Introduction

An Indian in Washington

India and America are located on opposite sides of the earth; therefore it is natural for America to think that we walk upside down, and for us to think that Americans walk upside down.

—Pandita Ramabai, *The Peoples of the United States* (1889)

The Sufferance of the Foreigner

In late September 1905, the Indian nationalist Lajpat Rai had gathered with a group of tourists in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, when a guide directed their attention to the works of art surrounding them. Plastered on the ceiling was *The Apotheosis of Washington*, a fresco featuring the first U.S. president on a celestial throne, flanked on each side by figures from classical Greco-Roman and nouveau American mythology (Figure I.1). Just below, *The Frieze of American History* encircled the rotunda with its selective timeline, and at eye level were enormous neoclassical canvases depicting scenes from the American Revolution and the conquest of the Americas. From ceiling to floor, the artwork of the Capitol presented a set of interwoven images that moved seamlessly from the mythological to the historical, containing within it, it would seem, a visual argument: The United States was the heir apparent of Western empire. At the dawn of the new century, as America extended its imperial reach across the globe, who would have thought to see otherwise?

In Washington, DC, during a three-week tour of the East Coast, Lajpat Rai discussed his visit in an editorial for the *Panjabee*, an English-language weekly based out of Lahore. The Capitol was indeed a “picture [that] tells volumes of history,” he told his readers, but Rai paid little attention to its classical influences and imperial overtures. Instead, he called attention to the images of the British, who, by the turn of the century, were viewed more as American allies than as historical adversaries. Throughout his editorial,
Rai added details and subtle quips that emphasized that American independence was an act of opposition against the very same British from whom India was currently wresting its freedom. When describing John Trumbull’s painting *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*, Rai cast George Washington with a kind of personal defiance (“Washington declines to accept overtures from Lord Cornwallis”), knowing that readers of the *Panjabee* would remember the latter as governor-general of India rather than as a redcoat general in the American Revolution. Rai appended the title of Trumbull’s *Surrender of General Burgoyne* with the note “by the British,” as if to make the sides of the battle unmistakably clear.² He especially relished that, for the British, the Capitol was full of “humiliating themes.” When the tour guide pointed out that the floor beneath the party’s feet was “paved by beautiful tiles imported from England” and that “it was a matter of great satisfaction that the only English material used for [. . .] this national edifice was one which was always...
underfoot,” Rai noted that the audience, barring the few Englishmen in attendance, erupted into cheers.³

By the end of his tour, however, Rai’s mood had changed. When he traveled down the Potomac to George Washington’s Mount Vernon estate, his prose grew more maudlin and he confessed that the “visit saddened [him].”⁴ He remembered the plight of India under British rule and described his shame at remaining a colonial subject while in the home of Atlantic patriots:

Reader! Can I tell you what thoughts arose in my mind in the course of my itinerary through Washington and what feelings and sentiments were born and stifled in the course of two brief days I stayed in this city. No! I cannot. I dare not. Bonded slave as I am, how can I give utterance or thoughts which though noble in themselves cannot be uttered with freedom and impunity in the land of the mighty Aryans—in the land of Pratap and Shivaji—in the land which is mine by birth and by birth of my forefathers but where I now live only by the sufferance of the foreigner.⁵

Rai’s address to the reader turned what may have first appeared as dispassionate description into overwrought testimony. His “itinerary through Washington” provided an occasion to voice a form of Indian nationalism that reflected his and, by proxy, his readers’ status as colonized subjects. But critically, in his editorial, Rai’s Indian imaginary was viewed through the lens of American history: George Washington rubbed shoulders with figures from India’s past, while the British appeared as a common enemy of liberty in both the New World and Old. To walk through the hallways of American history was to confront the “feelings and sentiments” of being an Indian on the cusp of the twentieth century—not only to bear the indignity of remaining colonized but also to imagine the “freedom and impunity” that could come with national sovereignty.

