses about French values. While Roy’s campaign failed to overturn his expulsion, he did ensure that the Indian cause was publicized. He was not without influential friends, and when he appealed to French backers he astutely mobilized issues for which they themselves were campaigning. Thus his appeal to the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen (the liberal citizenship association established in 1898 in the wake of the Dreyfus affair) made use of central Republican principles regarding the rights of man. Making clear that he had been denied basic rights of legal representation, he stated:

On January 30 I was arrested in Paris in fulfilment of an order of expulsion signed by the French Ministry of the Interior on January 3, and was immediately conducted to the frontier, without having been informed of the reasons for my expulsion, and without being given the means to consult a lawyer for my defence.

Thus, by one stroke of the pen, the right of asylum for Indian political refugees has been destroyed, and with this right, the idea which Indian revolutionaries hold, that France is the home of Liberty and Democracy for all the oppressed peoples of the world. (quoted in Roy, 1925: 205)

This argument was similarly used by his wife, writing more trenchantly for the British journal *Labour Monthly*. Contrasting British arbitrary power with French notions of liberty, Evelyn Roy ended her article with an appeal to French nationalism:

We believe that the French people, once aware of these wrongs inflicted upon the sons of India who are struggling to free their country from one of the blackest tyrannies in history, will demand the protection of those exiles who have sought refuge from British persecution on the soil of France or her colonies. (Roy, 1925: 209)

Establishing a binary opposition between British and French conceptions of the rule of law might not have produced an accurate representation of the realities of imperialism, but it was a convenient rhetorical device which was also used by Barbusse in an article written in support of Roy for *Labour Monthly*: ‘In any case, if these are the brutal and inexorable arguments that England employs to rid herself of those who denounce her imperialism, should a Government such as that of France become a partner in such iniquities?’ (1925: 295). This was not, of course, the only interpretation offered of the affair by metropolitan commentators. Characteristically, *L’Humanité* eschewed the discourse of imperial rivalry in order to advance the thesis of bourgeois imperial conspiracy, a conspiracy which could be thwarted only by a communist revolution:

En France et dans ses colonies la police française et anglaise s’unissent pour surveiller et persécuter les militants du mouvement révolutionnaire hindou. Voici comment les politiques, impérialistes de la France et de l’Angleterre, quoique foncièrement hostiles l’une envers l’autre en dernière analyse, se coalisent dans le but immédiat de réprimer, à l’aide de la violence, le mouvement menaçant de révolte contre la domination impérialiste — mouvement qui se dessine dans tous les pays d’Orient et, en particulier, aux Indes. (Fauladi, 1925)

The reaction to the expulsion of Roy went beyond the rhetorical exploitation of imperial rivalry as a means of promoting Indian nationalism by Indian nationalists; it also stimulated a marked sympathy among left-wing circles in France for Indian independence. This was noted with concern in a detailed police report of May 1925: ‘L’expulsion de son leader Mahandra Nat Roy a fait l’objet dans la presse d’extrême gauche de protestations véhémentes qui ont eu des échos dans certains cercles intellectuels français. Ceux-ci ne possédaient sans doute pas tous les éléments d’appréciation sur son véritable caractère’ (Préfet de Police, 1925). Nor was interest in ‘India’ confined to left-wing anticolonialists. As the police source added, India was widely perceived as a British affair and, as far as the public were concerned, Indian nationalism posed no great threat to French colonial sentiment, even if the reality was different:

Pour le public, le Comité Pro Hindou mène son action au grand jour et d’une manière qui ne saurait menacer nos intérêts nationaux. En réalité le siège de ce comité (26, rue Monnier) a été le lieu de rendez-vous quotidien de révolutionnaires de toutes nationalistes. Des communistes français et coloniaux sont délibérés sur les moyens de développer, selon les vœux de la Troisième Internationale, la propagande intercoloniale. Des agitateurs hindous et coloniaux y ont échangé des renseignements et des notes. (Préfet de Police, 1925: 15).

Substantiating this characterization of public opinion is difficult, but it is worth noting that reports received in London attested a ‘worrying’ level of French public sympathy for Indian independence (H.A., 1925b). This public sympathy was not, however, simply a passive phenomenon, exaggerated in the reporting by agents in Paris and London who were motivated by the twin fears of communism and anti-imperial agitation. Nor was it restricted to left-wing circles. Panikkar, for example, was to find expressions of political sympathy in a variety of popular and intellectual publications, providing him, as it had Roy and Bagchi before him, with opportunities that were closed to other anticolonial activists from France’s colonies and from other British territories. This sympathy was to diversify and grow with the advent of *gandhisme* in the mid-1920s.

