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## **Noblemen, Spies, and a Hindu Monk Going to War: Notes on Swami B.H. Bon in New York, 1940-41**

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*Published in:*  
Journal of Hindu Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.1093/jhs/hiaa001](https://doi.org/10.1093/jhs/hiaa001)

Published: 20/05/2020

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript

*Document License*  
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[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*

Broo, M. (2020). Noblemen, Spies, and a Hindu Monk Going to War: Notes on Swami B.H. Bon in New York, 1940-41. *Journal of Hindu Studies*, 13(1), 71-88. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhs/hiaa001>

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Noblemen, Spies and a Hindu Monk Going to War:  
Notes on Swami B.H. Bon in New York, 1940–1941

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*Introduction*

On the 18th of July, 1940, a telegram arrived for A.H. Joyce, Director of the Intelligence Department at the India Office in Whitehall, sent by Mr. Silver at the British Library of Information, New York.

CAN YOU TELL US ANYTHING ABOUT SWAMI B H BON WHO HAS  
ARRIVED HERE AND WISHES OUR SUPPORT IN CULTURAL WORK

Such a request for information was nothing new for Joyce; he had 'vetted' many persons connected with the British Empire in India. Once he had assessed George Orwell to hold "not merely a determined Left Wing, but probably an extremist outlook" (Hichens 2002: 182). The person to be checked this time, Swami Bhakti Hriday Bon (Vana, 1901–1982; he wrote his name according to its Bengali pronunciation), may not have the fame of George Orwell, but he is well-known in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava circles for having been one of the first Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas to come to the West as a missionary (see e.g., Sardella 2013: 146–173). In London and Berlin in the 30s, he had been the emissary of the Gauḍīya Maṭha founded by Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (1864–1937).

Bhaktisiddhānta's Gauḍīya Maṭha had been a remarkable success in early 20th century Bengal and to some extent beyond as well (Sardella 2013). Institutionally modelled on the Rāmakṛṣṇa Mission (and thus second-hand on Christian missionary societies in India), the Gauḍīya Maṭha had attracted a large number of talented young men, one of which as Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977) much later would attain international success. Bhaktisiddhānta made extensive use of the printing press for spreading his reformist Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava message, both through books and periodicals, and sent out his men to proselytize all over India, and to a lesser extent abroad as well (Burma, England and Germany). Swami Bon had been a leading figure in this international campaign, but after the demise of his master and the breakup of the Gauḍīya Maṭha, he had distanced himself from the movement and was now acting on his own.

Others have written about the love-hate relationship between media and Indian Swamis and Yogis (e.g., Foxen 2017: 49–55). In this article, I will only secondarily look at the media. Rather, I will look at the correspondence engendered by the above telegram, that is, how the British authorities dealt with this particular Swami. All of the material cited here is part of the India Office file IOR/L/I/1/1312. Most of letters below were originally stamped as "confidential" or "secret", but all of the material has been publicly available since the India Office records were moved to the British Library in St. Pancras, London in 1982. To my knowledge, however, no scholar has examined this material before. It is of great interest since it not only sheds light on a period in the life on Swami Bon

that is little known, but also since it through this case study illuminates some of the hopes and anxieties of the last years of British colonial rule over India.

### *The First Report*

It is not surprising that the staff at The British Library of Information in New York (BLI) were bewildered by the Swami when he turned up at their doorstep, but at least they knew whom to ask. BLI was not just any library. It had been founded in 1919 to promote British interests in the United States by supplying Americans with information about British affairs in a comfortable and safe library environment (Lincove 2011: 157). Much of the work of the BLI dealt with India; indeed, it systematically engaged in efforts to counter Indian cultivation of American sympathies during 1920–1942. Already in 1922, 25% of its time was estimated to as spent on "Indian propaganda" (Lincove 2011: 164).

