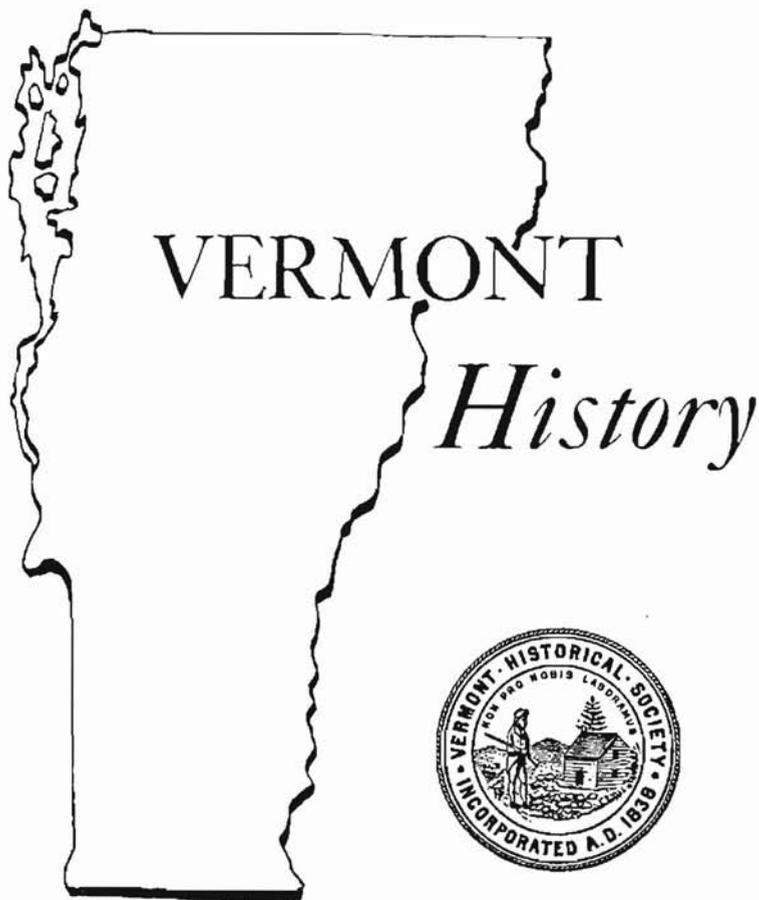


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"Chapman considered Das 'an agitator' and protested to Norwich President Charles H. Spooner against giving 'military instruction to men who might use that information against a power with which we are at peace.'"

The Vermont Education of Taranath Das: An Episode in British-American-Indian Relations

By RONALD SPECTOR

Among the many groups of recent immigrants in the United States who aspired to free their homelands were the East Indians or "Hindus" as they were usually called in the United States (notwithstanding the fact that they included a substantial number of Sikhs and Muslims). Entering the United States through Canada during the first decade of the twentieth century, several thousand Indians settled on the West Coast and secured work generally as farm laborers, lumbermen and railway construction workers. Although never more than 6,000 East Indians resided in the Pacific Coast states, they encountered the same type of hostility and discrimination as the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans. The nativist, California-based Japanese and Korean Exclusion League even changed its name to the Asiatic Exclusion League so as not to slight the "Hindus." By 1911, local pressure on immigration authorities had resulted in virtually cutting off Indian immigration into the United States.¹ After that date the United States refused entry to nearly all Indians on the grounds that they might "become a public charge," carry contagious diseases, or violate the alien contract labor laws.²

Although few in number, many of the Indian immigrants who had managed to enter the United States before the gates closed carried on an active agitation against British rule in India. For Indians, it was a time of great unrest and rising national feeling. In Eastern India, the ill-advised and highly unpopular "partition" of the Province of Bengal, one of the most populous and advanced regions of the country, by the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, in 1905, set off a chain reaction of protests, boycotts of British goods, riots, bombings, terrorism, and underground revolutionary activity.



