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The Delhi conspiracy case of 1912 and the role of British intelligence agencies in solving it

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Abstract

All accounts available today about the Delhi Conspiracy Case of 1912 - an assassination attempt on the reigning Viceroy Sir Charles Hardinge - are fragmentary (none of them gives a complete picture of the Case), outdated and often one-sided (for obvious reasons). The present article seeks to correct this anomaly, by giving a comprehensive, up-to-date description of this very important event in India's history, and, at the same time, also including the British view on this episode. While doing so, the article throws ample light on the work of the British Intelligence Agencies of that period.

Keywords: Delhi Conspiracy Case of 1912, Sir David Petrie, DCI, CID, Viceroy Sir Charles Hardinge, Rash Behari Bose, Basanta Kumar Biswas, Manindra Nath Nayak

Introduction

The bomb attack on Viceroy Sir Charles Hardinge

The British Diplomat who served as the Viceroy in India from 1910 to 1916 was Charles Hardinge, 1st Baron Hardinge of Penshurst, carrying a string of British imperial titles: KG, GCB, GCSI, GCMG, GCIE, GCVO, ISO, PC and DL ^[1]. His tenure was noted for good governance and he enjoyed remarkable support among the public, including the Press and even the Indian Nationalists.

Some of the prominent events during Viceroy Hardinge's regime included the visit of King George V ^[2], which is known as the 'Delhi Durbar' of 1911, and, the historically important and seemingly irreversible moves of a) the Unification of Bengal, followed by b) the shifting of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi on 12 December 1911.

To mark the restoration of the Capital status to Delhi, which had been the capital for several centuries under the Moghuls, a grand ceremony was held on 23 December 1912. The Viceroy and the Vicereine were moving in a celebratory cavalcade, riding on a royal *howdah* on a huge elephant, through the main streets of Delhi. When they were at *Chandni Chowk*, just crossing the Punjab National Bank building, a Lyddite Bomb ^[3] weighing "between a half and three quarters of a pound" [Poplewell, 2015:81] ^[4] was thrown on the howdah of the Viceroy from the left side of the cavalcade ^[5].

Reports of members of the crowd indicated that the bomb was thrown by a woman! The explosion was so intense that it killed the attendant holding the umbrella of the Viceroy on the spot, and was so loud that it could be heard in a "radius of 6 miles" [Hardinge, 1948:81]. It burst the eardrums of a number of officers and attendants close by, leaving them with permanent hearing loss. Viceroy Hardinge's left eardrum too burst, but he was so benumbed that he did not even realize that a bomb had exploded just behind him, until the Vicereine herself informed him about it.

Viceroy Hardinge was badly injured in his back, where several screws, nails and gramophone needles got lodged, and his left shoulder muscle got torn. Obviously, the bomb was thrown targeting the Viceroy, but, as the elephant was moving forward, the bomb missed both him and his wife, who was sitting on his right, and exploded behind them, with the attendant holding the umbrella taking the direct hit.

Astonishingly however, Viceroy Hardinge kept his cool and asked the officials to calm the crowd and continue the celebratory procession! Eventually, he fainted and later woke up on the pavement.

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His remarkable calmness and composure ensured that the British army and the police present around him would not fire at the crowd in retaliation, for which he was profusely thanked later.

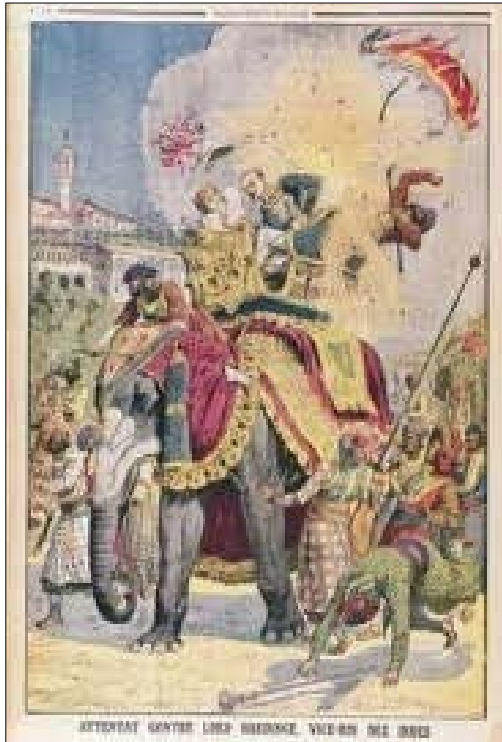


Fig 1: A painting showing the impact of the bomb thrown at Viceroy Charles Hardinge (Photo Credits: The French periodical *Le Petit*, which was in print from 1863 to 1944).



