Plots of Opportunity

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As we have already seen, in 1839 in Chartism Carlyle makes opportunistic use of an Indian secret society, the Thugs, to characterize the Glasgow spinners union as a dangerous conspiracy. That same year, Philip Meadows Taylor drew on his experience as Assistant Superintendent of Police in west-central India to produce Confessions of a Thug, an extraordinary account of ritual highway robbery and murder told first-hand by Ameer Ali, a former Thug turned government informer. The confessed murderer of seven hundred and nineteen persons, Ali remains a curiously ambiguous figure for Meadows Taylor’s narrator, who condemns his profession as “horrible” even as he admits to a “fearful interest” in this otherwise highly articulate and intelligent man (5). English readers were similarly fascinated by Confessions, which established Meadows Taylor’s reputation as a popular novelist, even as, according to the novel’s modern editor, Taylor’s text largely “helped to confirm the stereotype of India... as a retrograde, anarchic society that could hardly be called a civilization” (viii). The novel’s central figure of Thuggee, and the kind of virulent religious bigotry exhibited during the debate of the Catholic Question, combined in the late 1850s, when England’s complacent ignorance regarding its Indian possessions was replaced by a national sense of horror and fascination.

The reason for this increase in public awareness was nothing less than the rebellion of much of northern British India. The rebellion quickly became the single most-talked-about topic in England, motivating even those who ordinarily took little notice of colonial affairs to form an opinion of what came to be known as the Indian Mutiny. This escalation of interest is well-documented by an otherwise picturesque travelogue in Bentley’s Miscellany:
At the present moment the city of Delhi has a most painful interest attached to it, having become the centre of a mighty conspiracy for the overthrow of our Eastern Empire, and apparently for the extermination of our countrymen in India. As we know too well, this has been in part accomplished, and vigorous attempt is being made for its completion. A short sketch of the place, therefore, will not be unacceptable to the public, even those who at other times take no interest in the East. ("The Grand Mosque and Imperial Palace of Delhi," 546)

The terms employed by this travel writer to justify his architectural tour of Delhi help to illuminate the reasons behind calling the uprisings in Oude and other provinces the “Indian Mutiny.” Surprised by widespread disaffection in its most prosperous colony, authorities in England struggled to understand and contain what was increasingly seen as “a mighty conspiracy for the overthrow of our Eastern Empire.” As at the trial of the Glasgow Spinners, the problem was to acknowledge the presence of rebellious sentiment without allowing that sentiment to become outright rebellion; in other words, to excite public condemnation without simultaneously igniting public fear. The label “Indian Mutiny” performs this dual task admirably by casting the rebellion in a specifically colonial frame of reference primed to interpret any resistance to British rule as a mutinous conspiracy. It thereby distances the rebellion to the colonies and implies that those rebelling are doing so in secret and despite their obligations to England.

British MPs and periodical writers thus began to apply the familiar rhetoric of conspiracy and the figure of the secret society to represent Indian resistance to British colonial rule. As in the response to “Papal aggression,” this strategy was overtly nationalistic, pitting faithful British Christians against conspiring foreign heathens in a contest of national pride. To these nationalistic constructions the rhetoric surrounding the Indian Mutiny also added the dimension of race, further sundering English and Indian from one another.

The first section of this chapter examines this rhetoric of conspiracy more closely in order to demonstrate how the figure of the secret society was brought to bear during Britain’s Indian crisis to foster British nationalism and to repress liberal democratic reform in British India. This mixture of empire and political representation continues the internationalization of England’s rhetoric of conspiracy that we have already seen during “Papal aggression.” Such a major shift in emphasis away from domestic politics went unquestioned during the Mutiny, however, largely because India remained far more immanent than its geography would imply by virtue of the many Anglo-Indians who had returned to England from colonial service and the many placed in harm’s way by the outbreak of rebellion.

The second section of the chapter trace resistance to this strategy in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), a novel that simultaneously appropriates the rhetoric of con-
spionage surrounding the Mutiny and reverses its imperialistic implications. Offering readers a fictional “Hindoo conspiracy,” Collins uses a range of techniques, including temporal and spatial doubling, that forces readers to reexamine Britain’s role in the Mutiny. Read in opposition to earlier representations of the rebellion, the novel can be seen to deploy the figure of the secret society to bring together the very groups that its invocation during the Indian Mutiny was meant to distance from one another.

I. The Indian Mutiny

On 10 May 1857, the 11th and 20th Native Infantry and the 3rd Light Cavalry regiments of the Bengal Army at Meerut began what would come to be known in England as the Indian Mutiny by shooting their British officers, breaking open the gaol, setting fire to several buildings, and marching off towards Delhi, thirty-eight miles to the southeast. Upon arriving there the next day, they proclaimed the aging King of Delhi their leader, killed every European they could find and declared that they were reestablishing the Mogul Empire in India. The Mutiny spread quickly through the rest of the Bengal Army until, by the end of June, much of northern India centered on the Province of Oude was no longer under British control. Strategically, the three most significant gains for the rebels were Delhi, where anti-British if not nascent nationalist sentiments combined with one of the largest ammunition depots in India; Lucknow, where a small number of British soldiers and civilians were surrounded by what would eventually grow to 50,000 or more rebel troops and irregulars; and Cawnpore, where the Nana Sahib’s massacre of British women and children—the infamous Well of Cawnpore incident—would provide an emotional rallying point for British forces throughout India. The British counter-offensive concentrated on these and other captured cities and forts and by the end of August had succeeded in reconquering a significant portion of northern India. Delhi was retaken for good on 20 September and the siege at Lucknow broken only five days later. It would take the rest of the year to drive the remaining rebels from northern India, with the deciding pitched battles occurring at Lucknow (16 November) and Cawnpore (5 December). Guerrilla warfare in central India continued for much of 1858, but none of it posed a dramatic threat to British sovereignty or British civilian lives.

The most immediate cause for this two-year conflict was the introduction of the new Enfield rifle, which required greased cartridges to fire properly. Unfortunately, the lubricant originally applied was a mixture of cow fat, ritually unacceptable to the Hindu majority of the Indian Army, and pig fat, proscribed as unclean for the sizable Muslim minority. This thoughtless choice of lubrication led to fears of a British assault on the two principal religions of the Indian troops and
of a surreptitious attempt to forcibly convert everyone to Christianity. That these fears could lead to armed insurrection and the murder of women and children was interpreted by many in England as a sign of “Asiatic” irrationality and inherent brutality. As the Mutiny progressed, and especially once the Well of Cawnpore incident became well known, this opinion of Asiatic inferiority gained widespread support among rational Englishmen, many of whom recalled “the affair of the greased cartridges” as the first point of evidence against “Asiatics” in general.