I begin with this moment in Rai’s itinerary less for the merits of his comparison and more because it captures how expatriate Indians who came to the United States in the early twentieth century engaged in deeply self-reflexive ways of seeing. For figures such as Rai, the social and historical landscape of America acted as a reflective surface that provided glimpses of recognition and comparison—a means of seeing oneself in the transnational other. But if “reflection” describes the mirror image returned to a viewer, then “refraction” describes the distorted and often transformed image that appears when glancing from “a comparative angle of vision.”⁶ From the vantage point of the U.S. capital, Rai glimpsed the Indian anticolonial cause through what I call a “transnational refraction,” a political optic and discursive strategy that allowed him to reframe his cause from the local to the international, from a single nationalist struggle into the latest episode in a string of liberal revolu-
tions that included the United States. Through such refractions, the walls of the Capitol and Mount Vernon provided a prism that opened up analogies, encouraged new interpretive frames, and offered ways to imagine how American history could shed light on an anticolonial Indian future.

While transnational refractions were generative to Rai’s anticolonial imaginary, they also led to distortions, which obscured as often as they revealed. To give one example, while Rai spent time in DC, scenes of the U.S. colonization of Native American lands also appeared in his peripheral vision, suggesting unseemly comparisons that did not map so neatly onto his Indian–American analogy. He had observed the recurring “pathos”-filled images of Native Americans throughout the National Mall, noting “a pioneer in desperate conflict with a savage” painted in the portico and a “dejected chieftain and Indian (Red) mother” etched in the Frieze. Yet Rai abstained from evoking the obvious comparison between British colonialism in India and settler colonialism in the Americas, even if the appellative twins of Indians and “Indians (Red)” shared the common narrative of societies subjugated by the European outsider.

The reflections and distortions that emerged from Lajpat Rai’s refracted encounter with the United States—the analogies he saw and the ones he did not—raise a series of questions: What did it mean for an Indian nationalist to compare his cause to the conservative revolution of white settlers? What was the effect of describing India as a “land of Aryans” when such a word conjured different racial connotations in the United States? How did his allusions to religiously Hindu figures Pratap Singh and Shivaji expose his communal, rather than secular, vision of Indian nationhood? The comparisons Rai articulated and the details he fixated on reveal as much about his image of America as they do about his image of India. But comparisons—whether used as sustained analogies or fleeting metaphors—are often unpredictable, slipping easily into directions unintended by their writer. When Rai described himself as a “bonded slave,” for instance, how could his readers not also draw a link to the history of African Americans, who had gained emancipation only one generation earlier? In 1905, the stories of Native American dispossession, of Black inequality—and more broadly, the histories of race in the United States—continued to lurk in his periphery, never fully erased, always threatening to unsettle Rai’s tidy Indian–American analogy of national, anticolonial revolution. The very presence of, and discrimination against, Indians (or Hindus, as they were called) in the United States disrupted the analogies that Rai so readily sought.

After Rai returned to the United States in November 1914, where he resided in exile for the four years that marked World War I, he eventually came to understand America differently, reckoning with the issues of race, immigration, and empire head-on. As he worked for the cause of Indian in-
dependence from an office in Manhattan, Rai developed a network of friendships and acquaintances with American liberals and radicals, through whom he began to understand the complexities of life for immigrants, the working classes, and racialized communities in the United States. For the Americans who formed alliances with Rai and other Indian expatriates, this engagement with the Indian cause led to their own transnational refractions, dramatically shifting their perspective. Agnes Smedley, a working-class radical from Missouri who was mentored by Rai, later wrote that her work with the Indian expatriate scene led her to apprehend world events “through the eyes of men from Asia—eyes that watched and were cynical about the phrases of democracy.”

Rai’s friend W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the period’s leading African American intellectuals and theorists of race, held on to the promise of Indian decolonization for decades to come, declaring in 1947 that India’s independence was “the greatest historical date of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” By engaging one another, these writers gleaned insights into the unlikely ways that the conditions of British India were mirrored in a postwar America dominated by racism, capitalism, and the ongoing project of empire. They forced themselves to see “through the eyes of” their American and Indian others, in the process unsettling their own entrenched understandings of race, caste, nation, empire, and, no less importantly, themselves.