Under the long-time co-directorship of Angus Fletcher (1922–1941), the BLI attempted to thread the difficult path between information and propaganda. Fletcher detested the aggressive propaganda of the German Library of Information in New York and consistently turned down requests to have the BLI engage in propaganda missions (Lincove 2011: 166). Under the pressures of war, the BLI leadership was heavily criticized as having pursued an "Sleepy Hollow" existence, with a "total inability to grasp the idea of what do do and how to do it" (Lincove 2011: 171–172). Indeed, when challenged to produce a more efficient service for journalists, Fletcher declined, saying "This is Teutonic efficiency; this is what we are fighting the war against" (cited in Cull 1995: 59). Nevertheless, the BLI underwent a major reorganisation from the second part of 1940, until it was eventually swallowed up by British Information Services in 1942.

The BLI received its reply from London after about two weeks, on the 3rd of August. The first part was some basic information about the activities of the Swami between 1933 and 1937, based on press reports, noting his stay in London as a Hindu monk, his having been introduced to King George V and his work in trying to procure funds for a Hindu temple in London. To this was added the following information.

I enclose herewith a note of my information concerning Swami Tridandi Bhaki Haridaya [sic] BON, otherwise NARENDRA NATH MUKHARJI. This adds very little to the particulars you have already gleaned from Press reports, but appears to establish that he is an entirely reputable and cultured person.

I have no information as to the Swami's whereabouts since 1937. He does not appear to have gone to the U.S.A. from this country. Perhaps Mr. Joyce could secure information on this point.

SWAMI TRIDANDI BHAKI HARIDAYA BON [sic], otherwise NARENDRA NATH MUKHARJI

s/o late Babu Ramjan Kanta [sic, Rajanikanta] MUKHARJI

Aged somewhere between 36–41 (approx). Described as dark and thin: usual wears a mixture of Indian and European dress.

Nothing is known to the discredit of Swami T.B.H. BON. He first came to notice when he visited London in June 1933, on which occasion a reception was given for him by Sir Denison ROSS. The following year he was in charge of the Gaudiya Mission in London.

In November 1934 he went to Germany where he embarked on a lecture tour. One of the addresses given to the Indian Students' Association on "The Hindu View of Life" was religious and non-political. It was reported he was working for the Hindu Mission in Berlin.

In September 1935 his fare to India was paid by two young Germans whom he accompanied there: the object of this journey was that the two young men might learn Indian languages and hospitality was given them in India in return for their having put up the travelling expenses of the party. Both were scholars of some repute and nothing was known to their discredit. The Swami arrived in Bombay on 5.9.35 and left again for Europe on 10.10.35 in the m.v. "Victoria" (Lloyd Trestino Line).

In 1936 it was reported that he was once more in India and was collecting funds for the establishment of a Hindu institution in London: in Dec. 1937 "The Leader" published an influentially endorsed appeal for this objective and mentioned that the Swami was in charge of the scheme.

Despite some rather eccentric spelling of Bengali names, the India Office furnished a good report of Swami Bon: not only was nothing known to his discredit, instead, he was known as "an entirely reputable and cultured person."



Picture 1. Swami B.H. Bon in London, 1933 (photographer unknown).

At this point the correspondence from the side of the BLI is taken over by Sir Edmund Vivian Gabriel (1875–1950), a British civil servant, army officer and courtier, with long experience of work in India. Gabriel is today best remembered for his work as an administrator in Palestine after the first World War, where he voiced serious concern about the political situation, eventually becoming branded as an anti-zionist and forced to resign (Reynold 2014: 19).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, one conspiracy theorist had him being also the founder of "International Christian Leadership", a "fundamentalist organisation under oligarcal control", founded to influence key

During the Second World War, Gabriel was a member of the British Air Commission to the United States, charged with purchasing aircrafts for the Royal Air Force. Apparently he had an office at the BLI, for he seems to be the person that Swami Bon had been in contact with.

There is no record of Gabriel and Swami Bon having had any previous acquaintance, but since Swami Bon had been close to several influential and high-ranking men in London, such as the Marquess of Zetland (1876–1961), Secretary of State for India (at that time), and the Viscount of Halifax (1881–1959), once Viceroy of India but at this time the ambassador to the United States, perhaps the aged and aristocratic Gabriel was felt to be the most suitable contact person for him.