Gandhi and the ‘Indian moment’

The growing French interest in British India during the 1920s and early 1930s — evident in literary and intellectual writings (Bridet, 2014; Latronche, 1999; Markovits, 2000; Marsh, 2007), in communist publications (*L’Humanité*, *Bulletin* *communiste*), and in more broadly left-leaning cultural journals such as Romain Rolland’s *Europe* — contradicts the general lack of interest posited by Goebel, and Liauzu before him, in colonial issues (Goebel, 2015: 183; Liauzu, 1982: 96). Certainly, *Europe* published only 124 articles on colonial issues between 1923 and 1938, but of these 45 were devoted to Indian nationalism (either directly, or indirectly through discussions of Gandhi’s philosophy), making it the most prominent nationalist cause to receive attention.[[10]](#footnote-10) One reason for this marked interest was undoubtedly the rise of pacifism and anti-militarist sentiments in France after the devastation of the First World War (Ingram, 1991) and, thanks to Romain Rolland’s hagiographical account of Gandhi, a belief that the Indian campaign for Home Rule presented a model alternative to western warfare. Idealization of pacifist solutions was not, of course, a majority view; nor was Rolland’s interpretation of Gandhi universally accepted. Rolland’s articles in *Europe* and Barbusse’s responding articles in *Clarté* in 1923 offered two distinct visions of Gandhi, generating intense debate in print between the two writers. For Barbusse, Gandhi was the apotheosis of communism, expertly making use of non-violence as one weapon among many to advance the Indian cause: ‘Si Lénine s’était trouvé à la place de Gandhi, il aurait parlé et agi comme lui’ (Barbusse, 1923: 318). For Rolland, Gandhi was a messiah figure, ‘religieux par nature, politicien par nécessité’, set apart from the petty materialism of everyday life (Rolland, 1993: 28). A third vision of Gandhi emerged in the communist press in France and in Britain. For writers in *L’Humanité* throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Gandhi and the Indian National Congress epitomized the bourgeois corruption that ‘broke’ the revolutionary zeal of the masses, a trenchant assessment that was repeated in British journals such as the *Labour Monthly* (*L’Humanité*, 1930; Roy, 1923).

The popularity of Gandhi in France was illustrated in 1931 when, returning from the failed Second Round Table Conference in London in December of that year, he stopped briefly in Paris, where he attended a meeting at the Magic-City, organized by the Société des Amis. Concerned that the stopover would become a vehicle for anti-imperial opinions, the Préfecture de Police monitored the meeting and Gandhi’s other activities throughout his stay. The reports record the public acclaim with which his visit was met. Two hundred people blocked the road outside the apartment building where he was spending the night of 6 December, the concierge calling the police to clear the obstruction caused by gathering journalists (Directeur, 1931a). Although the meeting at the Magic-City was organized at the last minute, it was attended by 2500 paying guests:

La séance est ouverte à 21 heures en présence de 2500 personnes environ, ayant acquitté un droit d’entrée de trois francs. Gandhi, dès son arrivée, prend place sur l’estrade entouré de ses secrétaires; il est l’objet de longues et vives acclamations. (Directeur, 1931b)

While the meeting was derided by the journalists of *L’Humanité*, who viewed Gandhi as a bourgeois traitor to the communist revolution (‘Devant ses dévots le traître Gandhi débite des sornettes’), the event was front-page news in *Le Figaro* and *Le Temps* (*L’Humanité*, 1931; Sanvoisin, 1931; Gauthier, 1931).

The French fascination with Gandhi has been detailed elsewhere, notably by Latronche and by Markovits. What has not been discussed is how Indian nationalist students could make use of this fascination to promote their own agendas and careers, and Panikkar’s autobiography in this respect is particularly illuminating. At the first meeting of the Hindustan Samaj that he attended, Panikkar notes that attendance was mixed, including sympathetic Europeans and other nationalist leaders:

At the meeting I had an opportunity to meet Germaine Merlange, secretary of the French society, Friends of the Orient; the leader of the Indo-Chinese Freedom Party, Duong van Gia; Mono Nutu of Java; Chin of the Kuomintang Party from China; the young French poet, Jean Loyson, and others. (1977: 59)