*Captain A.I. Chapman, courtesy
of Norwich University*

Among those active in nationalist causes was a young Bengali college student named Taraknath Das. A member of a secret revolutionary society, the Amsilan Samiti, Das fled India in 1906 and spent a year in Japan before sailing for San Francisco in 1907. He studied briefly at the University of California but soon took and passed the United States Civil Service Examination for interpreter and was assigned to the U.S. Immigration Service office in Vancouver, British Columbia.

In Vancouver Das founded an Indian nationalist newspaper, *Free Hindustan*, the first of many "underground" newspapers published by Indian immigrants in Canada and the Pacific States.³ Canadian authorities called the *Free Hindustan* "highly seditious and full of falsehoods against the British Government of India."⁴ Informers planted by the Canadian police reported that Das was also collecting money for seditious purposes and instructing the local Indian community in "revolutionary ideas." Under pressure from Canadian authorities, the United States Immigration Office refused to continue employing Das unless he severed his connection with *Free Hindustan*.⁵

Das thereupon left Vancouver for Seattle where, British agents reported, he "fraternised with anarchists and bomb manufacturers" and continued publication of his paper, which by now had a circulation of about 2,000. British authorities took special alarm over the October, 1908, issue of *Free*

Taraknath Das as a cadet at Norwich University, from Dodge and Ellis, History of Norwich University 1819-1911



Hindustan which discussed the possibility of winning over troops of the British Indian Army to the nationalist cause.⁶ Information that Das had enrolled in a "high-class engineering and military establishment," Norwich University, undoubtedly increased British anxiety.

Das almost certainly enrolled in Norwich University to obtain military training. At this time the great Indian nationalist leader, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, was encouraging young Indians to obtain military training abroad as preparation for the liberation of their country, and on the West Coast, Das had associated with another young nationalist, Pandurang Sadashiva Khankhoje, who had enrolled in a California military academy and sought vainly to enter West Point. This possibility did not escape the attention of the British military attaché in Washington, Lt. Col. B.R. James, who promptly got in touch with the Chief of the Second Section of the United States Army General Staff, Brigadier General W.W. Wotherspoon, for information about Norwich University and its curriculum.⁷ The attaché had reason for concern, for Norwich University was one of the oldest and best military colleges in the country.

General Wotherspoon requested the senior Army instructor attached to Norwich University, Captain Leslie A. Chapman, to report "fully and confidentially" on "Paraknath Mdass'" character and activities.⁸ Two weeks later, having received no reply, Wotherspoon again wrote to Chapman

urging him to write in the near future. In a later letter Wotherspoon advised that ". . . the British Government is keeping careful watch upon these people and the Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. J. Franklin Bell, would like to give them as much information as we can upon the subject."⁹

The anxiety of General Wotherspoon and General Bell to accommodate the British remains a matter of conjecture. Both had recently served long tours of duty in the Philippines where they might have become sympathetic to the British colonial outlook. General Bell had organized and served as the first commander of the Philippine Scouts, and the idea of subverting colonial troops, as Das allegedly aimed to do, may have appeared especially reprehensible to him. In addition, General Wotherspoon's Second Section of the General Staff had responsibility for counter-intelligence matters, and he may have believed that the Das case fell under this heading.¹⁰

Captain Chapman reported from Norwich that Das had indeed enrolled and while embarked on the usual military instruction, provided first-year cadets had not enlisted in the Vermont National Guard as was usually required of entering students. Chapman considered Das "an agitator" and protested to Norwich President Charles H. Spooner against giving "military instruction to men who might use that information against a power with which we are at peace."¹¹ He successfully blocked Das's enlisting in the Guard but could not prevent his admission to Norwich. General Wotherspoon commended Chapman for his "mighty good judgment" in keeping Das out of the Guard since "that might have been somewhat embarrassing to our Government in case the question was raised."¹²