In a telegram and a letter sent on the 16th of August, Gabriel at any rate furnished Joyce with the information he had wanted: Swami Bon came to the United States not from England, but from Calcutta by a Japanese ship, via Hongkong, arriving in Seattle on June the 25th, "thence direct New York". This latter part is contradicted by a brief biography of Swami Bon published by his Institute of Oriental Philosophy in Vrindavan much later (ca. 1975), where he is claimed to have delivered some lectures in Chicago in between Seattle and New York (Institute [n.d.], 19).



Picture 2. Sir Edmund Vivian Gabriel. Portrait by John Newman Holroyd at the Museum of the Order of St. John, London.

### *Conflicting opinions*

Here the correspondance between IBL and India Office on Swami Bon could have ended, but on the 27th of September, Joyce wrote a brief but pertinent letter to Gabriel. Something new had come up.

With reference to your letter, No. G.A. 85 of 16th August, and to previous telegraphic correspondence, it has come to our notice from a confidential source that Swami B.H. Bon, during one of his interviews in America, expressed views which make him ill-deserving of any support from the Library.

According to the account, he appeared to be very anti-British: he referred to the O'Dwyer murder almost with satisfaction, and he spoke of British atrocities in India. He is described as less religious than nationalistic.

The "O'Dwyer murder" that Joyce refers to was the assassination of Sir Michael Francis O'Dwyer (1864–1940) by the Indian revolutionary Udham Singh on the 13th of March 1940. O'Dwyer had been Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab at the time of General Reginald Dyer's perpetration of the Amritsar massacre in 1919, famously terming it a "correct action" (Collett 2007: 267). He was shot dead by Singh in the middle of a meeting at Caxton Hall, presided over by the Marquess of Zetland (who was wounded – he had presided at talks given by Swami Bon in the same venue some years earlier). The unresisting Singh was caught on the spot, sentenced to death and hanged before the end of the year. Officially, the murder was condemned in India at the time, but Singh became a nationalist hero; his remains were exhumed in 1974 and repatriated to India. Since then, many books and at least one film have appeared to perpetrate the memory of the "Shahid" or martyr to the nationalist cause (Fenech 2002).

The "confidential source" mentioned in the letter is revealed in a later letter (Joyce to Silver, 25.11.1940) to have been a letter to Sir Francis Younghusband from the United States intercepted in the censorship. Sir Francis Younghusband (1863–1942) was a British army officer, explorer and spiritual writer, best remembered for leading the 1904 British expedition to Tibet. Towards the end of his life, Younghusband became increasingly interested in what today might be called New Age themes, including extraterrestrials and parapsychology, but also in promoting worldwide religious unity (Seaver 1952). He had met Swami Bon in London several times. Swami Bon (1981: 27–28) called him "one of the best friends and sympathisers that I have got in [England]" and he had been one of the vice-presidents of the Gaudiya Mission Society of London. Later, he had publicly supported Swami Bon's London temple project (All-India London Temple Trust 1937).

Despite this rather damning letter, Gabriel wrote an extensive reply to Joyce (received on the 18th of November), stating that it is incorrect to describe Bon as less religious than nationalistic, that he would have referred to the

O'Dwyer murder "almost with satisfaction" or spoken of British atrocities in India. He went on to write that,

[Swami Bon] is certainly not anti-British.

Since coming here he has invariably protested that politics is not his line; and that he knows nothing about it; indeed it is not easy for him to take an objective interest in realities at all.

Whatever the last clause is supposed to mean, Gabriel went on to explain in which way Swami Bon was misrepresented as a proponent of the Indian Congress view of Indian politics in an interview for the New York Sun 25.9.1940,<sup>2</sup> obviously the source for the report in the letter to Sir Francis Younghusband that had alerted Joyce. Gabriel then continued,

Bon, who will be wiser next time, came in some indignation to see me about this as soon as the publication had been made, and I had to persuade him it was better to leave well alone and not to write a protest. The interviewer went entirely off the rails, even though, at the Editor's request, I had prepared a memorandum for him.