Fig 2: Viceroy Hardinge and his wife Lady Hardinge i.e., Winifred Selena Strut (Photo Credits: *New York Times*, December 24, 1912, p. 3).

The role of intelligence agencies

Imperial India's first as well as foremost Intelligence wing was called Department of Criminal Intelligence or DCI. Established in 1903 by Sir Harold Stuart during the regime of Viceroy Lord Curzon, its work was to protect the then Government of India from threats and to maintain internal peace, along with the duty of collecting intelligence reports to prevent crimes before they happen, especially 'political crimes'. Its provincial-level branches were called Criminal Investigation Departments or CIDs.

Within a few years after the establishment of the DCI and its CIDs, their work came to be seen as lacklustre and less than commendable. The outgoing Viceroy Lord Curzon had extended his support to them, but Viceroy Hardinge was not at all impressed with these units and was in favour of dissolving them. His reign as the Viceroy, as noted above, was remarkably peaceful, what with many a public-favouring policy, sympathising with Indians in South Africa, and maintaining good relations with Indian Nationalists, especially the moderates.

The bomb attack on Viceroy Hardinge only served to precipitate matters for the DCI. The attack was obviously an issue of great importance and the Extremists who perpetrated the deed had to be apprehended without delay. To solve the case of the Delhi Bombing Conspiracy (as termed by the press), the DCI entrusted the investigation to Detective David Petrie.

The Detective-in-charge of the case



Fig 3: Sir David Petrie (Photo Credits: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/sir-david-petrie>)

David Petrie, son of Thomas Petrie, was born on September 9, 1879, in Inveravon, Banffshire, Scotland. He studied M.A. at the Aberdeen University of Scotland. In 1900, he joined the service of the Indian Police and his career progressed at a very fast pace: at the age of 30, he reached the rank of Assistant to the Deputy Inspector-General of Police in the Punjab province, and by the age of 33, he entered the service of the DCI.

David Petrie was also a noted writer. He had written an article that won the Gold Essay Prize in Asia's oldest

defence journal published by USI - United Service Institution of India - a think tank for defence services and national security in India, established in 1870 by Maj. Gen. Sir Charles Macgregor.

Petrie also took up the responsibility of establishing a network of spies in the Far East during the I World War: in Thailand and areas around it. He was sent there because his predecessors failed to establish a reliable intelligence agency. In later years, viz. from 1932 to 1936, David Petrie worked as the chairman of India's UPSC (Union Public Service Commission). During the II World War, he became the Director General of MI5 of the United Kingdom. In spite of being an influential personality with a high position in the British Governmental hierarchy, Petrie's role and work in Pre-Independence India is rather opaque and devoid of any limelight. One obvious reason could be the very nature of his work: lurking in the shadows in cloak-and-dagger style, in contrast to the usual carrot-and-stick police work.

Investigation by David Petrie

David Petrie's investigation in Delhi

When the Delhi Conspiracy case involving the bomb attack on Viceroy Hardinge was entrusted to David Petrie, he was Additional Superintendent of Police, Delhi. His main Team that investigated this case consisted of the following CID officers and other staff: 1) C. Stead - Punjab CID, 2) Denham - Bengal CID, 3) Vincent and Guider - both from Bombay CID, 4) Richardson - from the United Provinces, 5) Rai Sahib Daryai Mal - a retired DSP, 6) A staff member from Punjab National Bank (in front of which the bombing took place!), 7) A local Railway officer (for possible information on the movements of suspects!), 8) A female colleague (!) of Rai Sahib - to elicit information from women among the spectators of the ceremony.

In all, David Petrie was in charge of 34 personnel. Lord Hardinge encouraged Petrie to involve more people in the investigation and doubled the grants given to DCI, viz. from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 1, 00, 000.

Petrie, given a free hand to spend money, devised various techniques to crack the case. He started his investigation by visiting several places of immoral activities in Delhi like brothels, opium dens, gambling houses, and so on. In his inquiries for collecting information from people, who would be reluctant to talk to the police, Petrie sought the help of trusted locals with a certain reputation. He also questioned old anti-British suspects, spoke to relatives of 'extremists' and even offered them pardons, etc.