The United States of India argues that these transnational ways of seeing, and the refractions they enabled, played a key role in the development of anticolonial thought in the years during and immediately following World War I. In print journals, monthly organs, works of fiction, and pages of propaganda, this network of expatriate Indian and American authors attempted to reimagine and reshape the relationship between the United States and India during a critical period that witnessed not only wide-scale global and domestic transformations wrought by the war, but also a series of legislative measures restricting immigration and stripping Indian migrants in the United States of naturalization rights. As the American state was building borders and closing off its relationship with India, writers such as Rai, Smedley, and Du Bois, as well as less-heralded figures such as Dhan Gopal Mukerji and Saint Nihal Singh, actively challenged such decisions by rallying American support for the cause of Indian independence, attempting to free Indian political prisoners in the United States, challenging racist immigration laws, and—especially important for this study—developing new forms of writing that imaginatively aligned people and populations facing various forms of subjugation in the United States and India. The result was a sophisticated yet imperfect project of anticolonialism, which imagined a new world that sometimes recast, but often reproduced, the social and political structures of dominance that came before it.
India in America

By the turn of the century, the United States had come to mean a number of things for the Indians who endured the journey. For Rai, the alabaster monuments of Washington may have conjured dreams of freedom, but for most the United States simply meant work. Hundreds of men from Punjab—primarily Sikhs—left colonial India and found work in the lumberyards, canneries, and railroads along the Pacific Coast of the United States and Canada. Those who ventured farther south settled in the central and southern valleys of California, a landscape that resembled the irrigated farmlands of Punjab that they had left after the British enacted wide-scale changes in land tenure policy.11 As Vivek Bald has documented, a number of Muslim men from East Bengal had arrived as peddlers of Oriental wares in the late nineteenth century, where they fed a growing consumer market for all things “Indian” while integrating into communities of color in port cities, such as New Orleans.12 For their more well-heeled countrymen, the United States had become a desirable destination for higher education; American colleges promised degrees for those interested in industrial education, science, and agriculture. These early twentieth-century migrants and sojourners were mostly men, for whom certain pathways of travel were accessible, but a few women also arrived during this period to study and work. In 1883, for example, Anandi Joshi came to Philadelphia, where she earned a degree at the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania. Even earlier, in 1880, scholar Priya Srinivasan explains, four teenage women, whose names were recorded in the local papers as Sahebjan, Vagoirba, Ala Bundi, and Oondabai, arrived in New York on a contract visa as part of a troupe of dancers hired to perform during interludes of a local opera.13

In the early part of the twentieth century, the United States also became a political refuge for Indians targeted by an increasingly paranoid and powerful British colonial government, which had passed legislation to restrict free speech, imprison “subversives” without trial, and enact preventive detention.14 Many radicals and nationalists who successfully evaded colonial authorities and imprisonment in India fled to outposts such as the United States, where they redoubled their revolutionary efforts. Given its official diplomatic position of neutrality, America had become a popular destination for revolutionaries across the world who sought a base of operations abroad. In 1911, Sun Yat-sen toured across the United States, raising funds and building organizations to support the Chinese Revolution.15 The Bolshevik leader Mikhail Borodin, who would later cross paths with Bengali revolutionary Manabendra Nath (M. N.) Roy, resided in Indiana in the 1910s, before the October Revolution of 1917 lured him back to Russia.16 Irish republican organizations such as the Friends of Irish Freedom, a natural ally to anti-British Indian expatriates, promoted independence and raised funds for the Easter Rebellion of 1916.17 Indian activists who arrived in the period
before the war may have believed the United States to be remote enough to escape the watchful eye of the British.

As it turns out, they were mistaken. World War I and the decade after marked a shift in British and American relations, which changed from a phase of “rapprochement” to strong interimperial alliance. This alliance was reinforced both culturally and politically. Culturally, an emergent racial discourse of Anglo-Saxonism encouraged “British and American elites to think themselves as the twin vanguards of modernity.” Such sentiments were famously captured in Rudyard Kipling’s poetry, the American author Lothrop Stoddard’s paranoid volumes on the end of “white world-supremacy,” and journals such as the *English Speaking World* that published editorials on “Anglo-Saxon solidarity.” Politically, the period saw a new phase of cooperation between British and American intelligence, which kept tabs on the activities of Indian migrants and expatriates, monitoring their mail, countering anticolonial propaganda with colonial apologia, censoring books, and enacting deportations. The British Foreign Office had long been concerned with North America as a den of Indian radicalism and anticolonial sedition, and attempted to coax the U.S. government into preventing the naturalization of Indian “seditionists” who migrated to America. Each of the figures I discuss in this book, from the radical Agnes Smedley to the nationalist Lajpat Rai, even the popular children’s author Dhan Gopal Mukerji, appeared in the reports of U.S. and British agents, who feared a conspiracy of “Hindus and radical elements.”