Such an explanation would not have been lost on Joyce, who had intimate knowledge of how journalism worked – more so than Gabriel, it appears, who seems to have imagined a journalist sticking to a written memorandum. Both in India and in England, Joyce had campaigned for an independent and apolitical news service similar to England's Press Association, itself the progeny of Reuters (Israel 1994: 97).

However, there was more. Not only had Swami Bon been misconstrued, he was already of use for the BLI.

He is certainly being useful, both in the way of getting out indirectly just the word or two we want, and of establishing some contacts.

He has no marked personality as a speaker, but he creates a good impression, and has a great idea of the dignity of India, and its position in the Commonwealth. His brothers are in Government Service in India, and he has friends in England whom you know.

What Sir Gabriel meant by "getting out indirectly just the word or two we want" and "establishing some contacts" is not explicated, but it does appear like Swami Bon was doing some work for the BLI. "No marked personality as a speaker" is not very flattering, though it is qualified by "creates a good impression". Gabriel went on to write,

I have heard three addresses he has given in New York on his own subject, and they were entirely unexceptionable. The only political

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate this interview as either the source or the date is wrong.

references were to what he calls the religious background of the social and political life of the Hindus as an explanation of their attitudes.

It is unclear what exactly Gabriel meant by "the religious background of the social and political life of the Hindus". Some of Swami Bon's English lectures were published shortly after his passing (Bon Maharaj 1984), but none of the New York lectures were included. Neither did he cover this topic in the book he had published just before leaving India for the United States, *Sree Chaitanya* (Bon 1940).

I have been able to find five newspaper reports of Swami Bon in New York in 1940.<sup>3</sup> The first and second are short notices in the Berkshire Eagle from the 2nd and 6th of August, mentioning that "His Holiness Swami B.H. Bon" is to speak on the latter date at St. Paul's Parish house in Stockbridge, Massachusetts on "The Culture of India", giving a short biography of him and mentioning that he has earlier spoken at the Union Theological Seminary in New York and "before gatherings of university scholars". He is further reported to have been hosted by Miss Mabel Choate. Best known today for having created the magnificent gardens at Naumkeag house and leaving the house and gardens to the Trustees and Reservation, Mabel Choate (1870–1958) was a traveller and collector, well-known for her generosity (Owens 2019).

Mabel Choate may have met Swami Bon during her visit to Calcutta in 1938. Geoffrey Platt, her great-nephew, remembered the Swami's visit in a talk almost fifty years later – though with some disappointment:

Aunt Mabel had many guests – family and old friends whom we enjoyed. One of the guests was a little unusual. He was the Swami B.F. [sic] Bon from Calcutta and the book says that he was with us on July 30, 1940. He fascinated us by pacing up and down the stone step one morning of the west terrace from 7:00 until about 10:00, reading a book intently. We assumed he was attending to his devotions. When he came in we asked what the book was and he said it was "The Big Sleep" by Raymond Chandler. He wore his white robes about the house, but we were intensely disappointed when he appeared in a blue pin stripe business suit to go to the concert.<sup>4</sup>

The Naumkeag guest book entries indeed show the Swami to have arrived on the 30th of July, but Geoffrey Platt and his parents did not arrive before the 10th of July, so the Swami, disappointments notwithstanding, must have stayed on for a couple of weeks.

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<sup>3</sup> I wish to acknowledge the help of Mr. Rembrandt Kalkhoven and Dr. Philip Deslippe in finding these articles.

<sup>4</sup> From a speech given at a Naumkeag Garden Party in 1983. I am indebted to Allison Basset, manager, at the Trustees for this information, as for sharing a scan of the relevant page of the guest book.



Picture 3. Mabel Choate. <https://www.facebook.com/thetrustees/posts/she-didnt-move-mountains-but-mabel-choate-certainly-left-her-mark-on-the-berkshi/10153574198970715/>

A number of other persons are mentioned as patrons and patronesses of the lecture, including Rev. Edmund Randolph Laine (1889–1972), pastor of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

The third newspaper article is from the Brooklyn Eagle, 8.10.1940. It mentions Swami Bon taking part in a "World Parliament of Religions" on the day before, and includes a picture of him, though not a great one.



