

The Hunt for Chatto

W. Somerset Maugham, Revolutionary Reminiscences and the Fiction of Indian Nationalist Terrorism

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In September 1937, the Indian nationalist-turned-Bolshevik Virendranath 'Chatto' Chattopadhyaya, brother of Sarojini Naidu, was murdered in Stalin's purges in Russia alongside hundreds of other Indians accused of being 'Trotskyists'. For years, Chatto's fateful destiny was unknown, but rumours of his arrest quickly led his old ally and friend M.P.T. Acharya to write a series of essays on Chatto's life for *The Mahratta* in 1938.

In the summer of 1915, Chatto and Abdul Hafiz (of the Berlin-based Indian Independence Committee) conspired with the German Foreign Office, and a band of Italian anarchists, led by Arcangelo Cavadini and Luigi Bertoni, to smuggle weapons and poison into Switzerland and Italy, and – allegedly – to assassinate a number of European kings, prime ministers and presidents. Chatto's contacts within the French anarchist milieu led to the alliance with the Italian anarchists in Switzerland, while Hafiz had a degree in Mining (from University of Birmingham) and handled the weapons and poison. Some of the arms made it across the border, but the assassination conspiracy was foiled by the British Department of Criminal Intelligence.

However, the assassination conspiracy led to Chatto becoming one of the most hunted men by the Scotland Yard. According to contemporary accounts, the British agent Donald Gullick lured Chatto over the German border into Switzerland and then tried to get him to France, where Chatto could be arrested. When the two met at a café in Zurich, the Swiss police arrested them both on account of foreign espionage and evicted them from Switzerland. According to Chatto's later version, Gullick had on him 'a dagger, a revolver, and a bottle of chloroform', £5,000 and a note from the British intelligence service to kill Chatto.

The well-known British author W. Somerset Maugham was working for the British secret service in Switzerland at the time, and fictionalised the hunt for Chatto in his short story 'Giulia Lazzari' (1928), which was adapted for television by the BBC in 1991. Employing typical Orientalist rhetoric, the short story portrays Chatto as a dangerous terrorist, distinct from the noble Europeans, and allows no voice for Chatto who eventually commits suicide to avoid arrest in the story. That aside, it stays close to the actual manhunt, but ultimately portrays the Indian nationalist struggle for freedom as illegitimate.

Faced with eviction from Sweden in 1921, Chatto offered his own version of the story for the Swedish newspaper *Folkets Dagblad Politiken*. Absolving his involvement in the Zurich bomb plot,

he blamed the entire episode on the British but acknowledged that he had met Luigi Bertoni in Switzerland. Perhaps more nuanced, Acharya's three-story narrative of the hunt for Chatto challenges Somerset Maugham's Orientalist discourse and redeems the Indian revolutionary struggle for freedom and its turn to terrorism. Published in 1938, after hearing of Chatto's arrest, Acharya had not seen Chatto for years since they worked together in various organizations in 1920s Berlin. While Chatto served as secretary of the League Against Imperialism, Acharya joined the International Working Men's Association and charted out a career in the international anarchist movement.

Despite their ideological differences, Acharya seems to hold some respect for Chatto's long-standing career as an Indian nationalist: 'Chatto is not known as an effective public speaker but his powers of silent organization are tremendous. He was ever ready to help and guide not only Indian students abroad but men and women of all nationalities who sought his assistance. His knowledge of European politics is immense. He has come in intimate contact with diplomats and politicians of various countries. He also has firsthand information about the poorest strata in European society. Big and small men alike cherish his company and he impresses everyone as a friendly, bright and helpful gentleman. India must not ignore the arrest in Russia of such a bright son of India. Chatto is at present 56 and he must be enabled to pass his old age in his mother-country which he has not visited for at least thirty years'.

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