These regimes of surveillance and repression notwithstanding, the 1910s saw the emergence of two powerful organizations of Indian expatriates agitating against British rule in India, both of which served as important nodes in the interconnected and transnational network of writers this book examines: the Gadar Party on the West Coast and the India Home Rule League of America (IHRLA) on the East Coast. The latter was formed under the leadership of Lajpat Rai. After his arrival in New York in 1914, Rai toured the country and developed friendships with a number of prominent American progressive leaders, including Margaret Sanger, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Oswald Garrison Villard, Walter Lippmann, and Jabez Thomas (J. T.) Sunderland. Many of these leaders opened important doors for Rai by providing audiences for lectures and venues for publication. By 1917, Rai had established the IHRLA, operating it from an office on Broadway. The league published a number of political pamphlets and newsletters, including a monthly journal, *Young India*, that featured news stories and editorials denouncing British rule, alongside eclectic works of art criticism and poetry. In accordance with Rai’s position and as its name suggested, the IHRLA advocated for “home rule,” not total decolonization. Under home rule, India would remain a part of the British Empire but would gain some measure of autonomy over its internal management, including establishing its own parliament.
Just a few years earlier, in 1913, a more radical anticolonial organization known as the Gadar Party had formed on the West Coast and had called for the complete overthrow of British rule through armed revolution. Led by itinerant radicals Har Dayal, Taraknath Das, and Sohan Singh Bhakna, the group first formed in Oregon as the Pacific Coast Hindustan Association, with a membership that included a cadre of laborers, students, and revolutionaries who had been involved in anticolonial activities back home. The Gadar Party soon established an office in San Francisco, ran a printing press, and published a newspaper in English, Urdu, Gurmukhi, and Gujarati editions. Its reach would eventually extend far beyond the national borders of the United States and Canada and throughout the diaspora, with agents and actors in Europe, East Asia, South Asia, and Central America. With the political and financial backing of Germany, in 1917 the Gadar Party hatched a plan to send two shipments of arms to India to incite an insurrection. The plan was thwarted, however, by U.S. and British intelligence, and eighteen Gadar Party members, along with nearly twenty German and American citizens, were arrested on charges of conspiring to violate the wartime “neutrality laws.” The subsequent court case, which the press dubbed the “Hindu–German conspiracy trial,” was at the time one of the longest and most expensive trials in American history.27

Between these bicoastal associations, a number of smaller institutions created by Indian expatriates, migrants, and their American allies flourished, including the Friends of Freedom for India and the Hindustani Progressive Association of New York, each of which produced its own periodicals, pamphlets, and books. Other publications printed outside of the United States, such as the Calcutta-based Modern Review and Canada’s Hindustanee, also became critical venues for circulating information about the Indian diaspora, the independence movements in India, and the struggle for immigrant rights in Canada. In college towns such as Urbana, Berkeley, and Ann Arbor, university organizations such as the Hindusthan Association of America and the Nalanda Club became spaces for intellectual exchange among students across the country, many of whom would go on to become politically active in the struggle for Indian independence upon returning home. Friendships and acquaintances were fostered in spaces such as Manhattan’s Civic Club, where progressive leaders congregated for speeches on pressing issues of the day. Other political friendships were forged more covertly, in spaces such as the Yugantar Ashram in San Francisco and the Bakunin Institute in Oakland, and in watering holes such as the Taj Mahal Hindu Restaurant and Ceylon Inn in New York City. Within this network of diasporic Indians and Americans, writing was a shared means of fighting for the cause of Indian freedom abroad and petitioning for the rights of Indian migrants in the United States. Print and publishing connected U.S. and Indian authors, providing, as Brent Hayes Edwards has argued in the case of
Black internationalist print culture, “spaces of independent thinking [and] alternative modes of expression and dissemination, articulating transnational groupings.”