However, as Benjamin Disraeli famously stated before the House of Commons on 27 July 1857, “The decline and fall of empires are not affairs of greased cartridges. Such results are occasioned by adequate causes, and by an accumulation of adequate causes” (Hansard, 147: 475). In fact, there were numerous “adequate causes” already extant before the Enfield rifle ever arrived on the scene. The Bengal Army was overwhelmingly composed of high-caste Brahmans, many of whom felt contempt not just for the Sikhs and other Muslims enlisted with them, but also for their British officers. Both groups were viewed as inferior according to India’s complex caste system, and the British officers had the added disadvantages of haughty aloofness from their men and relative ignorance of the native languages. In addition, British territorial and cultural acquisition of India was proceeding at a rapid pace, thanks in large part to Lord Dalhousie’s assertion of the Right of Lapse, which refused to recognize the Indian practice of adoption by declaring the British East India Company sole heir to all native princes without a blooded descendant. The East India Company had also recently annexed the province of Oude, the principle homeland for the Sepoy troops, while British laws had voided the traditional practice of sati (1829) and made it possible to convert from Hinduism to Christianity without losing inheritance rights to ancestral property (1850). Missionary activity was also spreading throughout British India, much of it apparently receiving official support from proselytizing army officers and the connections of Lord Canning, the new Governor General, with conversion societies. Finally, the rapid spread of English education, railroads and telegraphs threatened to enforce cultural homogenization, as did the fact that all legal proceedings were conducted in English.

For many in England, though, these were not “adequate causes” for revolt, but rather signs of Britain’s imperial benevolence. This benevolence was reflected in what many liberal thinkers considered to be the duty of England towards India: “to carry European civilization into India—to communicate the intelligence of the West—to spread knowledge, and art, and science” (“The English in India,” 205). As the same reviewer saw it, the conscientiousness with which this duty had been carried out made it incumbent upon England to continue to govern British India, if for no other reason than to protect its inhabitants from themselves: “On moral grounds, the retention of India is to be justified by every consideration of duty towards its subject races.
We have conquered them, and the only reparation we can make is to rule them. To
give them back to their princes, even were it practicable, would be neither right in
morals nor in policy. It would be to give them back to anarchy and misrule” (“The
English in India,” 203). Others concurred, citing past instances of authorized mur-
der that British rule had brought to an end, as well as the democratic elevation of
India’s 20 million out-castes to the status of men, or at least of domestic servants.10
Fraser’s Magazine even summed up the traditions of British India as “perfect religious
toleration, and an unceasing, pertinacious effort quietly and gradually to raise the
native to the European level in the eye of the law” (“An Anglo-Indian Lament for
John Company,” 637). In other words, India had heretofore been governed accord-
ing to the liberal principles of guardianship democracy, and Britain’s imperial benev-
olence lay precisely in the belief that one day Indians might be made British enough
to rank as equals with their current guardians.12

The ideological payoff for such a belief in the benevolence of British rule was
that the Mutiny could be either bracketed off as merely a problem within the army
or, even if more widespread, as an undeserved rebellion against just British poli-
cies.13 This was precisely the strategy of one Bentley’s author, who exonerated British
rule in India in the following terms: “The policy which has guided the rulers of India
has been essentially that of conciliation, and hence the fearful blow upon us was unmer-
ited.... there is some slight consolation in the thought that, if we have hitherto
erred in our treatment of the mixed peoples of India, the error has been one of judg-
ment, and the cause of the outbreak cannot be sought in our tyranny” (“Our Indian
Empire,” Bentley’s Miscellany, 258). Unfortunately for its author, such a response still
begged the question of why, if British rule was so solicitous of native well-being,
would Indian confidence in British rule and British intentions be so low that the mis-
take of the greased cartridges could cause widespread rebellion.14

For those determined to believe in Asiatic backwardness and the benevolence of
British rule in India there remained another possibility that promised to explain how
greased cartridges could lead to rebellion. As Alexander Duff, prominent
Protestant missionary and author of The Indian Rebellion; Its Causes and Results. In a
Series of Letters, wrote in a letter dated 3 June 1857, “the belief is, that some deep,
designing men, taking advantage of the superstition of the sepoys, invented these
falsehoods [about the intent behind the greased cartridges] to lead them to rise and
overthrow the Government” (18). A conspiracy of only a few “deep, designing men”
effectively preserves Asiatic inferiority for the majority of the rebels by eliminating
their potential for agency even as it casts the few in charge as morally inferior to
the British because of their propensity for violent secrecy.

The fact that there were several secret societies known to exist in India at the time
added to the force of this line of argument, with each society playing a different role
in the burgeoning rhetoric of conspiracy. Freemasonry had been officially established in Bengal since 1813, and English Masons demonstrated their continued loyalty to the British Government during the Mutiny by volunteering, along with other European civilians, to serve in the Calcutta militia as a deterrent to rebel activity in Britain’s Indian capital. Their offer was ultimately accepted by Lord Canning, thereby tacitly continuing Freemasonry’s exceptional status as the only governmentally sanctioned secret society in India and showing once again that secrecy itself remained acceptable, even attractive, so long as it was practiced by the right people. The Jesuits played a more ambiguous role, receiving both praise and criticism from English periodical writers during the Mutiny. On the one hand, their past practice of attempting to win converts among high-caste Indians met with approval from some quarters:

It would be well for the future if our missionaries would take one leaf out of the book of the Jesuit, Francis Xavier. That remarkable man did not fail to address himself to the higher classes in the East, and among these he found many converts. Without neglecting the humble, it would certainly be advisable for British missionaries to address themselves to men in high position, whose example would have weight and influence with retainers and followers. (“India as it is—India as it may be,” 226)

On the other hand, they still retained the stigma generated by England’s historical anti-Catholicism, as in the following passage, where a general criticism of overzealous missionary activity becomes a more specific indictment of the figure of Jesuitism:

There can be no doubt that a vague fear of the gradual extinction of Hinduism has been for some years instilling itself into the minds of Hindus. They see the country covered with missionaries—Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jesuitical—they see bodies of Jesuits located in the towns—a nunnery established at Sirdhanna—simultaneously with the violation of some of the most positive institutions of their religion, such as the abolition of Suttee, &c. They see the English colleges arising for the instruction of Hindu women, and the English language replacing their own. Their Brahmins perceive an order of christianized Brahmins, Jesuits favoured by the Government, whose principles and practices are not widely different from their own, and it is not surprising that they have viewed these events with suspicion and distrust. (“The Government of India and the Mutinies,” 494–95)

The ambiguity accorded to Jesuitism did not extend to India’s only well-publicized indigenous secret society, the Thugs, who continued to generate disapprobation in
England. In addition to the pejorative fascination that had been generated by *Confessions of a Thug*, the figurative presence of Thuggery had been further secured by its actual repression in the 1830s and 1840s, making one reviewer’s advocacy of the “anti-Thuggee principle” easily recognizable to English readers: “Mercy quite as much as justice demands that, ‘on the anti-Thuggee principle,’ every village, every haunt should be scoured, and not a man who fought against ‘his salt’ be left to propagate the idea of future crime” (“Crisis of the Sepoy Rebellion,” 566). The Thugs thus provided a historical precedent for how to deal with unacceptable Indian behavior: mercy-by-extermination.

These three actual secret societies added sinister depths to Duff’s “deep, designing men,” and helped many to believe that the best way to understand the Indian Mutiny was through the familiar figure of the secret society. As during the reaction to the Glasgow Spinners’ Trial and Catholic Emancipation, public opinion during the Indian Mutiny partly accepted the conspiracy explanation due to evidence of prior Indian conspiracies. Numerous writers claimed special knowledge of these previous attempts to expel the British in India, and the number of conspiracies continued to grow as the Mutiny progressed. At first, English writers contented themselves with exposing to public view a single plot, centered on Calcutta. Essayists for both *Bentley’s Miscellany* and *Blackwood’s* told their readers of this “extensive conspiracy among the natives to overthrow the British dominion” as early as September 1857.16 By November, *Bentley’s*, at least, claimed to have discovered a far larger plot, of which the original Calcutta conspiracy was merely an episode: “So far back as the 24th January last, insurrectionary movements had commenced in India; incendiary fires took place, and, before long, Brigadier-General Hearsey became cognizant of an immense conspiracy, which had for its object the destruction of Calcutta and the annihilation of the British” (“The Day of Humiliation,” 464). A similar escalation is evident in Duff’s *Letters*, which progresses from enumerating the details of the Calcutta plot in a letter dated 16 May to exposing “at least four separate plots” in a letter written on 24 June (2, 36). The fact that none of these conspiracies was brought to light until after the Mutiny had already begun suggests that they form part of a containment strategy on the part of English authors.17 Spatially, the incidents of mutiny and revolt were proliferating at an alarming rate; ideologically, these instances could still be controlled if they were connected. In other words, the “discovery” of prior conspiracies transforms widespread disaffection into conspiratorial plotting, thereby undercutting the revolutionary potential of Indian unrest by attributing it to the machinations of malicious individuals. Moreover, the evidence of prior conspiracies would help to justify almost any level of response on the part of British troops.18 Finally, by casting the Mutiny as a conspiracy, this British military response could be directed at anyone, since, as *The Annual Register for 1857*
explained, “There can be no doubt that, for some time past, an extensive conspiracy has been forming in the North of India against the continuance of our dominion, but its exact nature and the names of its originators will perhaps never be known” (240). Therefore, the soundest policy would be to treat everyone as a potential conspirator.

In the wake of these revelations of prior conspiracies, the number of English MPs and periodical writers who believed that the Mutiny was the result of a conspiracy grew dramatically. They had already received an impetus in this direction from Disraeli’s India speech of 27 July, during which he argued that “the affair of the greased cartridges” was only symptomatic of larger forces at work:

Is the conduct of the troops the consequence of a sudden impulse, or is it the result of an organized conspiracy? The House must feel that, upon the right appreciation of that issue, the greatest of all questions, namely, the measures which the government ought to adopt, or Parliament ought to sanction, entirely depends. The measures which may be adequate in the case of a military mutiny will not be adequate to cope with a national revolt. The measures which may be perfectly competent to deal with conduct which is only the consequence of sudden impulse will be totally insufficient to deal with conduct which is the consequence of a conspiracy long matured, deeply laid, and extensively ramified. (Hansard, 147: 442)¹⁹

References to an Indian conspiracy were also made by Mr. Whiteside and Lord John Russell before the House of Commons on 11 August 1857 (Hansard, 147: 1415–16, 1440).²⁰ Periodical writers followed Parliament’s lead in interpreting the Mutiny as caused by a conspiracy and they began to focus their disapproval on India’s Muslim population. In his “few remarks on the recent revolt in our great Indian Empire,” one writer felt it safe to refer to “a vast Mahomedan conspiracy long organized, and having for its object the re-establishment of its ancient dominion” as “now accepted as a fact” (“How is India to be Governed?” 122). Others showed similar assurance, with one article in The London Quarterly Review feeling it unnecessary even to argue for the existence of a conspiracy, assuming instead that its readers would accept as a foregone conclusion its numerous general references to a conspiracy and unnamed conspirators working behind the scenes to manipulate the Sepoys.²¹

At least some in England were not content with such general references to a conspiracy and sought to make these charges more specific. Among these attempts at greater specificity was a rumor circulated by a number of Indian journals that Russia was somehow behind the Mutiny. This rumor received its most ardent support in England from MP David Urquhart, who published The Rebellion of India in response to Disraeli’s July speech. In his pamphlet, Urquhart argued not only that the Mutiny
was the result of Russian instigation, but that the Russians remained in charge once it had begun: "If the next mail from India does not announce that the remnant of the English have been driven into the sea, I shall hold it to be, solely because of the superintending providence of Russia, and the extent and efficiency of the agency she has in time established throughout Hindustan" (20). The fact that he had no tangible evidence for this assertion did not bother him at all, since he claimed to have arrived at it by the surer means of imaginative induction. One suspects that his imaginative powers were aided by England’s recent memory of the Crimean and Persian Wars, but despite such a questionable basis for judgment, this argument retained sufficient credibility to come up again during the trial of the King of Delhi, though nothing was ever proven.22

Even without adding the complications of a Russian plot, there were a number of writers who attempted to make the vague group of conspirators into a more recognizable picture of a secret society. Certain secret signs and symbols were attributed to the mutineers, including the mysterious circulation among the Bengal troops of chupatties (flat cakes of bread) and lotus flowers. Both of these supposed signs to rise were cited by Disraeli in his India speech as evidence that a conspiracy was in place (Hansard, 147: 469–71), and many periodical writers followed his lead. Concerning the circulation of chupatties, one writer remarked, “Five centuries before, the Chinese had, by a similar plan, organised and carried out a conspiracy by which the dynasty of their Mongol invaders was overthrown; and it now imported no less than the hope and attempt to annihilate the English race in India, and to restore to the effete house of Timour the sovereignty of Hindostan!” (“The Poorbeah Mutiny,” 94).23 A page later the same writer attributed the conspiracy to “the wily Mohammedan,” rather than the “the great mass of the Hindoo Sepoy” (95).

