

Who was Anthony Firinghee, the Portuguese-origin Bengali singer played on screen by Uttam Kumar?

scroll.in/global/970261/who-was-anthony-firinghee-remembering-the-portuguese-origin-singer-who-is-part-of-bengali-folklore

Arup K Chatterjee



A still from 'Antony Firinghee' (1967), with Uttam Kumar playing the eponymous role.

The soldiers of the British East India Company were plainly breaking the law by trespassing into Calcutta's Red Tank and it infuriated him. A "tall man with piercing eyes and a hawk-like face", he stopped the sepoys and hurled such "savage and terrible" abuses that it hurt their ears.

From nearby, a wealthy Bengali merchant watched the episode unfold with interest. The invectives had been so colourful, so impassioned, that he saw in it an opportunity to exploit.

The merchant tutored the tall man, named Anthony "Firinghee", in an "abusive" genre of music until his pupil earned success, independence from the merchant as well as enormous wealth.

To most of Bengal and Bengali cinema aficionados, the image of Anthony Firinghee is inseparable from "Mahanayak" Uttam Kumar, who played that iconic character in Sunil Bannerjee's film *Antony Firinghee* (1967). Kumar won the National Award for his portrayal of the "half-caste" minstrel, as Firinghee was referred to by the Brahminical society of early 19th century Bengal. In 2014, Srijit Mukherjee's film *Jaatishwar* dragged the Firinghee saga into realms of the fabulous and supernatural. With two mainstream Bengali films, one wonders why there is such little writing on the life of this folk hero.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/nge2hWSQyEc>

‘Ami Je Jalsaghare’, a song from ‘Antony Firingee’.

‘Polycolonial Personality’

Hensman Anthony was born in Bengal – most probably in the French colony of Chandernagore or Farashdanga – to an 18th century Portuguese settler. He rose as a Bengali *kabiyaal* (wandering poet singer) at a time when such performing arts were considered lowbrow, indecent and even low caste.

Arguably, the strong fusion of Vaishnavite and French culture of Chandernagore, which abolished sati and slavery much before the British were persuaded to, moulded Anthony’s psychology. He himself rescued a Brahmin widow – known as Saudamini in some accounts – from the hellish fires. Though latter-day moralists may have us believe that he married her, he very likely established an avant-garde live-in relationship with her in Gereti or Boruti near Chandernagore.

Apart from some brief biographical sketches by scholars, little is known about the life of Anthony, though much of it has seeped into Bengali folklore.

In *Polycoloniality* (2020), for instance, Saugata Bhaduri sees him as “a monumental figure within the popular cultural pole of the Bengal Renaissance” and “a truly polycolonial personality”. Gopinath Sen, in an old essay titled *An English Kabiwala of Bengal*, labelled Anthony, somewhat metaphorically, as a “Bengalised Englishman”, which he was not. In *Chandernagore and Calcutta* (2012), Sumanta Banerjee describes him as perhaps “the most colorful product of Chandernagore’s popular culture”. The Kenyan historian JJA Campos, writing in the *History of the Portuguese in Bengal* (1919), inadvertently discredited Anthony’s multicultural achievements by terming him “a Feringhi (probably a Bengali Christian)”.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/NUu7xUxYnn0>

‘Ami Jamini Tumi Shashi Hey’, a song from ‘Antony Firingee’.

Rosinka Chaudhuri, who compares Anthony with his contemporary Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, argues that the *kabiyaal* represented an alternative modernity to the one enforced by European companies in Bengal or the kind espoused by Brahminical traditions. The profession of *kabiyaals*, she writes, was spawned by the “urban chaos of cosmopolitan Calcutta in the early nineteenth century, competing with each other in the houses of the nouveau-riche for prize money. Anthony’s songs could be described as devotional lyrics with a secular message, capturing the humanist-universal-folk of the Bengali syncretistic tradition in lines that were uncannily reminiscent of the songs of Bauls such as Lalan Fakir or the aphorisms of Ramakrishna.”