Publications such as the IHRLA’s *Young India* and the Gadar Party’s newspaper not only served as means of disseminating information; they also became sites of imagining colonial India as an independent nation, or print manifestations of what Benedict Anderson once described as “long-distance nationalism.”

The forms of long-distance nationalism that Indian expatriates and immigrants in the United States expressed were often shaped by their firsthand experiences with racism, experiences that often fostered transnational affinities with communities of color. For writers such as the journalist Saint Nihal Singh, the sting of racism in America provided occasion for recognizing the shared fate of “coloured peoples” around the world, as he would describe in the *Modern Review*: “The white man metes out the same treatment to coloured people in India and out of India. It makes little difference whether the coloured man is an Indian, a Chinese, a Japanese or an Afro-American.”

This was especially true for Indian laborers, who were directly subjected to instances of racial and xenophobic violence stoked by anti-Asiatic labor organizations and an American public riven with anxieties over threats against white labor. West Coast publications such as the *Survey* and the *World’s Work*, as well as local newspapers, exacerbated fears of the “Hindu” as a menace, threat, and foreign invasion. These fears occasionally exploded into acts of violence, as they did in Bellingham, Washington, in 1907, when a mob of white men assaulted a group of Sikh laborers and forced them out of town. For some expatriate Indians, seeing or hearing about such events reinforced their second-class citizenship as both colonial subjects at home and racial subjects in the United States. Gadar Party leader Sohan Singh Bhakna, for instance, described how the experience of racial subjection was refracted through the colonial question: “It dawned upon us Indians that since we were slaves in our homeland nobody cared for us, and there could be no redressal to the situation unless we became free as a people.”

But even as experiences in the United States led some Indians to recognize how racism shaped their experiences both as migrants and as colonial subjects, many continued to proclaim their racial identity as “Aryan” or “Indo-Aryan,” a category partially synonymous with “whiteness” and endorsed by philologists and ethnologists of the day. The path to American citizenship depended on proving oneself to be the “free, white person” eligible for citizenship under the Naturalization Act of 1790. Not surprisingly, then, Indian migrants who sought to naturalize would often claim “Aryan” identity as a means to citizenship. For the nationalist-minded, claiming “Aryan” identity was also a means of closing what Partha Chatterjee has termed the “rule of colonial difference” and arguing against the injustice of colonial rule by deploying racial categories. To live in the United States was
to be caught in someone else’s translation. Part of what this book seeks to explore is how Indian expatriates responded to this aspect of transnational life. Which mistranslations would they instrumentalize and to what end? Which would they challenge?

For Americans in the early twentieth century, India conjured a wide spectrum of images. The subcontinent still evoked a cluster of exotic ideas inherited from sources low-brow to high, from pulp tales to the transcendentalists, Hindu holy men to *The Jungle Book*. The editors of *Young India* commented on this fascination, and its fickle nature, in their inaugural issue:

> for the man in the street, the only thing he knew about India was that it was painted red on a map, or that it was the land of the snake-charmer, or at the best that it was inhabited by heathens. Sometimes the India brand of tea on the breakfast table aroused his curiosity and he felt inclined to know what kind of tree “India” was, but discovering that nobody at the table knew better than he, he closed the topic once for all.  

For a certain group of liberal and radical Americans, however, the Indian independence movement had greater significance. W.E.B. Du Bois believed that an independent India would be a blow against white supremacy and benefit the broad struggle of the color line both globally and locally. Others still saw the draconian measures taken by the U.S. government against Indian radicals as a threat to American democracy.

In challenging the new Anglo-American imperial terrain, Indian expatriates and American allies alike continued to rely on analogies such as Rai’s, highlighting the symbolic parallels that linked the American Revolution and the Indian Independence movement. For the American allies who supported the Indian cause, such analogies were more than mere gestures of solidarity or attempts to arouse patriotic sentiment. The comparisons evoked and called to account the core values of American democracy: namely, a tradition of political refuge and a commitment to struggles for self-determination—ideas contradicted by America’s tacit support of British empire. Friends of Freedom for India secretary Agnes Smedley and president Robert Morss Lovett invoked such historical metaphors in an appeal letter on behalf of imprisoned Indian radicals in the United States who had been arrested and faced deportation: “In British eyes, these Hindus are guilty of treason (just as were Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson and Adams), and death will be their reward for love of their country. Can you rest while America is sending back to their executioners men who have come to America seeking refuge, men whose crime was working for the freedom of their native land?” This was more an appeal to emotion than any kind of sustained historical comparison; nevertheless, Smedley and Lovett’s analogy attempted to convince
their audience that the Indian question raised deeper questions about the state of the union.