G. B. Malleson made his attribution of guilt much more specific in The Indian Mutiny of 1857, citing the Maulavi of Faizabad in Oude, Nana Sahib, the Rani of Jhansi and Kunwar Singh as “the executive council of this conspiracy” (33). Malleson’s use of the label “executive council” deserves special attention since it draws on the rhetoric of the secret society to identify something akin to the Spinners’ “secret select committee” directing the Mutiny. What is especially revealing about his usage is that it demonstrates the ways in which accusations of membership in a secret society continued to stand in for evidence to that effect. The British never ascertained the meaning of the chupatties, and the lotus flower incident may never even have occurred. Moreover, even Malleson admits that “Who all of the active conspirators were may probably never be known” (17). Yet he and others felt perfectly comfortable proposing not just a general conspiracy theory, but a more specific outline of something like a secret society at the heart of the Mutiny, suggesting that the figure of the secret society created its own validity simply by being uttered.24
The figure of the secret society also enjoyed popular validity because it produced ideological results. The presence of a conspiracy transformed largely ineffectual early British resistance into heroic action by pitting brave individual Englishmen and their women against the vastly arrayed and deeply laid plans of the conspirators. The title of one article in the Westminster Review, “Indian Heroes,” amply expressed popular sentiment at the time, as did its glowing portrait of the greatness of the British race: “it is in India, during the past twelve months, that our manhood has been put to the severest test, and our ever-living heroism most nobly vindicated. India, for a hundred years the grandest theatre of British enterprise—the glory of modern British genius and valour—has now borne a final testimony to the greatness of our race” (352). This greatness was said to have been proven even by many British military setbacks, from the doomed defense of Cawnpore to the desperate efforts of the besieged British forces at Lucknow, thereby transforming ignominious futility into ideological victory. These energetic attempts to elevate the “manhood” of the British race even in defeat were meant to reflect not only on the inevitability of success in India, but also in any immanent military conflicts in Europe, as the following passage makes clear:

[T]he handful of heroes and heroines that survived one of the most gallant defences on record were rescued by the exertions of Outram and Havelock and their gallant band, and will finally, it is to be hoped, be avenged by Campbell, but the fame of their endurance and their valour will live for ever. So long as Britain has such blood in her veins, she can laugh to scorn the piratical ardour of a certain party over the water, who are never happy but when planning the invasion and devastation of our small but happy island. (“Oude and the Defence of Lucknow,” 418)

The mutiny even generated fictional serials meant to extol British heroism; among them were “The Poorbeah Mutiny” and “The First Bengal European Fusiliers,” both of which ran intermittently in Blackwood’s from January through July, 1858. In an important sense, conspiracy theories made these thrilling tales of British heroism possible.

The figure of the secret society had a much more debilitating effect on non-British Indians. Prior to the Mutiny, there was some hope that through the benevolent guardianship of the British, India might one day emerge from social backwardness and Indians themselves might participate in their own government. Such democratic sentiments were all but abandoned once British victory in the Mutiny was assured. As one reviewer for the British Quarterly Review explained,

The intelligent people of England desire that the natives of India should be treated as justly, considerately, and humanely, as may be possible, but no intelligent man in
Sir Erskine Perry of the House of Commons agreed, saying, “No one acquainted with the condition of India could suppose, however, that it was fit for anything like constitutional government. India could only be ruled by despotic power, and English institutions founded upon self-government would be wholly unsuited to such a country” (Hansard, 147.510). Even the normally radical Westminster Review believed that to “talk of representative institutions for India is mere drivel” (“The English in India,” 208). A later article in The Westminster Review was somewhat more liberal in that it appeared willing to return to some version of democratic guardianship: “Of the greater Indian powers, it is but natural to be jealous; but the little princes ought to be on every ground fostered by our Government as a cement between us and India, and as the germ of a truly organic inward growth of English principles. And the humbler the relation of these princes to us,—the more they have come in to position of our dependents and wards—so much more sacred is the solemn duty of fidelity to them as guardians” (“Our Relation to the Princes of India,” 461). However, this is democratic guardianship once removed, since the article proposes that England act as guardian not to the people of India directly, but to their petty princes, who are portrayed as children.

For the most part, though, democratic guardianship was no longer viable in India because, if the petty princes were children, the common people were often seen as little better than “fiends and demons, wild with lust, ferocity, and bloodthirstiness” (“Our Indian Empire,” Blackwood’s, 658). Public opinion had come a long way from Indian subjects in training to be proper British citizens, and the figure of the secret society played a significant role in this shift. The specter of a conspiracy behind the Mutiny effectively divided the people of India into two groups, unthinking followers and conspirators. Often, these groups were cast in terms of identity categories, as in the following characterization of the Sepoy troops: “The Hindoo Sepoys were made the dupes and instruments of their more crafty Mussulman comrades” (“The English in India,” 197). Most periodical writers agreed on the role of the “crafty Musselman,” but there were many who took a less sympathetic view of “the Hindoo Sepoy”; “Throughout
his history we find the Hindoo ever the same—ever abject under oppression, submissive to power, rebellious and insolent to weakness; neither tyranny, nor persecution, taxation, nor subjection, could rouse him to resistance or rebellion; no advantages of justice or civilization could ever win or attach him; but the instant that the sceptre grew light or wavering, he was ready to start up, to slay, to ravage, and spoil” (“Our Indian Empire,” Blackwood’s, 650).

