The Poisoner of Bengal

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The 1930s Murder That Shocked the World

Dan Morrison

juggernaut

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Cast of Characters

The Accused

- Benoyendra Chandra Pandey: The charismatic raja of Pakur, a fiefdom bigger than Delhi; zamindar ruling over thousands of impoverished farmers and tribals; and aspiring film producer. Elder half-brother to Amarendra Pandey.
- Taranath Bhattacharjee: Small-time doctor, part-time vaccine maker, and former student at the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine. Friendly with Benoyendra's mistress, the actress and dancing girl Balika Bala.
- Sivapada Bhattacharjee: Assistant professor at the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine, former professor of Taranath (no relation) and consulting physician to members of the Pakur Raj clan and other well-to-do families.
- Durga Ratan Dhar: A member of Calcutta's medical elite and a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians.

The Victim

- Amarendra Chandra Pandey: The 22-year-old heir with his elder half-brother to the Pakur Raj estate. On the verge of seeking a formal division after years of suspicion that Benoyendra is looting their shared patrimony.

The Law

- E. Henry Le Brocq: Deputy police commissioner in charge of Calcutta's detective department. A genial, aggressive lawman.
- Saktipada Chakrabarty: Assistant police commissioner who launched the Pakur investigation following a secret meeting with Kalidas Gupta (see page xi).
- N.N. Banerjee: The popular public prosecutor trying his biggest case yet.
- Barada Pain: Wily politician and defence lawyer; future scandal-scarred member of Bengal's wartime cabinet.
- Thomas Hobart Ellis: Sessions judge and future governor of East Pakistan.
- John Rolleston Lort-Williams: Justice of the Calcutta High Court, and a former Conservative member of Parliament from southeast London.
- Syed Nasim Ali: Justice of the Calcutta High Court; future chief justice.

The Family and Its Affiliates

- Protapendra Chandra Pandey: The late raja of Pakur, and a supporter of the militant Bengali underground. Died in 1929 of a bacterial infection.

- Rani Surjabati Devi: Aunt and surrogate mother to Benoyendra, Amarendra, and their two sisters; Amarendra's chief protector; target of Benoy's machinations.
- Srimati Pritilata Devi: Benoy's petite, long-suffering wife.
- Prosunendra Chandra Pandey: Benoy's son, a child at the time of Amarendra's death.
- Balika Bala: Stage actress, dancing girl, and Benoyendra's mistress.
- Rabindranath Pandey: Amarendra's uncle, defender, and a trained Ayurvedic doctor.
- Kalidas Gupta: Diminutive lawyer turned sleuth for the Pandey family and the Calcutta Police.

The Doctors

- B.P.B. Naidu: Head of plague research at the Haffkine Institute in Bombay. Part of a new generation of Indian scientists who rose to challenge European dominance of medical research on the subcontinent.
- P.T. Patel: Superintendent of the Arthur Road Infectious Disease Hospital.
- Nalini Ranjan Sen Gupta: Senior Calcutta physician.
- Santosh Gupta: Nalini Sen Gupta's nephew and a researcher at the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine.
- C.L. Pasricha: Professor of pathology at the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine.
- A.C. Ukil: Calcutta pulmonologist, and director of a laboratory at the All India Institute of Science.

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‘Every Inch an Aristocrat’

November 1933: Howrah Station

For most of the year, Calcutta is a city of steam, a purgatory of sweaty shirt-backs, fogged spectacles and dampened garments. A place for melting. In summer, the cart horses pull their wagons bent low under the weight of the sun, nostrils brushing hooves, eyes without hope, like survivors of a high desert massacre. The streets are ‘the desolate earth of some volcanic valley’,[1] where coolies nap on pavements in the shade of merchant houses, deaf to the music of clinking ice and whirring fans behind the shuttered windows above.

The hot season gives way to monsoon and, for a while, Calcuttans take relief in the lightning-charged air, the moody daytime sky and swaying trees that carpet the street with wet leaves, until the monotony of downpour and confinement drives them to misery. The cars of the rich lie stalled in the downpour, their bonnets wreathed in steam, while city trams scrape along the tracks. Then the heat returns, wetter this time, to torment again.

Each winter there comes an unexpected reprieve from the furious summer and the monsoon's Biblical flooding. For a few fleeting months, the brow remains dry for much of each day, the mind refreshingly clear. It is a season of enjoyment, of shopping for Kashmiri shawls and attending the races. Their memories of the recently passed puja holidays still fresh, residents begin decking the avenues in red and gold in anticipation of Christmas. With the season's cool nights and determined merriment, to breathe becomes, at last, a pleasure.

Winter is a gift, providing a forgiving interval in which, surrounded by goodwill and a merciful breeze, even the most determined man might pause to reconsider the murderous urges born of a more oppressive season.

Or so you would think.