Inspired by his romantic partner – but not entirely because of her – Anthony renounced his European clothes for the dhoti and shawl, while forming a troupe of *kabiyaals*. We often hear of David Ochterlony, the British Resident of Delhi married to Mubarak Begum, from latter-day postcolonial enthusiasts as a paragon of the sahib-gone-native, what with his patronising Persian and Hindustani arts and culture. In Anthony’s household, however, his Portuguese heritage did not clash with that of her Brahmin partner, as Hindu ceremonies went on unabated in it, even galvanizing his *kabiyaal* friends during festivals.

With Durga and Kali as his muses, Anthony was one of the pioneers of what Chaudhuri calls the “vulgarized vernacular public culture” that was mushrooming around the suburbs of Calcutta, much to the ire of the Baboos, Brahmins and highbrow culturalists. As a result, even today the figure of the “Firinghee” occupies an ambivalent position between tradition and modernity, between urbanism and folklore.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/7qezsSLee08>

‘Champa Chameli Golaperi Baage’, a song from ‘Antony Firingee’.

Anthony’s association with *kabiyaals* began when, during one Durga puja season, a Kabi Sammelan (poetry reading) was organised at his house under the promising influence of his wife. So steeped would Anthony become in the *kabiyaal* tradition that he began neglecting his family’s salt business. As the business collapsed, Anthony took up *kabigaan* (minstrelsy) on “a professional footing,” writes Gopinath Sen. Dinesh Chandra Sen, Sumanta Banerjee and Saugata Bhaduri agree that Anthony employed Gorakshanath as his lyricist, although they fell apart over the question of the latter’s fees. It was this incident that, as Banerjee believes, compelled Anthony to compose his own songs, which would later become “classic examples of the eclectic culture that Chandernagore nurtured”.

Conscious of his subaltern position in Bengal’s colonial and Brahminical climate, Anthony safeguarded his independence with a “contemptuous rejection of any attempt on the part of his rivals to ridicule him on the basis of his race or religion,” writes Bhaduri. A devotee of Kali, Anthony was closely associated with – some even say restored – the Firinghee Kalibari on Calcutta’s Bowbazar Street, where he spent his final years.

Finding Celebrity

This much merits being called history in scholarly registers. What is not well known is a fabulous account of Anthony by Henry Newman in a forgotten book called *The Indian Peep Show* (1937). Newman is perhaps the first to refer unsparingly to the caste politics in Anthony’s lifetime, whom he calls “a singer of the Bhang type, though he was not a Bhang; he was, indeed, a Feringhi”. Newman implies that Feringhi was a derogatory term used especially by upper-caste cultural vanguards to denote fallen Europeans. “When applied to Europeans in general,” he writes, “the person who applies it as a rule means to

be rude; it is just as offensive to say Feringhi of a European as it is to say Nigger of an Indian. The use of these words should be forbidden by law.” That said, Feringhi had a double meaning, that of Europeans who had assumed Indian customs, wore Indian clothes, had “adopted the Bengali language”, and assimilated as agriculturalists.

Even in Newman’s time, as he says, Anthony’s name could be found in books about Bengali musicians. But his initial claim to celebrity was the incident from around 1800 when he took on British East India Company sepoy near Calcutta’s Red Tank (Lal Dighi or Tank Square). The memoirist’s mythmaking becomes apparent as we are told that Anthony was tutored by the merchant in that abusive genre of music, and his instantaneous success earned him his independence from the merchant as well as enormous wealth.

“I have tried to get hold of some of the rhymes that Antony made,” pleads Newman, “but it is not easy. There may not have been strict laws about libel or slander in those days, but somehow nobody seems to have kept any Antonian verses; it seems a pity.”



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/MwTcJswkC2o>

‘Keu Ba Korchhen Barristeri’, a song from ‘Antony Firingee’.

What makes Anthony’s life and legacy even more interesting is that there is reason to believe that Newman’s anecdote is not about Anthony at all, but rather his grandfather, who was also known as Anthony Firinghee, and lived in the time of Job Charnock – once erroneously believed to be the founder of Calcutta. Writing 30 years before Newman, HEA Cotton observed in *Calcutta, Old and New* (1907) that “Anthony Sahib” was horse-whipped by Charnock near the tank of Dalhousie Square. While the enclosure in which the tank was located had been given over to the English by the local zamindar, Antony Sahib prevented the English factors from entering the enclosure during Holi.