However, even after seven months of the initial investigation, Petrie failed to achieve any significant clues in the case, not the least even the motive for the bomb attack. The Imperial Government of India and the Delhi Police were acting as the two wheels of investigation, but without proper coordination, both proceeding in seemingly different directions. Within a couple of months after the attack, i.e., since the beginning of 1913, the then Government of India started criticizing the DCI for its working style, which fetched no tangible results, but cost the Government a lot of money. This led to the Director of DCI, Sir Charles Cleveland, getting censured from entering the office of the Viceroy.

David Petrie's investigation in Calcutta

David Petrie, the shrewd sleuth that he was, now made Calcutta his base instead of Delhi as he felt that investigating Calcutta's rising revolutionary tide might yield better results. In the second half of 1913, his team came

across a revolutionary document called *The Liberty Leaflet*, which was distributed in large numbers across Punjab and the United Provinces.

The investigators now started looking for the person/s mass-producing and distributing these leaflets across the provinces so successfully secretly. A secret agent in Delhi came to know that a man named Abad Behari, head of a revolutionary group in Delhi, was distributing these leaflets throughout Delhi, Punjab and the United Provinces. By January 1914, the detectives were able to confirm Abad Behari's role, when the same document again appeared in large numbers in Lahore.

Since a big manhunt was deployed for the people involved in the bombing of the Viceroy, investigations were conducted in all the provinces separately. This revealed another vital clue, viz., the similarity of the bombs used in other political crimes across India from 1911 to 1913: they were all manufactured by one and the same person known as Manindra Nath Nayak, who had been a member of revolutionary secret societies since his student life and learned to manufacture Coconut Bombs by putting explosive material in the empty shells of coconuts along with sharp objects. (These bombs were similar to the failed Coconut bomb, that was thrown at Lord Minto in 1909.) Later, Nayak trained under Suresh Chandra Dutta, a Professor of Rippon College in Calcutta, to make superior quality explosives.

Meanwhile, towards the end of 1913, Detective Denham, CID agent from Calcutta, led a raid on a house in the area of Raja Bazaar, Calcutta. Armed with substantial evidence, along with the Liberty leaflets, he arrested four young men of Bengali descent in connection with similar bombings across the nation. This led to the arrest of another person working in the Calcutta press as a Type Setter, who was responsible for the mass production of these leaflets (his identity is unknown).

The interrogation of the youth arrested by Denham in Calcutta led David Petrie to establish a strong link between the Raja Bazaar Gang and the Secret Society of Delhi headed by Abad Behari.

By 16th February 1914, Petrie led raids on four suspicious houses in Delhi. In the house of one Amir Chand, he found materials for making Lyddite Bombs, as also the list of original members involved in the *Chandni Chowk* bombing of the Viceroy. The list also included the name of one Lala Har Dayal Singh and another that was completely obscure until then: Rash Behari Bose (not to be confused with Rash Behari Ghosh, a politician).

In Lahore, agent C. Stead conducted raids and arrested a man called Dina Nath, who later became the main approver in the case.

The statement given by the approver Dina Nath and the deductions made by David Petrie

It was Abad Behari who distributed the Liberty leaflets across the provinces. The origin of the leaflets was traced to Calcutta's Raja Bazaar, where the arrested young men, who were found in possession of these leaflets, had joined hands with Abad Behari and were linked to similar bombing incidents. The kind of bombs used by these young men and the bomb thrown on Viceroy Hardinge were similar both in their components and their preparation. They were made by one and the same person, viz., Manindra Nath Nayak of Calcutta, whose customers included these arrested youth and the above-mentioned Rash Behari Bose.

Soon, DCI found out that Rash Behari Bose transported these bombs from Calcutta to Delhi and stored them in the house of Amir Chand in Delhi. Amir Chand in turn gave the bomb to a man called Basanta Kumar Biswas, who, disguised as a woman (!), threw the bomb at Viceroy Hardinge.

Rash Behari Bose too was present during the bombing incident, but immediately left for Dehra Dun without raising any suspicion.

Basanta Kumar Biswas, now the prime suspect, managed to evade the police for several days, but was arrested on 26th February 1914. However, there is no conclusive evidence that it was he who actually threw the bomb, as his disguise as a woman could not be established beyond doubt.