Das was apparently a successful and popular student at Norwich. One of the founders of the "Norwich Tribunal," a debating society, he represented the school at inter-collegiate debates and contributed articles to the student newspaper, the *Reveille*. His earlier academic work enabled him to skip freshman courses and enter directly the sophomore academic program.¹³ Captain Chapman, certainly no admirer, described him as "a fair student very earnest" with a "personality which seems to win many to his side. . . . He writes for everything that will publish his communications and writes pretty well. He makes every endeavor to speak before clubs and societies of which there are several, wholly unconnected with the University, in this vicinity. His topic is invariably 'Free Hindustan'."¹⁴

Das demonstrated great interest in everything pertaining to military matters and sought unsuccessfully to enroll in advanced classes in military science. His friends and teachers did not know whether or not he actually planned to use his military training against the British. In any case, Captain Chapman did "not consider him as possessing any military ability whatsoever" and did "not believe anyone need fear him in any way." Nevertheless Chapman also reported that "another Hindoo has also been admit-



The Class of 1911 as sophomores in the winter of 1908-1909 with Das at the extreme left of row one, courtesy of Norwich University

ted and a considerable number of others, probably ten or more, are now corresponding with the authorities upon the same subject. Das himself states that he hopes to get a large number to come." Chapman expressed surprise that "the white cadets did not object to the presence of these men in the corps, but there has been no objection so far and I attribute my own feeling to race prejudice, which is stronger in me than in the average New Englander."¹⁵

The prospect outlined in the military instructor's letter of an entire squad of militant Indian nationalists receiving "high-class" military training at Norwich appears to have unnerved the British. In the spring of 1909, the Government of India recommended to the Secretary of State for India that the British Ambassador in Washington make representations against the "gang of Hindu agitators" receiving military training at Norwich or similar institutions.¹⁶ In Das's case such representations proved unnecessary, for Captain Chapman reported the following winter that the young Indian had been forced to withdraw from Norwich. According to this officer, President Spooner had warned Das when he first entered the University "that he must not continue any agitation against Great Britain" while studying at Norwich. As he continued to disregard this warning, he was honorably discharged in June, 1909, with the suggestion that he enter Harvard University.¹⁷

The British Embassy was elated. "It shows a good feeling that they have turned out Das from the University," wrote Lt. Col. James, "and I feel sure that the U.S. authorities will always be in sympathy with us in matters of this kind, as they have an idea that the education which they are now giving to the Filipinos may tend to breed the same class of agitator there."¹⁸ He promised to investigate Harvard and find out "if there is a Hindu gang there." To General Wotherspoon, he explained that "it is the superficially educated Dasses of India who are at the bottom of any trouble we have there. Fortunately, they are physically effete rascals and a good thick-headed Mahommedan would like nothing better than to be paid 8 annas an hour to knock them down."¹⁹

Das's brief stay at Norwich nicely highlights the ambivalent role which the United States has historically played in relation to European colonialism. Das did not attend Harvard but returned to the Pacific Coast where he continued his "agitation" and received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Washington. In 1914 he received a Ph.D. from Georgetown University and in the same year he also became a United States citizen. Although not a member, he had long been associated with the Ghadar Party, a revolutionary organization of Indians living in the United States and Canada, dedicated to the violent overthrow of British rule and the subverting of the Indian regiments of the British Army. Their projects to smuggle arms into India, their contacts with Germany and Japan and their efforts to return home to foment rebellion made them suspect in the eyes of many Americans. After the United States entered World War I in 1917, seventeen Indian nationalist leaders in the U.S. were arrested on evidence furnished by the British and tried along with a number of others for conspiracy to violate the neutrality law of the United States.²⁰ All but one were convicted, but through the efforts of American liberals and friends of India, Das escaped a prison term and deportation, and managed to retain his American citizenship. Over the next two decades he became "the foremost spokesman of the Indian community" in the United States,²¹ as well as a leading interpreter of the United States to India through his extensive writings and lectures. In 1934 he became professor of political science at Columbia University and in 1952, almost fifty years after he had fled India in disguise, finally revisited his native land.