It was true that Bengal's "abuse-with-music" were gone by Newman's time, but if such legendary details of Anthony's life were known to the author, surely his verses were not as difficult to find. In fact, it is Anthony's music that is still far better known than his biography. In one *kabir-ladai* (battle of minstrels), when Anthony took on Calcutta's *kabiyaal* Ram Basu, the latter insulted his hybrid position in the words:

Saheb! Mithye tui Krishna pade matha murali
Tor padri saheb sunte pele
Gale debe chunkali

O Sahib, your phony catalogue of Krishna's avatars
If your padre comes to know of it
He'll blacken your cheeks with tar.

Anthony replied cheekily:

Khrishtey ar Krishney kichhu bhinno naire bhai
Shudhu namer phere manush phere
Eyo kotha shuninai
Amar khoda je, Hindur Hari shey
Ei dekh Shyam dariya achhe
Amar manob janam shaphal hobe jadi eyi ranga charan pai

Brother, Christ and Krishna have but one creed,
Where prayers are not mere chanting of names
But where souls flock to greet
Your Hari and my god are all the same
Look here stands Shyam
My human form will honor itself if only I had his lotus feet.

The author is grateful to Prof. Saugata Bhaduri for his comments.

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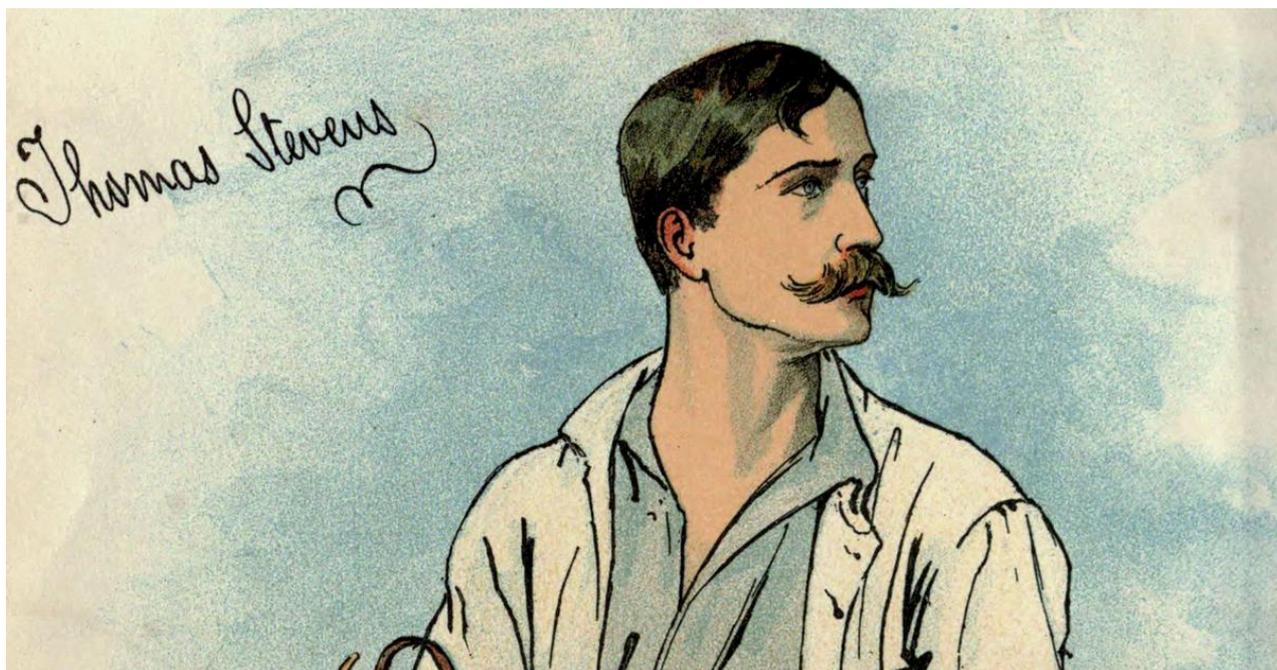
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A land of colours: India through the eyes of the first cyclist to circumnavigate the world

India didn't always turn out to be as Thomas Stevens imagined it when he pedalled across the nation in the 1880s.