Whichever view one adopted, it was clear that neither “Musselman” nor “Hindoo” deserved democratic representation in the government of India. The one was certainly too prone to form secret conspiracies against the Government and the other was either too passive or too savage to govern himself, much less anyone else. Both were effectively sealed within their respective stereotypes by the popular theory that the Mutiny was the result of a conspiratorial group resembling a secret society. The end product of this kind of rhetoric was that the governance of India was formally transferred to the Crown, which would administer it through a Secretary of State and an advisory council of fifteen men—all appointed positions.

II. INITIAL LITERARY REACTIONS AND COLLINS’S “HINDOO CONSPIRACY”

The imperial drama and imperialist ideology generated by the Indian Mutiny prompted an avalanche of imaginative literature in England that dealt either indirectly or directly with Indian themes. As Hilda Gregg wrote in her 1897 retrospective article, “The Indian Mutiny in English Fiction,” “Of all the great events of this century, as they are reflected in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the popular imagination” (218). As evidence for her claim, she offers an impressive list of popular songs, poems, eyewitness accounts and novels written both during and after the Mutiny. Brantlinger adds to Gregg’s collection with his capacious survey of Mutiny literature in Rule of Darkness, where he asserts that if “a humanist text can be imagined which will break down national, social class, religious, racist, and sexist barriers to understanding, then nearly all nineteenth-century and many twentieth-century accounts of the Mutiny are versions of its antithesis” (200).

Few of these accounts remain in circulation today. Certainly no one still sings “Delhi,” “The Highland Rescue,” “Jessie’s Dream” or “The Havelock March”—all cited by Gregg as current in 1858–59—and there are no contemporary theatrical productions of The Fall of Delhi (1857), India in 1857 (1857), Keereda and Nana Sahib (1857), The Indian Revolt; or, The Relief of Lucknow (1860), or Nana Sahib; or, A Story of Aymere (1863). Likewise, many of the poems and novels inspired by Britain’s misadventures in India remain largely unread today; included among this list of forgotten literature are two
attempts at Mutiny epics cited by Gregg—“An Escape from Gwalior” and “The Experiences of an Officer in the Rohilcunde Campaign”—as well as the novels Maurice Dering (1864) by George Lawrence, First Love and Last Love: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny (1868) by James Grant, and Stretton (1869) by Henry Kingsley.31

However, some of the early literature inspired by and participating in the racist and imperialist reactions to the Indian Mutiny does remain relatively accessible in the collected works of some of the Victorian Period’s best-known writers. Sir George Trevelyan—nephew of Thomas Macaulay, noted historian and future MP—centered his epic and questionably accurate history, Cawnpore (1865), for example, around a literary device, the metaphorically resonant Well of Cawnpore.32 Alfred Tennyson also turned his attention towards the Mutiny, first in “Havelock” (1858), and later in “The Defence of Lucknow” (1879). Both poems extol the bravery of British troops in India and the glory of the British race; this joint obsession with heroism and race is succinctly captured in the closing stanza of “Havelock”:

Bold Havelock died,
Tender and great and good,
And every man in Britain
Says “I am of Havelock’s blood!” (13–16)

The awkward slant rhyme of “good” and “blood” exemplifies the kind of racial lessons forced out of British India by many of the early respondents to the Mutiny.

A similar sentiment also emerges from Charles Dickens’s early contribution to Mutiny literature in “The Perils of Certain English Prisoners.”15 Co-authored by Dickens and Wilkie Collins for the 1857 Christmas issue of Household Words, “Perils” offers a thinly veiled allegory of the Indian Mutiny and one of the first fictional responses to England’s Indian crisis.14 Dickens wrote the first and last chapter of “Perils,” a tale set in the British West Indies and narrated by an English soldier, Gill Davis, sent to protect the island of Silver Store from attacks by pirates. The English on the island employ a “native Sambo,” Christian George King (the Bengal Army, or possible, Nana Sahib), who, unbeknownst to them, is actually working for the pirates (crafty Musselmans). Although he is unaware of this relationship when he first arrives, Gill Davis still feels a strong aversion toward King, constantly having to suppress the urge to beat him. His opinion of “Natives” in general is not much better: “I have stated myself to be a man of no learning, and, if I entertain prejudices, I hope allowance may be made. I will now confess to one. It may be a right one or it may be a wrong one; but I never did like Natives, except in the form of oysters” (217).

As it turns out, confining one’s trust to native oysters might not be a bad idea, since “Christian George King was a double-dyed traitor, and a most infernal villain”
(233), who not only betrays the English colony but participates in the massacre of women and children during the pirate assault that ends chapter one (Cawnpore). In the second, considerably more ambivalent chapter, written by Collins, the English escape the pirate stronghold and raft down the river to freedom. Dickens concludes the story by having these escapees rescued by English marines originally decoyed away from Silver Store through the actions of Christian George King. They return to the island, now vacant of pirates, and kill their mutinous former servant, whose dead body is “left hanging to the tree, all alone, with the red sun making a kind of a dead sunset on his black face” (264). Clearly, this final act of mercy-by-extermination fits in well with other periodical responses to the Mutiny, demonstrating not only that Dickens was aware of the rhetoric surrounding Indian affairs in England, but also that he was not averse to incorporating such rhetoric into his fiction.35

This reactionary rhetoric would receive its first serious fictional challenge eleven years later in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*. Written at least in part as a result of the renewed English interest in India prompted by the insurrection at Port Morant, Jamaica in the British West Indies, this founding text of English detective fiction is fairly up-front about its interest in Britain’s premier overseas possession: the novel revolves around a stolen Indian diamond which Collins reveals in his Preface to be a composite of a number of sacred Indian stones, including the Koh-i-Noor diamond, a recent addition to the English crown jewels.36 Through the figure of allegory, Collins links this Indian theme to a rather frank depiction of sexual relations, represented in the novel as a double for the imperial relationship between England and India. This fictional strategy of doubling reappears throughout *The Moonstone*, combining with Collins’s strategic deployment of the figure of the secret society to promote sympathy for India and, by extension, for the Indian Mutiny.