The entire DCI was surprised to learn that the mastermind behind the plot, i.e. Rash Behari Bose, was a Government employee working as a clerk at the Forest Institute in Dehra Dun. He was never even considered a suspect! They were even more surprised to learn that Rash Behari Bose, a 'wolf in the skin of a sheep', organised in Dehra Dun a demonstration on the very next day after the bombing, condemning the attack on Viceroy Hardinge! (This ingenious tactic was later described by Viceroy Hardinge himself in his private journal.) That was not all. The DCI discovered that Rash Behari Bose was a relative of Srish Chandra Ghose, a most feared Revolutionary of that era.

David Petrie came to know that secret revolutionary organizations like 'Yugantar' ^[6] and 'Anushilan Samiti' ^[7] were also involved in this bomb conspiracy as they actively encouraged Basanta Kumar Biswas to become a revolutionary and coaxed him into throwing the bomb.

Judicial trial and the aftermath

Finally, Petrie closed his case as solved, and eleven men were put on trial. On 5th October 1914, Amir Chand, Abad Behari and Basanta Kumar Biswas were given capital punishment, i.e., death by hanging. The rest were sentenced to life imprisonment in the Andaman Islands, except for two men who managed to evade the trial.

The first, Manindra Nath Nayak, was by now a resident of Chandernagore, a French territory. British India's police could not arrest him as it was out of their jurisdiction. Later on, Manindra Nath rose to become a member of the French India Legislative Assembly, thereby making it impossible for the British to pursue him.

The second was Rash Behari Bose, who escaped to Japan in 1915 under an alias of poet P N Thakur and spent many years incognito and married a Japanese woman, who took his surname: she is Toshiko Bose ^[8].



Fig 4: Rash Behari Bose and his Japanese wife, Toshiko Bose.
(Photo Credits: <https://www.atpress.ne.jp/news/104283>)

David Petrie was now showered with praises for his commendable work, which led to the victory of the Imperial Government against the revolutionaries. The solving of this case had increased the prestige of DCI as well as that of Petrie. This case became a milestone in his career. In later years, he went on to become the head of DCI and also of MI5.

Plausible motives for the bomb attack on Viceroy Hardinge

From a perusal of the authentic and reliable material available in print and putting two and two together, the following can be presented as the plausible reasons for the bomb attack on Viceroy Hardinge on 23 December 1912 in Delhi:

1. The population of Calcutta, West Bengal, dominated by Hindus, disliked the decision to shift the capital from Calcutta to Delhi during Hardinge's tenure. It was regarded as Pro-Muslim, because Delhi was previously the Capital of Moghul emperors, who were Muslims. More importantly, losing the status of Capital city also meant a loss of revenue for Calcutta.
2. Another reason could be the general and widespread frustration among Indians due to the lack of any significant political liberalization and the resultant under-representation of Indians in decision-making. Although the 1909 Minto-Morley reforms were implemented, they only appeared to be a divide-and-rule policy with meagre or no hope for self-rule and could not satisfy the thirst of Indian citizenry who longed for nothing less than complete freedom. However, the moderates cherished these reforms as a progressive step, akin to something better than nothing.
3. The grand ceremonial parade of 23 December 1912 was meant to celebrate the shifting of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. But it was viewed by many as a display of power by the British, who took pride in their might to rule upon the helpless citizens of India.
4. Viceroy Hardinge himself speculates in his private papers that one reason could have been the reunification of Bengal in 1911 during his own tenure. It was disliked by the Muslim community of East Bengal. The 1905 split had given them considerable autonomy along with separate electorates, thanks to the so-called 1909 Minto-Morley reforms. They feared that the reunification might lead to Hindu dominance in socio-politico-economic matters and considered the reunification as Anti-Muslim.
5. Separating the Bihar and the Orissa regions by forming a new province of Bihar in the year 1912 irked the Zamindars of Bengal, who would now lose their rights and revenues in the divided regions.

Conclusion

From all the foregoing, it can be deduced that the first (Shifting of the capital), the second (General frustration among Indians) and the third (Celebrating the shifting of the capital) motives mentioned above could be the prime reasons behind the attack on Viceroy Hardinge.

The detective David Petrie took nearly two years to solve the case, as the network of the involved revolutionaries was vast, closely-knit and opaque. It was intricately connected from Lahore in the West to Calcutta in the East.