Thomas Stevens | [Around the World on a Bicycle](#) by Thomas Stevens/Wikimedia Commons [Public Domain]

In his book *From Teheran to Yokohama* (1888), Thomas Stevens made an observation that may sound surprising today: the most magnificent road to bicycle on ran along the length of north India. The Grand Trunk Road was, Stevens wrote, “an unbroken highway of marvellous perfection, from Peshawar on the Afghan frontier to Calcutta”.

It was metalled for much of its length with a substance Stevens called “kunkah”, a kind of local limestone. When wetted and rolled, the kunkah cemented to form a surface of excellent wearing quality, as smooth and compact as an “asphaltum pavement”. On either side of the road were shade trees made lush green by the early monsoon.

Stevens, a cyclist of medium height, had arrived in India in early August 1886. By then he had been on the road for nearly two years, travelling through much of Europe. His bicycle tour of the world – that included, as circumstances warranted, voyages on ship and the railroad – had begun from New York in April 1885. His chosen ride for the journey was a “Columbia Ordinary”, known in England as the “penny farthing”, with its characteristic high

front wheel that was three times bigger than the rear wheel. (For the rider to sit on the saddle on the high wheel, a perch was needed.) The Columbia Ordinary was a hardy cycle, an improvement on the earlier models with its “cast iron frames, solid rubber tyres and plains bearings for pedals, steering and the wheels”....

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Bhagat Singh Thind: The soldier whose fight for US citizenship reverberated for decades

His pursuit to become a naturalised citizen led to an influential Supreme Court judgement, which ruled that Indians aren't legally white.



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On November 18, 1920, Judge Charles Wolverton of the District Court of Oregon passed a verdict of weighty importance but limited effect. Before him was the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, a World War I veteran of the US Army whose stabs at gaining US citizenship had been spurned by the administration. In his plea, Thind contended that as a “high caste Hindu Aryan” he was Caucasian – a “free white person” who, under law, could not be denied American citizenship. After some deliberation, Judge Wolverton agreed, clearing the way for Thind to become a naturalised citizen, until the government intervened again.

The Oregon court's judgement had followed similar conclusions reached by courts, at state and federal level. In the *Bicaji Balsara* naturalization case of 1909, Parsis were classified as Aryan and, thus, white. Similarly, in 1913, court had granted [Akhoy Kumar](#)

Mozumdar citizenship because he was a “high caste north Indian Aryan” and there was legal precedent for doing so.

While these verdicts were careful to insist that each was based on “legal precedence”, “congressional intent” and “scientific evidence”, they did coincide with rising anti-Asian movements and increasing instances of violence against the Chinese, Japanese and Indians. Dubious racial theories and the pseudoscience of eugenics were gaining ground in the US, stirring vitriol in the society....

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Meet lawyer Shekar Krishnan, who hopes to be among the first South Asians on the NYC council

The lawyer from the Jackson Heights neighbourhood in New York City says he wants to help alleviate the problems of immigrants.



Indian American lawyer Shekar Krishnan after winning the Democratic primary in District 25 ahead of New York City council elections. | Twitter/Shekar Krishnan

Born to Indian immigrants from Kerala in the United States, Shekar Krishnan could be on his way to becoming one of the first-ever South Asians to be elected to the New York City Council. He won the Democratic primary in District 25 of Queens held in June, representing the Jackson Heights and Elmhurst neighbourhoods that have a significant immigrant population. The New York City Council election is scheduled to be held on November 2.

Krishnan has been a community rights lawyer for almost 12 years now, working primarily in the affordable housing movement. His candidature has been endorsed by Daniel Dromm, the outgoing council member representing District 25.

Scroll.in spoke to Krishnan about life as an immigrant, his election campaign, and his plans for the communities of Jackson Heights and Elmhurst neighbourhoods.

Edited excerpts from the interview:

Tell us about your life as an Indian immigrant in the US. What motivated you to enter politics?