Picture 4. Swami Bon in the Brooklyn Eagle (through newspapers.com).

The fourth article is from the Columbia Spectator, 30.10.1940, covering a lecture the Swami had given in Professor Herbert Schneider's (1892–1984) class on the philosophy of religion the day before. The unnamed author does a fair job in summarising the Swami's talk on the three features of the divine in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, noting that the Swami was "dressed in an outfit of pink silk typical of the native dress in India" and that "he presented a peculiar appearance to students of the West. His skin is deep brown, almost black, but his features are characteristically Caucasian." Interestingly, the author calls the Swami "Dr.". While Swami Bon did eventually get a number of honorary doctorates, that was much later in his life. This may have been a mistake by the author, or then the Swami may have here joined a host of earlier and later Swamis and Yogis being creative with their life stories (see e.g., Deslippe 2018).

The fifth and last article, from the New York Age, 9.11.1940, mentions that Swami B.H. Bon, president of the All-India London Temple Trust, will speak on "The Cultural and Religious Values of Hindu Religion" on November the 14th at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. Perhaps this was the lecture mentioning something on "the religious background of the social and political life of the Hindus", especially since it was delivered just before Gilbert's letter.

Gabriel ended his letter with some more general concerns about Indians in the United States.

[Swami Bon] is at present lecturing in Columbia University, but, though as a religious he does not want more than a mere subsistence, there is always the danger that if we do not keep him in tow he may, like many other Indians here, fall by default into the anti-British camp, which is all ready to receive him.

The Indians in U.S.A. have not been much looked after, and there has been little understanding. The endeavour now is to converge them, as equal members of the family, whatever troubles their inferiority complexes may have led to in the past, and, by giving them a friendly hand instead of no hand at all, make them proud, instead of resentful, of their connections, and work for the common cause.

That Gabriel would see Indians as having "inferiority complexes" is ironic to say the least, considering the way in which India had been treated under British rule: better than other European powers treated their colonial holdings, perhaps, but certainly not as "equal members of the family".

At any rate, Joyce accepted the verdict of Gabriel on Swami Bon. In a short letter to Silver at the BLI on the 25th of November, he wrote,

I am quite prepared to accept Sir V. Gabriel's opinion of the man, however, and I certainly agree with the last two paragraphs of his letter.

Joyce and Gabriel were in other words in favour of the plan of eventually granting India a dominion status within the British Commonwealth, in common with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, Ireland and Newfoundland. Dominions were defined as "autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations." This was the ultimate purpose of the Government of India Act of 1935 that Lord Zetland had an important role in passing. That Sir Winston Churchill (1874–1965), who had bitterly fought all plans of dominion status for India (James 1973: 33–34), became Prime Minister in May 1940 was a severe chock to India's friends in Britain, leading for example Lord Zetland to resign his position as Secretary of State for India.

### *A Swami going to war*

While Swami Bon continued making contacts and lecturing in New York, summer and fall of 1940 witnessed the Battle of Britain, where little England alone withstood the Nazi menace that had overrun much of Europe. Propaganda efforts focused on the dogged bravery of the British people, influencing many volunteers to join the struggle. Some of the people volunteering their services may have been surprising to the British authorities. On 29th of October, Gabriel wrote to Joyce,

Swami B.H. Bon, who is helping us considerably with his lectures, has sent me a letter (16 Oct.), which may be of general interest as indicating the

sentiments of a Hindu priest who is a man of peace. He says: "It is encouraging to know that India's contributions in men and materials do not fall short of her great role in the present struggle. Hindu were always brave soldiers in a righteous cause. We hate to kill men and women, but we are also equally ready to combat evil doers. We do not incite war, but when it is forced upon us, it becomes the duty of every Hindu to face his enemies. Hindu philosophy teaches that the soul was not created and never will be destroyed; after death we pass on to a new life. So we are not afraid of death. In the Gita Sri Krishna told Arjuna 'If thou be killed in battle thou shalt enter heaven; if thou emerge victorious thou shalt enjoy the world. Rise up, Arjuna, with a firm determination now to fight. Sin will not touch thee if thou fightest with the aim of final liberation, steadfast in weal and woe, for profit or loss, defeat or victory.' So I am glad to know that the Hindus of India are rising to the occasion. I am particularly proud to know that there is a Bengali squadron leader now on duty on the N.W. Frontier.