The allegory of female sexuality expressed by the theft of Rachel’s jewel is accessible through a simple plot summary, and is less directly relevant to my project than the ways in which the novel slips into more imperial registers through the strong presence of Indian elements in the story.37 The jewel is an Indian jewel, originally brought to England by Colonel John Herncastle, Rachel’s uncle, who acquired it during the siege of Seringapatam. In this, the primal scene of the novel, Herncastle breaks into the armoury, takes the jewel, and murders three Indian guards with his dagger, which he holds “dripping with blood” when the narrator of this original scene first sees him (Prologue 5).38 Herncastle is referred to throughout the book as “the Honourable John,”39 a title also applied to both John Company (the British East India Company) and John Bull (Britain), further reinforcing the imperial overtones of his theft. To add to this Indian atmosphere, the cabinet in which Rachel places the jewel is an Indian cabinet. Moreover, Blake steals the jewel while under the influence of
opium, which was perhaps the most well known export from British India. Finally, he performs this initial theft in order to protect the Moonstone from a group of Indian conspirators, really high-caste Brahmins, dedicated to returning the jewel to India. As Jenny Bourne Taylor argues, Collins’s inclusion of these Indian details in a novel written during a period of renewed interest in the Indian Mutiny suggests that he is self-consciously going “against the grain of the prevailing representation of ‘India’ as extreme signifier of savage violence” in order to foster a less exclusively condemnatory attitude towards India and a more critical stance on Britain’s imperial policy.

Collins’s choice of dates is particularly significant to this effort at fostering sympathy. Rather than set the novel during the years of the Mutiny, which would have almost certainly predisposed his audience to take up an extreme position of condemnation, Collins, in the words of Jaya Mehta, “deliberately predates the novel so that any historic reference to the insurrection is impossible. Instead, the colonial event that inaugurates the mystery is the 1799 Siege of Seringapatam, a siege not of British troops but by British troops” (618). In addition, Rachel’s birthday party and the theft of the diamond takes place in 1848, the year not only of European revolutions and Chartist agitation, but also of Britain’s conquest of the Punjab in India. Finally, the Orientalist, Mr. Murthwaite’s, final letter concerning the fate of the Moonstone is dated 1850, the same year that the Koh-i-Noor diamond mentioned in Collins’s Preface was presented to Queen Victoria; Murthwaite writes, “There, raised high on a throne—seated on his typical antelope, with his four arms stretching towards the four corners of the earth—there, soared above us, dark and awful in the mystic light of heaven, the god of the Moon. And there, in the forehead of the deity, gleamed the yellow Diamond, whose splendour had last shone on me in England from the bosom of a woman’s dress!” (Epilogue iii.521). Hence the novel begins with imperial brutality on the part of “the Honourable John,” and then proceeds to invert two important dates in the history of British India by making 1848 and 1850 years of British loss, not British gain. Moreover, these later losses are made the direct result of the first imperial gain, and, in fact, the novel suggests that in 1850 the Moonstone has returned to its rightful place out of British hands. In other words, the dating of the novel subtly encourages readers to stop seeing India through the English lens of the Mutiny and to start perceiving it by the Indian light of the Moonstone.

In addition to the use of allusive dating, Collins also employs a more characteristically Dickensian technique of doubling in order to effect this shift in his readers’ perception. His most productive efforts in this direction surround the three Indian Brahmins dedicated to recovering the Moonstone for Indian worship. These men originally appear in the text as dangerous agents of reverse-colonization, members of a foreign conspiracy whose portrayal draws on the rhetoric of the secret society in
order to further estrange them from English readers. However, as the novel progresses, they become more sympathetic figures whose actions and attitudes double those of the novel’s English characters. This technique of doubling not only elevates the Indians, it also diminishes the English, until, at the end of the novel, the three Brahmans and their agents can commit murder and still appear as legitimate agents of the restoration of order in The Moonstone.

The initial representation of the Indians as potentially dangerous and wholly foreign occurs primarily in the ten chapters leading up to the theft of the Moonstone, making the three Brahmans prime suspects in the eyes of the reader. Information about them almost always comes at second-hand, escalating in severity as these early chapters progress. They make a brief first appearance in person before Gabriel Betteridge, who judges them to be “strolling conjurors” with suspiciously superior manners (I.i.3.17), and tells them to leave. After they do so, his daughter Penelope supplements this first impression with a curious tale of the Indians practicing clairvoyance by mesmerizing a young English boy and searching for an “English gentleman from foreign parts” possessed of a mysterious “It” on the road where Franklin Blake is scheduled to appear (I.i.3.19–20). Though he initially dismisses these actions as mere “hocus-pocus” to his daughter (I.i.3.20), in his position as narrator Betteridge warns the reader that “you won’t find the ghost of a joke in our conversation on the subject of the jugglers” (I.i.3.21), whose unnatural control over one English subject and interest in another is made potentially sinister due to its connection to the narrative of the Moonstone. This connection is strengthened by the early appearance of Blake, who tells Betteridge, “I have been followed, and watched in London, for the last three of four days; and I have travelled by the morning instead of the afternoon train, because I wanted to give a certain dark-looking stranger the slip” (I.i.5.30).

Primed by Betteridge’s narrative hint, the reader is moved to accept Blake’s otherwise unsupported and vaguely racist assertion, “that my stranger and your three jugglers may turn out to be pieces of the same puzzle” (I.i.5.30). From street performers to spies, the Indians slip a bit further in the reader’s estimation when Blake tells Betteridge of the possible presence of “A plot organised among the Indians who originally owned the jewel ... a plot with some old Hindoo superstition at the bottom of it” (I.i.6.42). That such Hindoo religious plots can be dangerous is revealed by the celebrated Indian traveller, Mr. Murthwaite,” who, upon seeing Rachel with the Moonstone displayed in her bosom, warns her that “An Indian diamond is sometimes part of a Hindoo religion. I know a certain city, and a certain temple in that city, where, dressed as you are now, your life would not be worth five minutes’ purchase” (I.i.10.73).

Murthwaite is also responsible for justifying the reader’s growing conviction that this Hindoo plot and the mysterious Indian jugglers are one and the same. They make
another brief appearance, this time at Rachel’s birthday party, from which they quickly
depart at a word from Murthwaite. After they have gone, he, Blake and Betteridge
reconvene in the garden, where he reveals that the jugglers are actually high-caste
Brahmins in disguise. Subtly invoking the issue of caste so central to the greased car-
tridges fiasco, Murthwaite expresses some puzzlement at why the Indians would be
thus disguised in England, since doing so means that “They have doubly sacrificed
their caste” (I.i.10.79). Upon learning the history of the diamond, his puzzlement
disappears and he firmly connects these disguised Brahmins with the plot to
recover the Moonstone. Further, he reiterates his earlier warning of Hindoo plots
in stronger terms, cautioning Betteridge and Blake, “In the country those men came
from, they care just as much about killing a man, as you care about emptying the
ashes out of your pipe. If a thousand lives stood between them and the getting back
of their Diamond—and if they thought they could destroy those lives without dis-
covery—they would take them all. The sacrifice of caste is a serious thing in India,
if you like. The sacrifice of life is nothing at all” (I.i.10.81).