My parents came to the US around 30 years ago, and they struggled with discrimination and the inaccessibility of resources all through their careers as research scientists in the pharmaceutical industry. When they first arrived, they qualified for every single public benefit available at the time but did not receive them because they didn't know what they were or how they could have applied for them. Our immigrant community faces similar struggles even today....

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In the 19th century, groups of American women rose up in support of an Indian activist

Pandita Ramabai's reputation as a pioneering educationist, feminist and Sanskrit scholar had preceded her to the US.



[JB Rodgers Printing Co./Wikimedia Commons](#) [Public Domain]

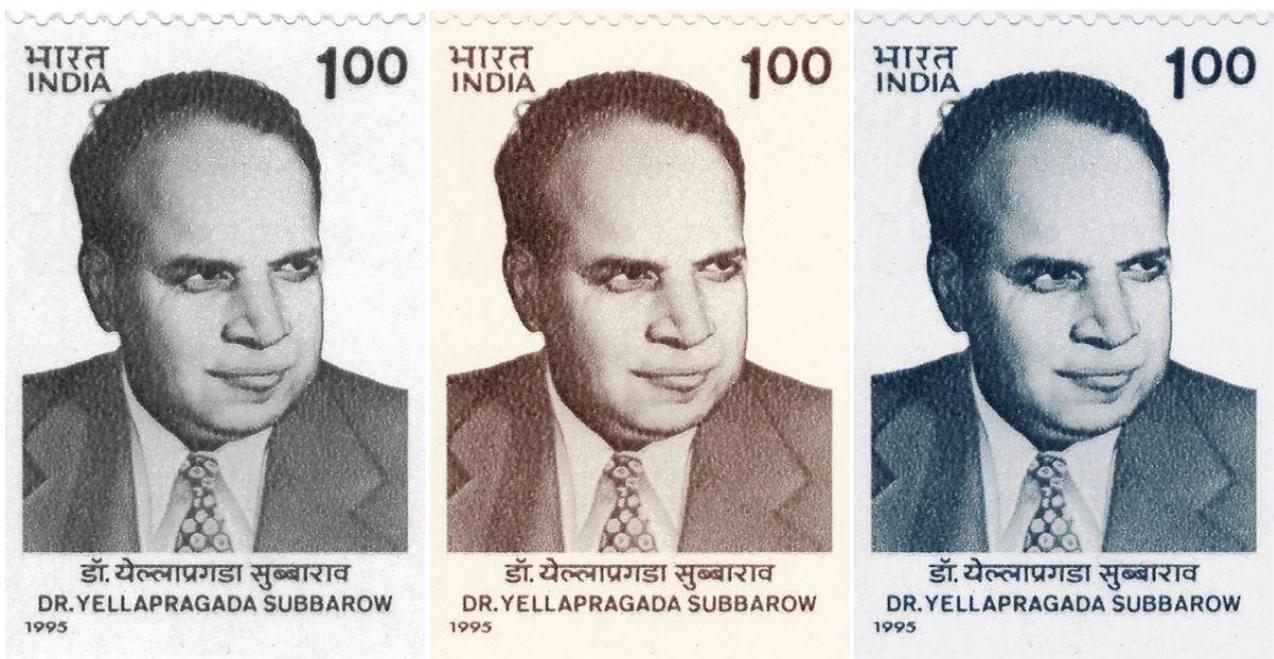
In March 1886, 28-year-old Pandita Ramabai travelled from England to Philadelphia at the invitation of Rachel Bodley, the dean of the Women’s Medical College in Pennsylvania. It was an exceptional occasion. A fresh class was graduating from the historic institution and in it was one of India’s first female medical students, Anandibai Joshi. Adding to the weight of the occasion was Ramabai’s own reputation – a scholar of Sanskrit texts, an educationist, and a champion of women’s rights in India.

Ramabai had formed the Arya Mahila Samaj in Poona (now Pune) in 1882 to promote women’s education and put an end to the practice of child marriage. So distinguished was her work in the field that she was invited in 1882 to testify before the Hunter Commission on “native education”. In her deposition, Ramabai spoke of the public hostility towards women’s education. She underlined the “need for women teachers and inspectors of schools,” writes sociologist Meera Kosambi, “and made an additional plea for women doctors because Indian women would not consult male doctors, especially for gynaecological complaints.”...