If I were given the opportunity, I feel that I myself could do much, and that my energies are not being utilized. Having lived the life of a religious, I loathe war, but should there be need of my services in India, and you think I can do anything now, I shall be glad if they could be utilized."

Swami Bon's rather general offer of assistance here was followed up by a more concrete one in a remarkable letter to Gabriel on the 24th of November, here given in full.

620 West 115th Street  
New York

My dear Sir Vivian,

I think it will be a noble duty for any Hindu Priest to render spiritual comforts to the Hindu soldiers who have staked everything of this world at the cost of their lives in the battlefields. Man thinks most of God when under agony of a brutal death, and a few words of spiritual encouragement and blessings may give the greatest solace to the dying heroes – even the very presence of a monk at their death-bed may inspire them with hopes and courage. This is not only humanitarian on the part of a monkpriest, but a spiritual duty incumbent on him.

The Christian and Moslem soldiers do receive such spiritual help from their respective Chaplains and Moulavis; there is no reason why thousands of Hindu soldiers of His Majesty should not be given similar facilities. A Hindu Priest, when Brahmin by birth, can not only help in performing the last rites of a dying soldier, but also render greater assistance to the military authorities by way of suggesting to them the proper food, observance of occasional and important religious festivals and lectures on religious subjects and expositions of portions of the Hindu Scriptures to the Hindu soldiers which will undoubtedly give them a great amount of pleasant and hopeful respite before going to the war-front.

Soldiers who have left their parents, wives and children and who have volunteered to enter into the jaws of death need the tenderest consideration in every possible way. For a Hindu, religion is above everything. The Hindu Officers and the ordinary soldiers need such help equally.

If His Majesty's Government will consider the proposal, you will please let me know the conditions. My humble services will be at the disposal of my co-religionists in the War-field.

Yours sincerely,

B.H. Bon

Gabriel must have been happy about the offer, but also have recognised the problem inherent in it: just as the Swami intimates in his letter, Hindu soldiers of the British Empire were not followed into battle by "Hindu priests" in the way that Christian soldiers had their chaplains and Muslim soldiers their maulwis. That such a Hindu priest might offer suggestions on "proper food" and the need to celebrate religious festivals might also have not sounded as helpful to the military authorities as the Swami intended. When forwarding this letter to Joyce on the 2nd of December, Gabriel added some notes of his own.

Bon is anxious for military service of some kind, and has also asked to be entered as a candidate for the Air Force, either in India, which would mean returning there as soon as he knew he could be accepted, or in Canada, or elsewhere under the Empire training scheme.

In his own letter, Swami Bon does not indicate a desire to fight the enemy personally, but rather seems to envision a supporting role for himself, more in keeping with his self-representation as a Brahmin. Perhaps Gabriel's addition here was the result of further discussions between the two, where Gabriel expressed his doubts that the army would institute a special position for the Swami alone. Again, Gabriel stressed the character and loyalty of the Swami.

While here, he has kept himself on an altogether different plane from the political Indians, and has been very helpful to us and keen to do all he could.

As we shall see, Swami Bon's offer did raise questions at the India Office, but as a reply did not seem to be forthcoming, Gabriel followed up with another letter to Joyce on the 3rd of January, 1941, when the Swami was already planning to return to India.

[Swami Bon] is a somewhat reticent person, and sometimes perhaps not quite so tactful socially as he might be, but I could have made very much more use of him if present restrictions on India had allowed. He has been greatly encouraged by a recent letter he has had from L.S. Amery, but he cannot, I fear, help contrasting the poor recognition he has had from the representation of India here with what he has had in London.

I am not sure what the "present restrictions on India" were; the words may simply have reflected the lack of funds or time for anything not directly related to the war effort. The letter from Leopold Stennet Amery (1873–1955), at that time Secretary of State for India, has unfortunately not survived.