The stakes of such analogies were even higher for Ram Chandra and the seventeen other Gadar Party members who stood trial in a San Francisco courthouse in November 1917 on charges of violating the neutrality laws when, as mentioned, they collaborated with the Germans to ship arms to India. A skilled propagandist, Chandra had become the editor of the Gadar newspaper in 1914, and eventually rose to become head of the party after key associates from the organization fled the country. Under his leadership, Gadar Party pamphlets continued to connect the struggles of immigration to the colonial condition of Indians. In one pamphlet titled *Exclusion of Hindus from America Due to British Influence*, Chandra warned of efforts by the U.S. Congress for an “Oriental exclusion law” targeting Indians. Whereas Japanese immigrants could appeal to their government, Chandra quipped that the British, fearful that Indians were “becom[ing] imbued with pestiferous ideas of political freedom” in the United States, would never come to their aid. Other Gadar Party pamphlets characterized the United States as a nation that had always supported causes for self-determination. The party reprinted an old 1906 editorial in which former secretary of state William Jennings Bryan denounced British rule in India (and, according to Bryan, deliberately excised statements in which he spoke favorably about Britain). By the time of their trial in 1917, Chandra and the other Indian defendants were left with very few strategies to protest their innocence: one was to minimize their connections to Germany, the other was to assert the same Indian–American analogy they had promoted repeatedly in their propaganda.

A pamphlet titled *The Appeal of India to the President of the United States*, published by the Gadar Party office, included three open letters that Chandra had written to Woodrow Wilson. In his third and last letter to the head of state, dated February 26, 1918, as the trial was raging on, Chandra drew on the nationalist history of the United States to plead the defendants’ (and India’s) cause:

Mr. President: Your own dear country, the United States of America, became a free nation by an act of rebellion against the British. And the [...] tyranny inflicted by the British upon the Americans in 1776 is far exceeded by the indescribable things which have been perpetrated upon the devoted Hindus.

Deeming Wilson the “noble successor” of Washington and Lincoln, Chandra recast the cause of war as a moral struggle, fought in order that the “weaker nations be saved and the ‘world made safe for democracy.’” Referring to Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” speech, Chandra underscored the American president’s
demand for a “free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims,” one that weighed the interests of “populations concerned” against the “equitable claims” of the colonial government.42 Only then, Chandra wrote, would India “be ready to live up to the very principles which you have laid down better than any other people in the world.”43

Chandra’s rhetorical strategy, like Rai’s nearly a decade before, sought to frame an independent India as but another project inspired by and in keeping with the United States’ own history. It deliberately overlooked, of course, the contradictions of the analogy—namely, that the United States was, and continued to be, a settler colonial project that differed from India’s colonial experience even before the Revolutionary War, or that it was invested in its own forms of racialized colonization. Facing imprisonment and caught at the mercy of the state, Chandra nonetheless leaned on such nationalist metaphors to change the tenor of the trial, which branded the Hindu–German alliance as a foreign threat and wartime adversary requiring swift removal.

At the trial, defense attorney George McGowan presented the court with pamphlets by Chandra and other excerpts from the Gadar newspaper that quoted from Washington, Lincoln, and Wilson. In his opening statement, McGowan denounced British rule in India and its role in censoring dissent in the United States: “We will show [. . .] that the British government has suppressed newspapers, imprisoned editors and closed the shores of its self-governing possessions against the Indians.”44 McGowan then quoted from Patrick Henry’s iconic speech at the 1775 Second Virginia Convention, reciting the famous lines “give me liberty or give me death” as if to stoke the judge and jury’s nationalist sympathies. Upon hearing all this, the U.S. district attorney protested that McGowan’s comments were “scurrilous, unpatriotic, and almost treasonable,” and petitioned for the entire statement to be scratched from the record.45