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Remembering the forgotten Indian biochemist who made pioneering contributions to cancer treatment

Yellapragada Subbarow’s research didn’t earn him fame. But it did secure his place in history.



Yellapragada Subbarow | [India Post](#), [Government of India/Wikimedia Commons](#). [GODL]

In May 1948, Gobind Behari Lal, a science writer and the first Indian to win a Pulitzer, wrote in his column about a patient at New York’s Harlem Hospital. The patient, afflicted with cancer of the oesophagus, had been treated with a new drug, Teropterin, which had

considerably alleviated his pain.

The drug, synthesised by pioneering biochemist Yellapragada Subbarow and his colleagues was a “chemical relative of synthetic folic acid”, a vitamin used in treating certain forms of anaemia. Lal’s conclusion was that Teropterin temporarily arrested the cancer, and “Subbarow would use this new knowledge to develop new far-reaching cancer treatments”.

Two years later, in February, another article by Lal and Paul Murphy recounted the case of an eight-year-old boy affected with leukaemia. Beginning December 1947, the child had been administered the drug Aminopterin, after which the cancer cells showed obvious signs of remission. Seven months later, he developed a bacterial infection that was successfully treated with the new antibiotic Aureomycin....

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Opinion: Why the Dismantling Global Hindutva Conference is not ‘Hindu-phobic’

The event seeks to bring a long-delayed global awareness about the operations of an exclusionary and discriminatory ideology.



Prakash Singh/AFP

The Dismantling Global Hindutva Conference – scheduled for September 10 and featuring a number of reputed scholars, activists and journalists who are intimately acquainted with different aspects of Hindu nationalism – is a long overdue, important and necessary initiative.

The conference is jointly sponsored by over 40 departments in major American universities and colleges.

Hindutva, as described by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in a publication in 1923, is an ethno-nationalist majoritarian ideological project. The ideology of Hindutva proposes that India is essentially a Hindu country defined by a Hindu cultural ethos, Hindus are the true and authentic inhabitants of the land and religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, are outsiders who are allowed to live in the country by the grace and willingness of the Hindu majority.

The organisers of the conference are understandably keeping their identities private for reasons of safety and security, given the long history of the global Hindu Right of threatening scholars, whether Romila Thapar, Wendy Doniger, Paul Courtright or Audrey Truschke. By way of disclosure, I should mention that my institution is not involved in any way in organising the event....

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42nd Street, New York, circa 1880. | [Internet Archives/Wikimedia Commons](#).

In the 19th century, two Indians travelling through the United States forty years apart had near identical experiences of what it was to be an alien.

Ishuree Dass, a missionary from the North-Western Provinces, described the excitement as news of his arrival spread: “Natives of Winchester had heard of the arrival of a foreigner from a distant country; and the curiosity of some, especially of the fair sex, was somewhat excited. Those that had any acquaintance with the family with whom I lived called to gratify this propensity; and most of them were surprised that I could speak English, or that I did not manifest any signs of savageness about me.”

Dass published an account of his travels, with the prosaic title *A Brief Account of a Voyage to England and America*, in 1851, six years after his return to India.

More than 33 years later, it was the turn of Jehangir Kothari, a businessman and philanthropist from Karachi, to draw inquiring looks. Sighting Kothari in the rotunda of the hotel Palmer House, a *Chicago Tribune* reporter described him as “Greek”, “definitely not a Hindu”. “A man of medium height, thickset, with a very full face, jet-black hair, a short curly black beard,” it was his complexion that attracted attention. “Not exactly swarthy, his skin had a distinct reddish tinge, which was in striking contrast to his hair and whiskers,” the *Chicago Tribune* report went on. “His English when he spoke was as pure as any Chicago man would have used.”...