On 29 November 1933, mercury in the former capital of the British Raj peaked at a temperate 28 degrees Celsius, with just a spot of rain and seasonally low humidity. On Chowringhee Road, the colonial quarter's posh main street, managers at the white-columned Grand Hotel awaited the arrival of the Arab-American bandleader Herbert Flemming and his International Rhythm Aces for an extended engagement of exotic jazz numbers.[2] Such was Flemming's popularity that the management had provided his band with suites overlooking Calcutta's majestic, lordly, central Maidan with its generous lawns and arcing pathways, as well as a platoon of servants including cooks, bearers, valets, a housekeeper and a pair of taciturn Gurkha guardsmen armed with their signature curved kukri machetes. Calcuttans, Flemming later recalled, 'were *fond* lovers of jazz music'.[3] A

mile south, just off Park Street, John Abriani's Six, featuring the dimple-chinned South African Al Bowlly, were midway through a two-year stand, entertaining well-heeled and well-connected audiences at the tony Saturday Club.

The city was full of diversions.

Despite the differences in culture and climate, if an Englishman were to look at the empire's second city through just the right lens, he might sometimes be reminded of London. The glimmering of the Chowringhee street lights 'calls back to many the similar reflection from the Embankment to be witnessed in the Thames', one chronicler wrote.[4] Calcutta's cinemas and restaurants were no less stuffed with patrons than those in London or New York, even if the police had recently shuttered the nightly cabaret acts that were common in popular European eateries,[5] and even if the Great Depression could now be felt lapping at India's shores, leaving a worrisome slick of unemployment in its wake.[6]

With a million and a half people, a thriving port, and as the former seat of government for a nation stretching from the plains of Afghanistan to the Burma frontier, Calcutta was a thrumming engine of politics, culture, commerce – and crime. Detectives had just corralled a gang of looters for making off with a small fortune in gold idols and jewellery – worth half a million pounds sterling in today's money – from a Hindu temple dedicated to the goddess Kali. In the unpaved, unlit countryside, families lived in fear of an 'orgy' of abductions in which young, disaffected wives were manipulated into deserting their husbands, carried away in the dead of night by boat or on horseback and forced into lives of sexual bondage.[7]

Every day, it seemed, another boy or girl from a 'good' middle-class family was arrested with bomb-making materials, counterfeit rupees, or nationalist literature. Each month seemed to bring another assassination attempt targeting high officials of the Raj. The bloodshed, and growing public support for it, was disturbing proof that Britain had lost the Indian middle class – if it had ever once had them.

Non-violence was far from a universal creed among Indians yearning to expel the English, but it had mass support thanks to the moral authority of Mohandas Gandhi, the ascetic spiritual leader whose campaigns of civil disobedience had galvanized tens of millions. The Mahatma was then touring central India, and trying to balance the social aspirations of India's untouchables with the virulent opposition of orthodox Hindus – a tightrope that neither he nor his movement would ever manage to cross.

And from his palatial family seat at Allahabad, the decidedly non-ascetic Jawaharlal Nehru, the energetic general secretary of the Indian National Congress, issued a broadside condemning his country's Hindu and Muslim hardliners as saboteurs to the cause of a free and secular India.[8] Nehru had already spent more than 1,200 days behind bars for his pro-independence speeches and organizing. Soon the son of one of India's most prominent families would again return to the custody of His Majesty's Government, this time in Calcutta, accused of sedition.

It was in this thriving metropolis, the booming heart of the world's mightiest empire, that shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon on that last Wednesday in November, well

below the radar of world events, a young, slim aristocrat threaded his way through a crowd of turbaned porters, frantic passengers and sweating ticket collectors at Howrah, British India's busiest railway station.

He had less than eight days to live.

Amarendra Chandra Pandey, just 22, couldn't know that he was moments away from an incident that would lead to his own agonizing death; or that his storied dynasty, one stretching back to the days of the Great Mughals, would in a matter of months be known to the world, broadcast across the globe in tones of horror and amazement, tragically associated with greed, lust and the perversion of science. All Amarendra wanted was to get home to the comfort of his bungalow in Pakur, 280 kilometres away, a sprawling country borough of black-stone mines, forests, and paddy, which his clan had ruled over for generations.

It had been a trying year. One of Amarendra's elder sisters, Kananbala, had died only months before of what was believed to be a sudden case of mumps, leaving a husband and teenage daughter. Whatever one's station, life was precarious in the pre-antibiotic era, and the Pandeys were shaken by the pitiless speed with which Kananbala had been taken.

Amar, who had been an avid tennis player and horseman, was himself still recovering from a vicious, bone-wracking bout of tetanus that had left him with lasting heart damage and a crippling secondary infection. He had spent weeks paralysed, mute with lockjaw, surviving on teaspoons of rice gruel. Still, most tetanus infections ended in death; his troubled recovery was regarded as something of a miracle.

