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The Strange ‘Hindu Murders’ of the US West Coast in the Early 20th Century

By: Anuradha Kumar

In the 1930s, a spate of murders claimed the lives of several Punjabi men in California’s Central Valley region. US police and press were quick to ascribe these killings to mysterious old ‘Oriental’ cults and factional rivalries.

On 4 March 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 9 March, Clarence Morrill, the chief of the state department of criminal investigation, made public the identity of the murdered man. Sant Ram Pande was 32 years old and a student of mechanics at the University of California at Berkeley (*Santa Rosa Republican*; *San Francisco Examiner*, both 9 March 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 fourteenth.

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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 onto 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, 11 March 1931).

Pande, in newspaper photos, appeared as a serious-looking young man in a neat jacket, with hollowed cheeks and a sullen expression. Those initial days, as the investigation gathered pace, Morrill supplied most details to the press and took most of the credit as well. He had helped recover the fingerprints, a difficult endeavour considering how badly mangled Pande’s hands were. These were matched with the prints Pande had left voluntarily with the department just before he “disappeared.” It was likely he had intimations about his “murder.” Another set of prints had been left with the police department at Berkeley where Pande had secured a permit for a concealed weapon, a gun, to protect himself.



Oakland Tribune (Oakland, California. 9 March 1931 | newspapers.com)

As other details emerged, Morrill found himself on the defensive. Pande, it appeared, had been last sighted on 4 February, the day of his visit to the police department, and a month before his body was found. The alarm had not been sounded then; nor had the police heeded a report that Pande had been seen getting into an automobile soon after leaving Morrill's office (*Oakland Tribune*, 13 March 1931).

Under pressure, Morrill let on a bit more — that he had taken five days to make Pande's identity public because he was afraid the suspects would try to get away.

Morrill also obliged with more details. The police did have some theories about the killing, he told reporters. He had taken five days to make Pande's identity public because he feared the suspects would make an attempt to get away. During this time, a close watch had been instituted on the borders with Mexico and on ships leaving the Californian coast, especially off San Francisco. Morrill disclosed he had even received reports that the suspect had offered \$4,000 for an airplane ride out of the US. Pande, the surmise now went, had been tortured and then killed before his body was found.

These new revelations prompted the press to put out their own theories about the murder, and the many more that had preceded it. The numbers of the Hindu murders varied, ranging between 13 and 23.

Old 'Oriental' cults

The killing followed a pattern observed by "Oriental cults" of old, as one newspaper had it. This was a pattern set by the "thugees" who terrorised much of India in the mid-19th century, according to Peter Levins of the *Daily News* ('What Has Happened? Twenty Year Wave of Hindu Killings Baffles California', 23 April 1939). Despite the British having suppressed them during the violent days of the "1857 mutiny," the thugees were still very much around. The cult worshipped the goddess Kali, "a bloodthirsty, lustful goddess" with "dark looks," "matted hair," an "obtrusive tongue coloured red with blood," and holding in her hands, more often than not, "a skull or two." It was on her orders, one view noted, that the thugees went on their killing spree.

Pande's decapitation, another report knowledgeably added, was by someone who had knowledge of surgery, and the murder was reminiscent of how the thugees operated.

They poisoned their unsuspecting victims and strangled them with silk kerchiefs, more often than not decapitating them. The latter, one newspaper helpfully elaborated, was to ensure that the poison seeped directly into the veins, and weakened the will. Pande's decapitation, another report knowledgeably added, was by someone who had knowledge of surgery, and the murder was reminiscent of how the thugees operated. Bodies had been found garroted, drowned or poisoned; all bearing the hallmarks of an Oriental murder mystery.

On 10 March, three 'Hindus' — the misnomer for all South Asians then — were found hiding in a barn in Sacramento, and arrested. Udham Singh, Shajga Singh, and Nagahar Singh had no papers or identifying documents of any kind on them. They were clearly undocumented migrants, and were taken into custody before their deportation (*The Times*, San Mateo, 10 March 1931).