The Indian–American analogy was perhaps doomed from the start, and as it turned out, so was Ram Chandra. On April 23, Chandra was walking across the courtroom when he was gunned down by Ram Singh, another Gadar Party member standing trial. Singh seemed to have several motives for Chandra’s murder: the proceedings revealed that Chandra had used Gadar Party funds for personal use, and Singh’s loyalties were with a rival leader from the organization. Whatever the exact cause, the event became an early, sensational moment in South Asian American history, and newspapers nationwide offered several dramatic and gory accounts. The San Francisco Chronicle, for its part, played up tropes of Indian exoticism by describing the courtroom murder as the “Climax of Hindoo Romance” (Figure I.2). By the end of the trial, eight of the Gadar Party defendants had been found guilty and served sentences from sixty days to twenty-two months.

In retrospect, it is a particularly bitter irony that the freedom of those Indian defendants was partially staked on whether or not the court was con-
vinced by a historical analogy linking Indian independence with American liberty, on whether or not Americans could see something of themselves in the eighteen Indian men standing trial. Whereas the Gadar Party and its defense framed the trial as a question of freedom, the *Chronicle* cast it as the tragic conclusion of an ill-fated “Hindoo Romance.” Yet, in spite of its obvious failure in the Hindu–German conspiracy trial, imagining the Indian nation through U.S. history—and attempting to persuade American readers (or juries) to do the same—continued as a common strategy among expatriate Indians and American allies well into the next decade. One of this book’s concerns is investigating these authors’ investment in this tactic and how they handled its more unwieldy implications. As discussed, there were obvious drawbacks to the rhetorical move. It often produced awkward and un-

*Figure 1.2* Illustration from the April 24, 1918, edition of *San Francisco Chronicle* diagramming the deaths of Ram Chandra and his assassin Ram Singh. (*San Francisco Chronicle*)
tenable comparisons, drawing equivalences between the colonized Indian and the white settler colonialist, collapsing distinctions between radically different forms of colonialism, and tacitly endorsing American democracy without critically engaging the country’s own stratification along racial lines. To mobilize American nationalist history was also to mobilize American nationalism itself, a discourse that, by the early twentieth century, had already demonstrated its power—even if that power was just as easily used to exclude migrants, trumpet white supremacy, and suppress dissent. In using this strategy, Indian and American authors advocating for Indian independence hoped to evoke identification and empathy, while avoiding the more complicated questions that could come from a more careful comparison. As a piece of rhetorical architecture, analogy served as a bridge between two continents, however uneven its foundation.

One particularly unwieldy transnational analogy makes up the title of this book. “The United States of India” was a phrase used by several Indian writers and political actors to facilitate the imagining of an independent Indian nation-state in the years before Indian and Pakistani independence. Ram Chandra’s widow Padmavati would later describe how her husband spoke with Gadar Party members about the dawn of a “United States of India” free from British rule.46 When the remaining members of the Gadar Party reassembled after the Hindu–German conspiracy trial as the Pacific Coast Hindustani Association in the 1920s, the phrase found a second life, with the United States of India (USI) eventually replacing the title of the organization’s monthly print journal the Independent Hindustan in 1923.47 Its inaugural editorial announced:

It is true that “Every Day and in Every Way . . . Is India Becoming More and More United and Democratic.” She is coming fast to her political goal, The United States of India, modeled after The United States of America.48

In drawing parallels between the United States and India, the editorial took imaginative leaps, going so far as to claim that the Indian National Congress had named itself after the U.S. Congress. The editorial embellished the American rhetoric by announcing the organization’s ultimate goal of achieving a “free, independent, republican national state in India [. . .] of the people, for the people, by the people.”49 The cover image of the inaugural issue (Figure I.3) featured an illustration of “Mother India” towering over a globe, her sari billowing out from the South Asian landmass and over the west coast of North America, as if to symbolize a transpacific bridge connecting the United States and India (with Britain conspicuously absent). The February 1926 issue went one step further, presenting a dollar-bill portrait of George Washington with the text “Our Ideal and Inspiration” printed above, and below,
an injunction to “Champions of Liberty in all lands,” to “be strong in hope.”
The quote was drawn from a message that Washington had written to “Patriots of Ireland” in 1788, and was regularly used by Irish leader Éamon de Valera during his 1920 visit to the United States, including in his addresses to groups such as the Friends of Freedom for India. In recirculating and decontextualizing the quote, the USI editors creatively reassembled the iconography of American nationalism for their own ends.