NOTES

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¹Gary R. Hess, "The 'Hindu' in America: Immigration and Naturalization Policies and India," *Pacific Historical Review*, XXXVIII, (Feb. 1969), 60-62; and S. Chandrasekhar, "The Indian Community in the United States," *Far Eastern Survey*, XIV (1945), 147-149.

²Khushwant Singh and Satinda Singh, *Ghadar 1915* (New Delhi: 1915), p. 13.

³Biographical information on Das from S.P. Sen (ed.) *Dictionary of National Biography* (Calcutta: 1972), I.; and William A. Ellis, *Norwich University 1819-1911* (Montpelier: 1911), III, 490-491. The sketch in Ellis (probably contributed by Das himself) is more complete but does not mention his political activities. See also R.C. Majumdar *History of the Freedom Movement in India* (Calcutta: 1963), II, 166-169; A.C. Bose "Indian Nationalist Agitators in the United States and Canada 'till the arrival of Har Dayal'" *Journal of Indian History*, XLIII, 227-239; and L.P. Mathur, *Indian Revolutionary Movement in the United States of America* (Delhi: 1960).

⁴Home Dept. Political, February, 1911, Nos. 98-101, Appendix I, National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter NAI).

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*, Agent letter, 27 November 1909.

⁷*Ibid.*, Military Attaché (Lt. Col. B.R. James), Washington, to India Office, 31 January, 1909, No. 491.

⁸W.W. Wotherspoon to 1st Lt. Leslie A. Chapman, January 5, 1909, War College Division Correspondence, Record Group 165, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁹*Ibid.*, Wotherspoon to Chapman, January 20 and 26, 1910.

¹⁰A short sketch of Wotherspoon's career may be found in Robert McHenry (ed.), *Webster's American Military Biographies* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam, 1978), p. 491. On Bell's career in the Philippines, see Edgar F. Raines, Jr., "Major General J. Franklin Bell and Military Reform" Ph.D. Diss. Univ. of Wisconsin 1976, I 9-14 and passim. The work of the Second Section is described in Marc B. Powe "The Emergence of the War Department Intelligence Agency 1885-1918." M.A. Thesis, Kansas State University 1974, pp. 54-58. Powe notes that neither Bell nor Wotherspoon knew much about intelligence work.

¹¹Extract from letter from U.S. Military Officer attached to Norwich University, Vermont, to General Staff, Washington." Home Dept., Political, February, 1911, No. 98-101, NAI.

¹²Wotherspoon to Chapman, January 29, 1909, War College Division Correspondence, Record Group 165, National Archives.

¹³Ellis, *Norwich University*, p. 491.

¹⁴Extract from letter from U.S. Military Officer attached to Norwich University, Vermont, to General Staff, Washington." Home Dept., Political, February, 1911, Nos. 98-101.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶The Viceroy and Council to H.M. Secretary of State for India, Viscount Morley, May 6, 1909, No. 5 of 1909, Home Dept., Political, 1911, 90-101, NAI.

¹⁷Chapman to Wotherspoon, January 28, 1910, War College Div. Correspondence, Record Group 165, National Archives.

¹⁸B.R. James to India Office, ADMO 3, Home Dept., Political, February 1911, Nos. 98-101, NAI.

¹⁹B.R. James to Wotherspoon, February 4, 1910, War College Division Correspondence, Record Group 165, National Archives.

²⁰The Gadar Conspiracy has generated an extensive literature. Two more recent accounts are Joan M. Jensen, "The 'Hindu Conspiracy': A Reassessment," *Pacific Historical Review*, XLVIII (February, 1979), and Don K. Dignan, "The Hindu Conspiracy in Anglo-American Relations During World War I," *Pacific Historical Review*, XL (1971). See also Giles T. Brown, "The Hindu Conspiracy 1914-1917," *Pacific Historical Review*, XVIII (1943).

²¹Hess, "The Hindu in America," p. 66