But the young man's troubles weren't only medical in nature. There was a growing unspoken concern among the close-knit clan that Amarendra's physical challenges were congruent with financial ones. Amid a deluge of evidence that his bullying elder half-brother was looting their shared estate, Amarendra had recently overcome years of reluctance and was now preparing to divide their jointly held property, known as the Pakur Raj.

Benoyendra Chandra Pandey, the powerful raja of Pakur, had warned Amarendra that he would 'break bones' over any effort to interfere with their shared patrimony. The threat wasn't taken lightly. Benoy's nickname was Sadhan, Bengali for fulfillment. One of his few admirers would later say that Benoy possessed 'physical charm beyond any comparison – a tall physique, generous forehead, doe-eyes', with shoulders like those of an ox and arms as long and thick as the branches of sal trees. Benoy, he recalled, was 'every inch an aristocrat'.[9]

Others saw a pampered, heavyset man with the latent aggression of a wild boar, a quick mind and a natural air of even-tempered command. People did as he wished. 'I never saw him angry,' one of Benoy's chief antagonists would later recall. Where slender and dutiful Amarendra was the perfect image of a young, unmarried member of the rural Bengali aristocracy, Benoy was iconoclastic, an open drinker and a ladies' man who, it seemed, never missed an opportunity to offend the sensibilities of his kinsmen. Since his father's death from a bacterial infection four years earlier, the new raja of Pakur had worked relentlessly to seize the properties of his kinsmen and expand the borders – and income – of his back-country fief.

Fratricide is the oldest crime, with many methods available to a brother with the requisite sociopathy. Benoyendra, 32, had that in spades, but he also possessed vision. A would-be impresario of the growing Indian film industry, Benoy hatched a conspiracy that would guarantee Amarendra's death and his own financial freedom. Rather than having his younger brother hacked to death on some rural back road by hired goons (a not-uncommon practice among the perpetually feuding gentry), shooting him dead in a hunting accident, or slowly poisoning Amar with, say, arsenic, as royals and commoners alike had done since at least the Middle Ages, Benoy, a twentieth-century predator loose among Victorians, set his eyes on a thoroughly modern murder.

Inspired by one of English literature's most popular heroes, using medical science in the service of violence, the raja employed a weapon which he was sure would make the cause of Amarendra's demise untraceable. The boy's death would easily be chalked up to any one of the grand buffets of viral and bacterial fevers that regularly claimed the lives of Indians and Europeans of all classes in the humid, littoral metropolis.

Benoyendra devised a plot to strike his brother with stealth, speed and audacity. By joining forces with a down-and-out physician who had trained in microbiology, and using a well-paid assassin with the nerve to do with his own hands what the doctor and the nobleman could not, Benoy would finally be rid of his troublesome sibling and be free to dream and spend as he pleased.

Accompanying Amarendra on Platform Three that fateful day was his iron-willed aunt, surrogate mother and would-

be protector – Rani Surjabati Devi. A wealthy dowager and the widow of their father's brother, Surjabati had raised Benoyendra, Amarendra and their two sisters. As the boys grew up, she struggled to shield Amar from Benoyendra's neglect and later from his veiled, mounting threats. Not content with looting Amarendra's share of their shared patrimony, Benoy was also eyeing the ample properties that the woman he called 'Mother' had inherited from her late husband. The brothers were in line to inherit equal portions of Surjabati's estate, which produced an annual income exceeding their own.

Surjabati's influence over his younger brother was a constant irritant. 'It is his wish that I should not have any connection to you,' Amarendra wrote to her in 1932. Privately, the aunt and elder nephew loathed one another. In public they performed with arctic civility. Surjabati, despite her wealth and seniority, was disadvantaged in her long duel with Benoy. He was the karti, the undisputed leader of his wing of the family, while the rani was a childless widow, with no biological son of her own, in an era where widows were still expected to live out their days in joyless seclusion. The small, formidable woman in wire-rimmed eyeglasses, who had married into the family as a young teenager, was holding her own against Benoyendra in a contest as old as aristocracy itself. No one understood he was playing by new rules.

At the East India Railways' Howrah station, Amarendra collected tickets for his homeward journey on the Pakur Express. Surjabati had already sent ahead instructions for her household servants to burn incense, to wash down the cots and chairs with pest-killing phenyl, to beat and air the

cushions and bedding, and to tie fresh leaves to the entry gates in preparation for their arrival. Surjabati, Amar's sister Banabala and his teenaged niece Anima Devi would accompany him on the north-bound train. They were joined at the station by a handful of relatives and friends, including, to everyone's surprise, an ebullient Benoyendra who, most uncharacteristically, had also come to see them off.

Amarendra, tickets in hand, led the party in a line towards their waiting train through a clamour of steam whistles, footfalls and hawkers, his elder brother at the rear. A moment after crossing from the public booking hall to the station hall, with their platform in sight, Amarendra gave a shout.

'I have been pricked!'*