Compared to the way in which Swami Bon was received in London in 1933–1935 (Bon Maharaj 1981), the recognition he was given in the United States was indeed poor, even with the support of the BLI. There were many reasons for this, of course. Firstly, when in London, Swami Bon had been the leading emissary of an important religious movement in India. Even though he now nominally represented The All India London Temple Trust, as in the fifth of the newspaper articles above, in reality he was on his own. Secondly, even though much of the intelligentsia of the United States was in favour of Indian independence, official policy was marked by uncertainty and ambivalence (Jain 2016: 44). Thirdly, the war – in which the United States in 1940 still maintained a formal neutrality – overshadowed everything.

Gabriel continued, again ending his letter with some more general thoughts,

My principal anxiety has been to keep him occupied and save him from succumbing to the pressure that is brought on all Indians in this country. The anti British group, for that is what it basically is, is well organised, well financed, in touch with its principals in India, and said to receive high Indian backing here, which may or may not be true, and is no doubt from the best of motives. It consequently tyrannizes.

Gabriel's second letter seems to have finally put the wheels moving at the India Office. There is a flurry of letters and notes back and forth between different officials, both at the India Office and at the Defence Department. Colonel Erskine wrote to Simpson on 3rd of February 1941,

What do you think we should reply to Sir V. Gabriel's letter. Swami Bon would not be useful in England, as all the Contingent are Muselmans – I do not think he would be welcome by Middle East, even if we could get him there – on the other hand, perhaps it might not be quite polite to say that he is not required?

What can one answer.

These hastily scribbled notes sum up the issue neatly. On the one hand, it was difficult to see any real use for the Swami, but on the other hand, it might indeed "not be quite polite to say that he is not required" – particularly since this Swami was backed by Sir V. Gabriel.

On the following day, Simpson replied.

The only thing to do with the Swami's letter, so far as I can see, is to forward it to A.H.Q., India, and to inform him that this has been done. I cannot imagine, however, that they will be able to make any use of him, for I have never heard of Hindu "priests" being attached to the I.A.

Apart from the Swami's own letter there are Sir V. Gabriel's remarks about his desire to perform military service. Here again I think he must approach A.H.Q. It would be as well if Sir V. Gabriel supplied a covering letter in order to make sure that A.H.Q. did not return, in both the cases mentioned above, a curt or formal refusal which might offend an Indian who clearly means well.

This became also the gist of the reply that Joyce sent Gabriel on the 14th of February. At the same time, as suggested above, advance information about the Swami, his offer and Gabriel's support was sent to the Defence Department of the Government of India. There was thus a broad agreement that the best way forward would be for the Swami to apply in person at Army Headquarters in Simla, India – something that incidentally would also unburden the India Office of any responsibility in the matter. Further, the opinion of the India Office was that the Indian Army would find little use for the Swami, but that he needed to be treated in a considerate way, as "an Indian who clearly means well", and who also happens to have influential connections.

### *Conclusion*

On the 4th of March, Gabriel wrote a final letter to Joyce in connection to Swami Bon.

He has already left here en route to India, but I think I can still get what you say to him before he actually leaves the country. He is due to sail from Seattle in the NYK ship Hikawa Maru on the 7th of March for Yokohama, going on from Kobe to Calcutta by a British India ship if possible. I have suggested to the appropriate office here that it might be as well to observe his contacts on the way.

The last sentence in Gabriel's letter is very revealing. After trying to make as much use of Swami Bon as possible in the United States, the same person who had vouched for his reliability was now suggesting that his contacts on the way be observed. Had something changed in their relationship, or was this just an expression of *realpolitik*, considering how Japan, though still not at war with the Allied powers in March 1941, had joined the Axis powers of Germany and Italy already at the end of September 1940?

Our sources give us no answer. Swami Bon's diaries or correspondence from the time in New York have not survived, and he wrote little about it afterwards. In the small biography of Swami Bon mentioned above, the spread of the war is given as the impetus for his return to India (Institute [n.d.], 20), but a lack of funds and success could also have been at least partial reasons.