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Officers digging on the Switzer Ranch near Wheatland, California for clues to the "Hindu murders" in 1931. | The Sacramento Bee (Sacramento, California), newspapers.com

On March 4, 1931, newspapers in California’s Central Valley region reported the discovery of a body near the town of Rio Vista. The body found nude and headless – clearly decapitated – had been trussed with steel wire and bound to a tractor wheel. It was found in the Cache Slough area, a wetland region in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region.

Five days later, on March 9, Clarence Morrill, the chief of the state department of criminal investigation, made public the identity of the murdered man. Sant Ram Pande was a 32-year-old and a student of mechanics at the University of California at Berkeley (*Santa Rosa Republican* and *San Francisco Examiner*, both March 9, 1931).

Pande, Morrill declared, had taken time off to help the authorities in investigating the spate of “Hindu murders” the area had seen. Since 1926, chiefly in the counties of Yuba, Sutter, Placer and Fresno in the Central Valley, 13 murders, all unresolved, had taken

place. Pande's made it the 14.

Following this, over the next few days, newspapers reported on the existence of an "Oriental murder" or "vengeance cult" that targeted any individual, even one of their own, for acting against it. It was the onset of "Kali Yuga", one newspaper column pointed out. It went on to quote "Oriental students of fatalism, faith and philosophy" at the University of California who described Pande's murder as having occurred during the time of Kali Yuga when "all was evil", and "man could do little to escape trouble" (*Sacramento Bee*, California, March 11, 1931)....

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Kedar Nath Das Gupta (standing, extreme right) at a conference of world religions in 1927 with (sitting, from left to right) Anagarika Dharmapala (Buddhist), Dr FW Norwood (Protestant), Dr Annie Besant (Theosophist), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Spiritualist), Rev A Green (Jewish), and (standing, from left to right) Dr AD Jilla (Muslim), Rev Theodore Smith (Zoroastrian), SN Mallik (Hindu). | [Courtesy: www.arthur-conan-doyle.com](http://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com). Credit: [The Graphic, October 8, 1927.](#)

On February 22, 1912, a play adapted from Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879) was staged at London's Royal Court Theatre. Simply called *Buddha*, it was produced by Kedar Nath Das Gupta and William Poel, the noted Shakespearean actor and stage manager. The play's cast included established actors like Clarence Derwent and Ruby Miller, with SC Bose, the scriptwriter, essaying a minor role. When the audiences and reviews came out, they were so full of praise – *The Guardian* called it a "beautiful dramatization" – that the play's run was extended from three to seven performances.

Das Gupta followed *Buddha* with a performance of Kalidasa's *Kumarsambhava*, originally written in Sanskrit, and some weeks later, he founded the India Arts and Dramatics Society. Behind the society was the laudable intent to foster understanding of Indian

culture in Britain through ancient stories, dance forms and plays. And by all accounts, it did try. The society presented multicultural productions of ancient Sanskrit plays and contemporary work by Rabindranath Tagore, a sort of mentor to Das Gupta....

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Kumar Rocker and Rohan Handa. | [Rocker \(Gamecock Central, CC BY 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons\)](#), [Handa \(Vikas Handa\)](#).

I will never forget the chills that jolted my spine when I first chanced upon the great sportswriter George Plimpton's explosive *Sports Illustrated* story headlined *The Curious Case of Sidd Finch*. It was in 1985, during yet another interminable study hall in the old wood-paneled library of my high school in Tarrytown, New York, and – per usual – I was happily reading magazines instead of tackling homework.

Plimpton made my eyes pop by describing another spectacular pitching talent coming up for the New York Mets baseball team, which had unearthed two incredible gems in Dwight Gooden and Ron Darling the previous year. Bursting with envy – because I bleed for the crosstown Yankees – I learned how Hayden Siddhartha Finch threw the ball faster than anyone else ever recorded. It was too much to bear. Enraged by the unfairness of the universe I closed the magazine, then saw the cover date: April Fool's Day.

Fast forward nearly four decades, and, like Yogi Berra infamously said, it was déjà vu all over again when Sweeny Murti, the veteran radio announcer for the Yankees, tweeted on July 1 about “a prospect from Yale [who is] moving up the draft boards thanks to his fastball/slider combo. And like me, he is a first generation Indian American.” ...

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