This final connection of the Indians with murder occurs in the chapter immedi-
ately prior to the theft of the Moonstone, which now seems well within their purview
as, in Betteridge’s words, superstitious “murdering thieves” (I.i.10.81). Up to this
point, Collins’s portrayal of dangerous Hindoo Brahmins who have lost their caste
and are acting on the basis of religious superstition to recover an Indian jewel in British
possession appears very similar to the rhetoric surrounding the Indian Mutiny. However,
even though he has done more than any other character to establish this congruity,
Murthwaite does not share Betteridge’s conclusions about it; in fact, he believes that
the Indians are “a wonderful people” (I.i.10.81).

Murthwaite’s opinion notwithstanding, at this point in the novel most Victorian
readers were apt to share Betteridge’s view, especially since Collins carefully rep-
resents the Indians using the figure of the secret society. Not only do they engage
in ritual and occult practices like clairvoyance, but they are also repeatedly referred
to as engaged in a “plot” or “conspiracy,” words calculated to evoke strong reader
emotion when coupled with recent memories of the Indian Mutiny. Once again, it
is Murthwaite who adds crucial evidence that the three Indian jugglers are more
than they seem, that they are in fact members of what he refers to as “this modest
little Indian organization” (II.ii.3.315). His proof of this assertion is largely contained
in a letter left for the Indians while they are being detained in the local prison; it
reads as follows:

“In the name of the Regent of the Night, whose seat is on the Antelope, whose arms
embrace the four corners of the earth.

“Brothers, turn your faces to the south, and come to me in the street of many noises,”
which leads down to the muddy river.

“The reason is this.

“My own eyes have seen it.” (II.ii.3.320)

The letter is not strictly in code, though it was written originally in Hindustani to insure that most Englishmen could not read it, but its veiled reference to the Moonstone is obviously meant to be deciphered by an insider. Further, since the letter comes to the Indians while they are in prison, it suggests a wider network of organization than they have yet shown. In other words, like the circulation of the chupatties, the letter allows the novel’s characters to imagine a widespread and well-organized conspiracy only the edges of which they have been allowed to see. Such evocations of the figure of the secret society work to distance the Indians, to render them suspicious and dangerous prime suspects in the theft of the diamond.

However, even if they did take the diamond from Rachel Verinder’s room—which, it turns out, they did not—the Indians have at least the excuse that it had been stolen from them first. They are doubles of Rachel in this respect, and this initial act of doubling not only begins to make them seem less exclusively aggressive foreigners, it also begins to show the imperial underpinnings of the Verinder family. The Indians are actually doubled in several ways by different members of the novel’s cast. Gabriel Betteridge offers the most humorous example of doubling with his repeated acts of Crusoemancy; indeed, his narrative, and therefore the entire story of the Moonstone, begins with just such a consultation of Defoe:

In the first part of Robinson Crusoe, at page one hundred and twenty-nine, you will find it thus written:

“No I saw, though too late, the Folly of beginning a Work before we count the Cost, and before we judge rightly of our own Strength to go through with it.”

Only yesterday, I opened my Robinson Crusoe at that place. Only this morning (May twenty-first, Eighteen hundred and fifty), came my lady’s nephew, Mr. Franklin Blake . . .

Two hours have passed since Mr. Franklin left me. As soon as his back was turned, I went to my writing desk to start the story. There I have sat helpless (in spite of my abilities) ever since; seeing what Robinson Crusoe saw, as quoted above—namely, the folly of beginning a work before we count the cost, and before we judge rightly of our own strength to go through with it. Please to remember, I opened the book by accident, at that bit, only the day before I rashly undertook the business now in hand; and, allow me to ask—if that isn’t prophesy, what is? (I.i.1.7–8)"
One might answer that Betteridge’s reliance on the mysterious advice of Robinson Crusoe looks less like prophesy and more like the Indians’ acts of clairvoyance. Moreover, Betteridge’s version of mumbo-jumbo places the story of the Moonstone squarely within the colonial context of the Prologue by quoting from the prototypical novel of English imperialism. It also renders imperialism every bit as irrationally superstitious as the Hindoo conspiracy to recover the diamond, since Betteridge’s valorization of Defoe’s text resembles nothing so much as religious devotion.45

Clairvoyance also provides a point of contact between the Indians and the man most responsible for proving Blake’s innocence of the theft, Ezra Jennings. Responding to Jennings’s description of the opium experiment he plans to perform on Franklin Blake, the lawyer, Mr. Bruff, writes, “It was quite unintelligible to his mind, except that it looked like a piece of trickery, akin to the trickery of mesmerism, clairvoyance, and the like” (II.iv.6/18.445).46 In addition to the practice of a type of clairvoyance, Jennings shares a number of other characteristics with the Indian conspirators, and these similarities help to render them more sympathetic. Like the Indians, Jennings’s outlandish appearance works against him:

Judging him by his figure and his movements, he was still young. Judging him by his face, and comparing him with Betteridge, he looked the elder of the two. His complexion was of a gipsy darkness; his fleshless cheeks had fallen into deep hollows, over which the bone projected like a penthouse. His nose presented the fine shape and modelling so often found among the ancient people of the East, so seldom visible among the newer races of the West. . . . Add to this a quantity of thick closely-curling hair, which, by some freak of Nature, had lost its colour in the most startlingly partial and capricious manner. (II.iii.4.358)

It is no wonder that Dr. Candy’s patients feel a bit of trepidation when being treated by a doctor’s assistant who looks so unhealthy himself. However, their negative reaction is likely due as much to Jennings’s foreign aspect as anything else: his “gipsy darkness,” Eastern nose, and non-Anglo-Saxon hair. Coupled with his birth in the colonies and deliberately ambiguous racial ancestry, Jennings’s appearance makes him a credible double for the Indians.47 As the only foreigner allowed to speak for himself in the text, Jennings also helps to overcome his and the Indians’ suspicious appearance by exemplifying a number of qualities highly prized by the novel’s English characters. Blake describes him as exhibiting “the unsought self-possession, which is a sure sign of good breeding, not in England only, but everywhere else in the civilized world” (II.iii.9.410), and he displays this quality, along with sensitivity, intelligence, energy, forthright honesty, and discreetness, during the opium-induced reenactment of the theft.48 In fact, he is so successful in thus embodying English manly virtue that he wins over both
Bruff and Betteridge by the end of the experiment (II.iv.6/25.2am.476). Given Jennings’s success at overcoming the initial repulsion occasioned by his appearance, one is left wondering whether or not the Indians would have done the same if allowed to represent themselves.