According to the same biography (Institute [n.d.], 20–21), Swami Bon was upon reaching Japan invited to give lectures in the House of Peers, at universities and at various cultural associations, meeting generals Araki (1877–1966) and Tojo (1884–1948), the poet Noguchi (1875–1947) as well as the revolutionary Bengali leader Rashbihari Bose (1886–1945). He also continued his relations with British officials, as ambassador Sir Robert Cragie (1883–1959) arranged a

luncheon in his honour at the embassy and the first secretary invited him to dinner.

After "a cordial stay" in Japan, Swami Bon continued to Hong Kong, where he was detained for two weeks by war preparations, using the time for meeting prominent Indians and giving university lectures. He returned to Calcutta just one week before Japan attacked British and American holdings on the 7th of December 1941. Whether Swami Bon really met Araki and Tojo is doubtful, for at least the chronology seems out of step: leaving the United States on the 7th of March, spending some days in Japan and then two weeks in Hong Kong does not add up to arriving on the 1st of December in Calcutta. Mistakes of chronology are not uncommon in Swami Bon's later writings: despite arriving in the United States on June the 25th, 1940, he writes in at least two places (Bon Maharaj 1981: 136; Bon Maharaj 1984: 3) that he spent 1939–1941 there.

Nevertheless, Gabriel's final instruction of keeping an eye on the Swami's contacts seemed to have been adhered to, for Swami Bon was arrested in Calcutta upon the outbreak of the war in the Pacific and questioned regarding the people he had met. He was let off after a brief interview, but whether he had actually entertained any ideas of applying for military service at Army Headquarters, this must effectively have put an end to that. The Swami never did get to serve as a Hindu Priest on the battlefield or fly a Spitfire; instead, he spent the next years in Calcutta, Varanasi and on pilgrimage in the Himalayas, before settling down in Vrindavan in 1943 (Broo 1999: 49–54).

Swami Bon never mentioned the BLI or Gabriel in his later writings, let alone wanting to help the British war effort. This may have been policy; after all, after independence there was little merit in having wanted to aid the former colonialist power. It is also possible that the offer may not have been that seriously meant, but more intended as an incentive for Gabriel to keep the support of the BLI coming. Swami Bon was no novice to shifting politics: he writes (Bon Maharaj 1981: 95) that when living in Berlin in 1935, he used to greet everyone with a "Heil Hitler!" and raising his right arm. When questioned by fellow Indians, he replied,

"What was the harm in that?" On the other hand, I had the advantage of not being a suspect, and also the Nazi-followers were happy with me, which helped me immensely in my missionary activities.

Gabriel thought he was using the Swami, but who was actually using whom? Following the example of his master, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (Sardella 2013: 173), Swami Bon always adopted a loyalist or at least non-confrontational stance towards the secular powers, one that was recognised as such by the British authorities in India. As the Governor of Madras, George Frederick Stanley (1872–1938) said, while laying the foundation stone of the Gauḍīya Maṭha in Madras in 1930,

Your mission, however, recognizes the futility of [revolutionary and unconstitutional] preaching and realizes that loyal support of established

authority is the only sure means of attaining that true and lasting peace to which we all aspire.<sup>5</sup>

At the troubled time of the last years of British dominion over India, it need to come as no surprise that such a stance was welcomed by the British authorities, leading them to offer at least a modicum of support to the efforts of the Gauḍīya Maṭha and Swami Bon in this case. That this mutual support was situational and transient is well illustrated by the interaction between Swami Bon and Sir Vivian Gabriel detailed in this article.

In hindsight, Swami Bon's missionary activities in New York were failures in the long run, despite his best efforts. But maybe some good luck rubbed off on the ship that ferried him away from the United States, the Hikawa Maru? Long after the passing of Swami Bon, Sir Vivian Gabriel, A.H. Joyce and all the other persons involved in this story, she still remains as a museum ship in Yokohama, being one of only two large Japanese passenger ships to survive the war.

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in *The Harmonist* vol. 29/9, p. 286, the journal of the Gauḍīya Maṭha.

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