Revolutionaries of the 20th Century detested the colonial policies of the British. Unlike the moderates, they wanted full freedom, nothing less. Policies implemented by the then Government of India, whether for reasons of selfish mercantilism or for reasons of selfless good Governance and well-being of Indian Citizens, were viewed as policies of oppression and autocracy.

Under such circumstances, a pompous ceremony held in the new capital city only added salt to the already injured pride of the Indian Revolutionaries. The ceremony acted as a lit match-stick in the powdered barrel of the anguish of these revolutionaries, which was expressed in the form of a bomb explosion. Moreover, the ceremony offered a rare opportunity for the "common man" to get close to the Viceroy, throw a bomb on him from a crowd and escape unnoticed in the melee!

An interesting point to note here is that another relative of Srish Chandra Ghose and Rash Behari Bose too took cudgels against the British Raj, preferred a violent struggle (Was it a family trait?!), raised a whole army and fought the British tooth and nail! He was none other than Subhash Chandra Bose, whose exploits are legendary and inspirational. Suffice to note that, in his attempts to win freedom for India from the British, Subhash Chandra Bose left no stone unturned: from securing an audience with Adolf Hitler in Germany to reaching Japan in a submarine! He is the only one 'conferred' with the title of '*Netaji*'.

An important lesson here for students of history is that some who are 'perpetrators of crimes' on one side of the fence can be 'patriots and legendary heroes' on the other side!

References

- The titles of Viceroy Charles Hardinge are as follows: KG (Knight of the Order of the Garter), GCB (Grand Cross of Order of Bath), GCSI (Grand Commander of Order of the Star of India), GCMG (Grand Cross Order of St. Michael and St. George), GCIE (Grand Commander of the Indian Empire), GCVO (Grand Cross of the Victorian Order), ISO (Imperial Service Order), PC (Member of Privy Council), DL (Deputy Lieutenant).
- Incidentally, the 1923 inscription on the famous Gateway of India in Bombay (now Mumbai), which was built during 1913-23 declares: "Erected to Commemorate the Landing in India of Their Imperial Majesties King George V and Queen Mary on the Second of December MCMXI".
- A Lyddite bomb is a Picric acid bomb commonly used in World War I era, and improved upon in later years to pierce through armoured vehicles and hence also called a Shellite bomb.
- In endnote 84 on p. 97 of Popplewell's 2015 book, "Intelligence and Imperial Defence..." we can find the source for the weight of the bomb: "Telegram from Governor-General's Council to Secretary of State, 23 Dec. 1992. CUL Hardinge Papers, Vol. 85." In the same endnote, Popplewell goes on to add: "This was the second time revolutionaries had made an attempt on the Viceroy. The first occurred on 13 Nov. 1909 when two coconut bombs were thrown at Lord Minto's Carriage at Ahmedabad. They failed to explode". Here he quotes: Ker, "Political Trouble in India", pp. 310-311. (James Campbell Ker, "Political Trouble in India 1907-1917", reprint edited by Mahadevprasad Saha, Calcutta, Editions India, 1973.)
- It may be noted that in the Commonwealth, all traffic moves on the left side of the road, hence the left side is always closer than the right side pavement.
- Yugantar, an underground revolutionary organisation in Bengal, was jointly established in 1906 by Aurobindo Ghosh, Barin Ghosh, Bhupendranath Datta and Raja Subodh Malik. (J.C.Ker, op.cit., p. 220)
- Anushilan Samiti was outwardly a body building club, but used by revolutionaries as an underground society for anti-British activities.
- The famous Nakamura Bakery's owner Aizo Soma of Tokyo, Japan, had sheltered Rash Behari Bose in his bakery. Here, Bose introduced an authentic Indian-spices-based chicken curry called "Indo-Karii" (Indo-curry) to replace the hither-to popular British curry prevailing in Japan called "Raisu-karii" (rice curry). In the "Comment" section of *The Hindu* dt. February 06, 2018, Pallavi Aiyar narrates how "Rash Behari Bose introduced spicy curry to Japan as part of his anti-colonial struggle": ""According to *Bose of Nakamura*, by Professor Takeshi Nakajima, Bose wanted to prove that the curry the Japanese were used to was a colonial invention. Getting his recipe on the Nakamura menu was therefore "part of his anti-colonial struggle, by trying to win back India's food culture from British hands."" (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/bose-of-nakamura/article22661567.ece>) Eventually, Bose married Toshiko, the eldest daughter of Aizo Soma.
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