Even without being able to speak for themselves, however, the Indians do accrue a certain amount of respectability from the fact that their practice of secrecy is curiously mirrored by the Verinder household during the initial police investigation. As D.A. Miller observes in his groundbreaking reading of *The Moonstone*, Sergeant Cuff’s attempts at detection are repeatedly frustrated and eventually stymied altogether by different household members’ appeals to “insider” knowledge: they know that, despite Cuff’s impressive collection of evidence, Rachel did not take the diamond because they know Rachel and they know that she is not capable of theft. Miller argues that this appeal to insider information eventually displaces the detective function onto the family, replacing the role of the detective with a more universal function of detection. One might also say that the family’s frustration and expulsion of Cuff allows for a subtle slippage from protecting the family’s privacy to practicing the family’s secrecy. In fact, the reason that the truth is not immediately known is that Rachel secrets her knowledge that Blake took the stone, thereby allowing Godfrey Ablewhite to preserve his secret that he took it from Blake. Moreover, the family’s respectability can only be preserved by keeping the secret for a further two years, allowing Blake to accumulate the necessary documents to vindicate himself in the face of public rumor-mongering. Such an assiduous practice of secrecy allows the Verinder family to serve as a double for the Indian conspiracy, and this doubling of the Indians and the family further makes the novel’s Hindoo conspiracy seem much more familiar, and therefore much more acceptable.

The final factor that allows the Indians to be transformed from dangerous foreign conspirators to agents of order is Collins’s active advertisement of the presence of English criminality. This criminality is evident in the actions of the “Honourable John” Herncastle at Seringapatam, certainly, but it also extends to the rest of the family. Immediately after the theft of the diamond in 1848, for example, the family arranges to have the Indians detained by the local magistrate under questionable legal circumstances; as Betteridge the narrator puts it, “Every human institution (Justice included) will stretch a little, if you only pull it the right way” (I.i.11.93), and the Verinders are not above a little stretching when they deem it necessary. Rachel’s cousin, Godfrey Ablewhite, goes far beyond such simple stretching, however, living a double life that allows him to be at once “the most accomplished philanthropist (on a small independence) that England ever produced” (I.i.8.60), as well as a thief, a mercenary suitor, and a fraudulent executor.

What makes his double life significant not just for himself, but also for his coun-
try, is that Ablewhite appears as the personal representative of what writers on the Mutiny would have called the “English race”: “He stood over six feet high; he had a beautiful red and white color; a smooth face, shaved as bare as your hand; and a head of lovely flaxen hair, falling negligently over the poll of his neck. . . . He was a barrister by profession; a ladies’ man by temperament; and a good Samaritan by choice” (I.i.8.60). Subsequent revelations of Ablewhite’s misdeeds stain this initial portrait of idealized whiteness until, at the end of the novel, he assumes the disguise of a dark-complexioned sailor while on the run from the Indians. Despite this change of appearance, however, they still see him for who he really is and smother him in his sleep, leaving Sergeant Cuff to dramatically unmask the whiteness of the corpse underneath (II.v.1.498).

III. Conclusions

Despite its anti-imperial leanings, Collins’s novel appears to reestablish a social order that is distinctly conservative. Betteridge’s concluding section of the narrative proper ends where it had begun, proclaiming the virtues of Robinson Crusoe. This time, though, Betteridge gets his characters straight, correctly assigning the role of Crusoe to the newly married Blake, who finally accepts the prophetic relevance of England’s founding colonial novel to modern life. In addition, Murthwaite’s last letter, while it endorses the return of the Moonstone to its shrine in India, also reestablishes the appropriate colonial relationship between England and India by placing Indian life back in its place as the appropriate object of British observation. Finally, the Hindoo conspiracy is formally dissolved when the three Brahmins depart in separate directions, without speaking a word, having to rely on their cultural guardian, Murthwaite, to tell their side of the story.

However, Collins’s apparent return to the status quo at the end of The Moonstone cannot efface the novel’s more radically anti-imperial implications. The final act of Ablewhite’s unmasking, for example, has important implications for the images of the Indians and the English that emerge from Collins’s novel. For the Indians, the act of murder paradoxically aligns their “Hindoo conspiracy” on the side of law and order—the side occupied during the Mutiny by English Freemasons—since it is only through Ablewhite’s death that the full extent of his misdeeds come to light and that Blake is finally exonerated, resulting in his marriage to Rachel and the reestablishment of English domestic tranquility. For the English, the family is not what it once was: Lady Verinder is dead, the Ablewhites have suffered the disgrace and death of their eldest son, and the family’s dirty laundry has been aired for all to read. Moreover, the family’s connections to “the Honourable John” have revealed an imperial base
for domesticity, which itself appears as a cover for English criminality. As a reflection on the Mutiny, then, *The Moonstone* issues a challenge to earlier racist and imperialist responses to the rebellion by literally revealing that at work behind the dark mask of disorder and death is the white face of England.

Admitting some English responsibility for the Indian Mutiny goes a long way towards bridging the gap between English and Indian that the initial rhetoric surrounding the rebellion had sought to establish. Moreover, the suggestion in Collins’s novel that secrecy may be practiced as readily by English heroes as it is by revolutionary villains undercuts the rhetoric of Carlylean heroism underwriting British representations of the Mutiny. *The Moonstone* even goes so far as to suggest that the Hindoo conspirators may themselves be a type of Carlylean hero, perpetual prophets who surrender their social status in the service of their beliefs, and in so doing become agents of social order. This capacity for self-sacrifice allows them to share the moral and racial superiority supposedly conferred on the English by the Indian Mutiny. Read in a democratic context, this final image of the Indians suggests that they and other “dark races” under colonial rule have always already been equal to their democratic guardians.