The term “The United States of India” continued to appear throughout political science reports as the name for a hypothetical independent Indian republic. Bhagat Singh Thind, an immigrant from Punjab and U.S. Army veteran, whose case for citizenship would reach the U.S. Supreme Court, used the term in a political broadside. “India will be fully free to evolve according to her own ideals, her destiny, unfettered from within, unmolested from without,” Thind wrote, concluding optimistically that “Burma will voluntarily join the United States of India.” The phrase also appeared in an essay by expatriate intellectual Taraknath Das (one of the men arrested during the Hindu–German conspiracy trial), who wrote in 1923 that “responsible Indian nationalists are working for a Federated Republic of the United States of India.” In a similar vein, some decades later, Dalit leader and chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who studied at Columbia University between 1913 and 1916, used the term in the proposed preamble to the Indian constitution:

We the people of the territories of British India [...] with a view to form a more perfect union of these territories do—ordain that the Provinces and the Centrally Administered Areas (to be hereafter designated as States) and the Indian States shall be joined together into a Body Politic for Legislative, Executive and Administrative purposes under the style The United States of India [...].

The language of “We the people” and “a more perfect union” clearly echo the Constitution of the United States, suggesting the powerful influence that ideas of American democracy, from broad ideals to details about governance, had on Ambedkar as a visiting student. The scrambling of “The United States of America” for the purpose of imagining an independent India was itself a deliberate political strategy. For Ambedkar and Das, it was a direct call for India to adopt a federalist style of government in the model of the United States. For the editors of USI, to name an independent India “the United States” was also a strategic, rhetorical cutting of India’s umbilical tie to the British Empire and an appeal to their American readers to recognize the political affinities connecting these seemingly disparate places.

For the purposes of this book, the phrase “United States of India” evokes the complex and cross-cultural ways of seeing and strategies of writing that
I described as transnational refraction. The “United States of India” tracks a way of viewing America from the perspective of India—“India’s United States,” as it were—while also marking the unsettling and self-reflexive way by which that image of the United States could turn back onto its viewer and reveal a reflection that was slightly different, distorted, refracted. One might argue that for Das and Ambedkar, imagining a “United States of India” was simply filling an American frame with Indian content, something akin to
what Partha Chatterjee has described as the “derivative discourse” of nationalism. But this overlooks the productive, unsettling function of the term. The “United States of India” denaturalizes a name we have heard thousands of times. It appears first as a typo, a slip of the tongue, an act of mimicry. But like an act of mimicry, “The United States of India” is similar but not quite the same, an implicit analogic argument that disturbs the very notion of American exceptionalism.
For each of the figures mentioned—Ambedkar, Das, Rai, and Chandra—to see the United States was also to see oneself differently, to imagine India not just as it was or as it appeared to others, but as it ought to be. Pandita Ramabai’s observation that serves as this chapter’s epigraph exemplifies this kind of refraction. After visiting the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, Ramabai penned a Marathi travelogue, using an ethnographic eye to detail her experience of the culture and institutions of the United States. “It is natural for us to think Americans walk upside down,” Ramabai wrote, in a rare moment of jest, describing the subcontinent’s inverted perspective on America.57 As the book’s English translator Meera Kosambi writes, Ramabai “subjected the American continent and culture to an Indian—albeit internationalized and eclectic—gaze.”58 Yet there is another gaze, twinned but hidden, in Ramabai’s quip—one that afforded a view of India from the vantage point of the United States. As if caught in a transnational camera obscura, Ramabai’s perspective from America also turned her image of India upside down, and in so doing, unsettled her entrenched understanding of its practices, structures, and narratives. In this way, Ramabai’s travelogue from the late nineteenth century was an earlier iteration of what the Indian American writer Amitava Kumar would later observe in the twenty-first: “to come to America means to discover anew what had till now been home.”59