The San Francisco Examiner (San Francisco, California). 16 February 1918 | newspapers.com

Since the 1890s, when immigration from British India to the US west coast began in a big way, men from Punjab made up most of the numbers. Most had the last name of Singh. As many of them took to agriculture in a big way, thanks to central California’s warm climate and rich soil, they brought relatives and clansmen over. When immigration rules tightened, the numbers dropped, but undocumented migration picked up — helped by smuggling gangs. This aspect would have a bearing on Pande’s murder and California’s string of “Hindu murders” that occurred over a decade and more.

Following Pande’s murder, aspersions continued to be cast on the “Hindu murder gang” that had in its eyesight all those who betrayed it—as informers or stool pigeons.

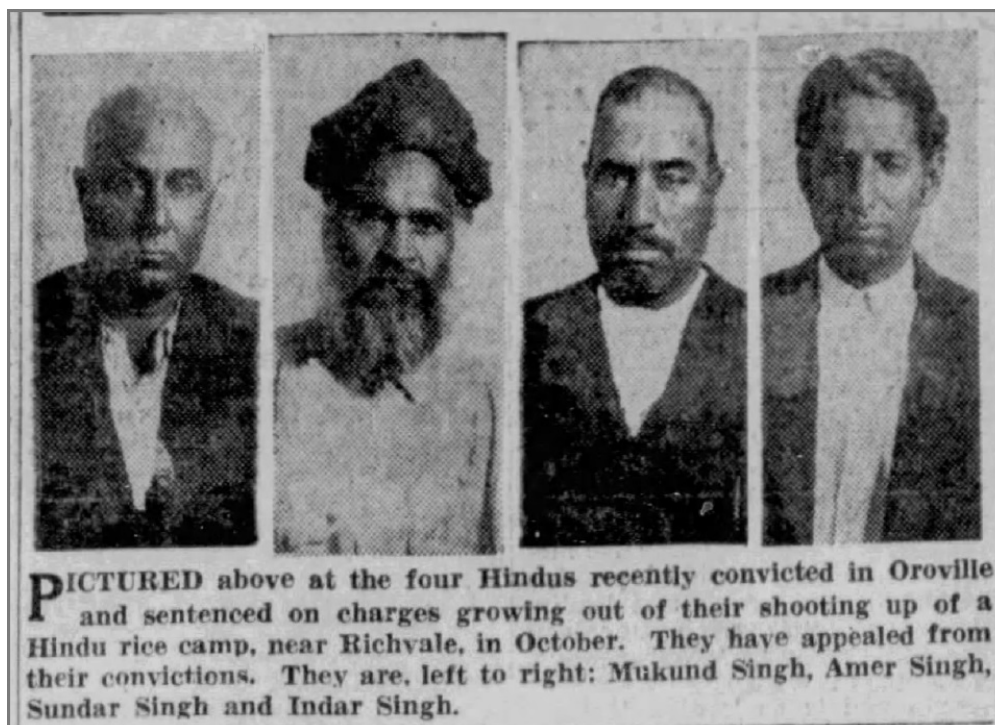
Yet, in the immediacy of Pande’s murder, aspersions continued to be cast on the mysterious “Hindu murder gang” that had in its eyesight all those who betrayed it, chiefly as informers or stool pigeons. Pande clearly had been one such. With the arrests of the three men, the police announced that it would crack down on all ‘illegal’ ‘Hindu’ migrants, especially those hiding out in ranches and labour camps of the Central Valley region.

In almost the same breath, however, the police claimed that a breakthrough had been made in the Pande case. Sheriff Charles McCoy of Marysville revealed that in the barn where the men had hidden away, a harrow — a banded agricultural implement used to flatten soil and shape furrows in it — had been discovered, freighted down with a tractor wheel that matched the one associated with Pande. Not just this, the sheriff claimed that the harrow’s other end not being weighed down was significant. However, no reason for this was given.

More evidence, more suspects

On 15 March, a week after Pande’s body had been identified, there came the sensational arrest of two suspects in the murder. Mukund Singh, whom photos always showed as a bald man, looking expressionless at the camera, was picked up in Sacramento, and Tara Singh was arrested in Stockton, 77 kilometres to the south. The latter had been a friend of Pande’s, and the two men were the last to have seen him alive.