For Panikkar this led to a fruitful working relationship with Germaine Merlange. Panikkar wanted to write for newspapers and magazines but was unable to write in French; he and Merlange came to an arrangement whereby she would translate his articles into French and deal with the journals for a share of his fees. This ‘journalistic partnership’, as he describes it, gave him the opportunity to write for *Europe, Europe Nouvelle* and *Littéraire* (1977: 60). Panikkar is explicit: such opportunities were open to him because of his perceived link, by virtue of being Indian, with Gandhi, and what Gandhi represented to certain intellectuals in France in the 1920s — specifically, the prospect of the end of European colonial empires.[[11]](#footnote-11) Panikkar also forged a friendship with Juliette Veillier-Duray, the first female secretary of the Paris bar association’s lawyers’ conference to give an inaugural lecture. Elected for the session 1925/26, Veillier-Duray lectured on the trial and conviction of Gandhi (Kimble and Röwekamp, 2015: 136); she made Panikkar’s acquaintance while searching for relevant sources and materials. Indian nationalists had, since the writings of Ghose, used the rhetoric of republicanism to promulgate their demands, but they were not alone in doing so. There was a marked tendency, across the political spectrum in France, even among imperialists and the governing party, to view the Indian narrative according to French republicanism (Marsh, 2007). As Panikkar’s memoirs and intelligence reports from British and French agents make clear, cross-fertilization was encouraged by the importance (symbolic or otherwise) of Indian nationalism to anticolonial movements, particularly in respect of their attempts to advance their own agendas. The home of the Comité Pro-Hindou at 26 rue Monnier became a popular meeting place where, as the Chef du Service des Renseignements Généraux et des Jeux noted in a report to the Préfet de Police of September 1926, Hoang-Van-Hiet, ex-président de l’Association des Cuisiniers Annamites à Paris, had been a regular visitor (Chef du Service, 1926). An earlier note (of May 1925) speculated that the worldwide fascination with the Indian campaign, and the fact that the Comité Pro-Hindou ‘réunissant des personnalités éminentes en France’, had created ‘une situation favorable à un mouvement révolutionnaire’ (Préfet de Police, 1925). Panikkar credits the perceived success of the Indian campaign as a factor in the creation of the Oriental Society, which he co-founded with Duong Van Giao and Mono Nutu and which comprised *c.* thirty people from Indochina, Java and China. Both Panikkar and Duong Van Giao took part in the Bierville World Peace Conference in 1926, where Panikkar’s position paper, arguing that Indian independence would expedite the claims for freedom of other Asian countries, was endorsed unanimously (1977: 63).

While interest in India and Gandhi’s campaign for independence attracted French intellectuals and anticolonial activists, the societies and meetings that resulted brought Indians into circles which were being monitored, whether by British agents, Parisian police officers, or agents working for the CAI. Participation in the Oriental Society was one of the factors that alerted agents of the CAI to Ali Khan Imtiaz (with whose case this article began), generating a report that he associated with extremists. This notwithstanding, the events leading up to Imtiaz’s definitive expulsion show a confusion that contradicts any narrative of seamless inter-imperial co-operation in policing Indian ‘extremists’. Cross-referencing the APP files with those of the IOR reveals that it is unclear who wanted Imtiaz out of France and who precipitated the request that he be expelled. The India Office was adamant that the decision to expel Imtiaz was a French one (Phipps, 1938). In contrast, the Directeur Général de la Sûreté Nationale suggested that the decision to remove him was at the instigation of the British in advance of the state visit by the British King and Queen planned for June 1938 (Directeur Général, 1938). Tracing the affair back to its origins using all three archives reveals that it was an anonymous informer who claimed to have spotted Imtiaz among Indochinese extremists, and that this generated a report of an ‘extrémiste dangereux’ in February 1938 (Renseignement, 1938). The ensuing police reports were initially sanguine, noting that Imtiaz had not attracted any attention hitherto ‘au point de vue politique et sa présence n’a jamais été constatée dans les milieux révolutionnaires’ (Service des Affaires, 1938). This changed, however, when a police report in May 1938 revealed that he had been cohabitating with a white Frenchwoman, Mlle Xaille, owner of a café-cabaret called La Bolée (Mourtardier, 1938). At this point, action was immediately taken to expel him. The sudden change in approach demonstrates how one commissaire spécial’s interpretation of what constituted a danger could have international ramifications. It also demonstrates the potency of an age-old fear: that of cohabitation between a colonial ‘other’ and a white Frenchwoman. The case of Imtiaz was reported by the press but received less attention than that of the internationally known M. N. Roy. Coverage of the Imtiaz case was limited to *Le Populaire*, which reported on 15 December 1938 that he had been forced to leave French territory, despite his papers being in order, after acting as an interpreter for an Indian journalist who had arrived in France to report on strike action (H., 1938b). This report of his summary expulsion bears little resemblance to any of the reports of the incident filed in either the India Office or the Préfecture de Police; the reporters of the socialist *Le Populaire*, implacable enemies of Daladier’s increasingly authoritarian government, were exploiting the case for political ends (H., 1938a). In the event, *Le Populaire’*s self-interested intervention had little impact. The expulsion order remained and Imtiaz was expelled.

Conclusion

By the time Panikkar came to write his memoirs, his recollections of Paris had become laudatory. In language which echoes strikingly that used by Baldwin in 1927, he claimed:

As for politics, one might say that Paris was a veritable council for European affairs. Exiled freedom fighters from many countries used to gather in Paris: Italian leaders escaping from the clutches of Mussolini, Polish leaders seeking refuge from Pilsudski, anti-Communist Russians, anti-Kemal Turks, revolutionaries externed from India. In short, Paris was a haven of refuge for exiles from all over the world. Only in Paris do we find a complete absence of the colour bar. Everyone knows that the British look down on coloured people. The reverse was true of Paris. Negro or Mongol [*sic*], Hindu or Briton, each man was respected according to his education and status. (1977: 61)

It would be easy to point out that historical reality contradicted idealized memory. What is significant is that the Indians discussed here — whether they were leading revolutionaries like Roy and Savarkar, intellectuals like Panikkar, or students like Imtiaz caught up in the machinations of trans-imperial surveillance — developed an ambivalent and mutually beneficial relationship with French activists and intellectuals, who feted and co-opted them in ways that other anticolonialist activists were not. Indians expertly made use of imperial rivalry to advance their cause, a cause that at various times mapped directly onto the objectives of key French political groupings, but they also fell between two empires in ways that could lead to expulsion — either because of the chaotic reality of police monitoring or, as in the case of Imtiaz, because of racist assumptions where an Indian man was deemed a threat to Frenchwomen. After the failure of the Round Table Conferences (1930–32), and as increasing concern about a remilitarizing Germany and a crisis of the republic occupied French front pages, Indian affairs lost their attraction. Despite influential friends, Imitaz could not mobilize the support of the Ligue des droits de l’homme in 1938 as Mme Cama and M. N. Roy had done so effectively before. Meanwhile, for activists such as Roy, Moscow was a far more amenable place to sojourn. Ultimately, Paris was more effective as a discursive construct than as a physical refuge.

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1. The CAI was renamed the Service de Liaison avec les Originaires des Territoires françaises d’Outre-Mer in 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a discussion of how the peripheries (in the regions and overseas) shaped French policies at the centre before those same policies were transmitted back to the periphery, see, among others, Wilder (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The only comprehensive work (Sareen, 1979) is now somewhat dated. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Goebel (2016: 1458) alludes to the development of a ‘shadow diplomacy’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The colonized peoples of the French empire had differing legal statuses depending on the territory in which they lived. Slaves of the ‘quatre vieilles colonies’ of Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana and Réunion became citizens with the abolition of slavery in the French Empire in 1848, as did inhabitants of areas colonized under France’s first empire (the Quatre Communes of Senegal and the remnants of French India), although in the Quatre Communes and the Indian colonies their citizenship was ill-defined and contested. The ‘Code de l’Indigénat’ (1881) ensured that Muslim Algerians were French subjects rather than citizens; peoples of France’s new colonial possessions of the nineteenth century, French West Africa, French Equatorial Africa and Indochina, were also, for the large part, subjects. A key consequence of this heterogeneous legal situation was that different groups of colonial migrants enjoyed different rights in France even if metropolitan authorities frequently lumped them together (Marsh, 2018: 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Records held in the IOR show detailed accounts of British officials putting pressure on the French government to stop the importation of *Vanguard* into Pondicherry in 1925. In fact, documents at the CAOM show that the French had banned it already in 1923. This evidence contradicts Brückenhaus’s assertions (Brückenhaus, 2017: 184). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The *gendarme* may have been acting in accordance with the established French–British agreement to return deserters to their ships. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. M. N. Roy to the ‘Ligue des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen’, 10 March 1925 (Roy, 1925: 210). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Figures calculated using the complete files of BA 2184 (Archives de la Préfecture de Police) and L/P&J/12/219 (India Office Records). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Figures calculated using Liauzu’s database of articles (1982: 72–74). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In the second volume of her autobiography, Simone de Beauvoir describes the euphoria among the French left in autumn 1929, when Gandhi’s campaigns of civil disobedience in India appeared to signal the end of European colonial empires (1960: 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)