Two days later, another associate, Nukan Singh was found with a blood-stained axe, a butcher’s knife, meat cleaver, and arsenic vials (*Sacramento Bee*, 18 March 1931). A suitcase recovered from Mukund Singh also threw up a red diary belonging to Pande, and letters he had received, some written in the Devanagari script (*Oakland Tribune*, 16 March 1931). There was also a search for one Narain Singh in whose car Pande had been last spotted on 4 February.



The Sacramento Bee (Sacramento, California). 14 December 1931 | newspapers.com

Newspapers reported these developments along with other sensational disclosures related to Pande. He had apparently been in the habit of sending autographed photos of himself in a naval cadet’s uniform to girls (*Tulare Daily Times*, California, 19 March 1931). He also came from a wealthy family in India and his father was in the police. Born in 1899, Pande arrived in the US in 1916. He had found a benefactor of sorts in Lachman Singh, once a priest at the Stockton gurdwara (popularly referred to as the Stockton temple and built in 1912) who now lived in Walnut Grove, a city not too far from Sacramento. Pande had evidently stumbled on a plan to kidnap his benefactor’s son and paid the price for this knowledge with his life.

The police suspected Mukund Singh of using arsenic to dispose of one Dasnuda Singh, whose killing had been reported some months before Pande’s. The wealth angle too became a reason for Pande’s murder, but this could not be substantiated. Within a few days, the letters and the diary were reported missing right from under the police’s nose in the identification bureau at Sacramento. Even the dried and clotted blood found on the axe turned out to be rust, and the suspects — Mukund, Tara and Nukan — were released. As for Narain Singh, he just wasn’t found.

Still more theories

Now that the investigation had reached a seeming dead-end, the theories became somewhat far-fetched. Morrill referred to political rivalries between the “Hindus” that stretched back to a decade and more, to 1917–18. In February 1931— a month before the Pande murder — there had been the death in a shootout of Nagina Ram Dhami, who Morrill said was a member of the Indian National Congress of the Pacific Coast. Like Pande, Dhami had been an informer about the 'Hindu murders', and he met his death at the hands of a member of the Ghadar party, a group already familiar to most people, especially in California, for its role in the Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial of 1917–18.

What was memorable was the shooting down of Ram Chandra, head of a faction of the Ghadar, by Ram Singh, a fellow accused, on 13 April 1918—a murder that was not fully explained.

The trial, the most expensive one in US history till then, had stretched for months, and led to the imprisonment of several Ghadar leaders — Bhagwan Singh, Tarakanath Das, and others — as well as German consular officials, on charges of conspiring against the Allied Forces during World War I. What was particularly memorable was the shooting down of Ram Chandra, head of one faction of the Ghadar, by Ram Singh, a fellow accused, on 13 April 1918 (*Petaluma Argus-Courier*, California, 10 Sept 1936). The murder was never explained satisfactorily because Ram Singh himself was gunned down seconds later by a police marshal, James Holohan, in the crowded courtroom. Ram Singh had always professed loyalty to Bhagwan Singh, the Ghadar leader who accused Ram Chandra of using German money to buy real estate in San Francisco instead of investing in the cause of revolt.



The San Francisco Examiner (San Francisco, California). 24 April 1918 | newspapers.com

The killing of Ram Chandra, Morrill, and others now believed, had caused bad blood between different Ghadar factions who were still eliminating each other, and those they saw as collaborators. Pande was a supporter of British rule in India; reportedly, he was even against Gandhi’s methods. The Ghadar, a shadow of its earlier avatar, now earned its income from a smuggling racket, and anyone whom it secreted across the border had to pay 'protection money' or risk being reported to the police. Pande evidently had had some information about them and paid the price as had Dhami before him.

In September 1931, Basant Singh, accused in the murder of Pande and others, was arrested in British Columbia but he hanged himself using his turban in his prison cell.

This assumption still left Morrill stumped, for in this Hindu murder ring or vengeance cult, he could find no mastermind. No one was willing to give evidence, or to speak against their own. Lachhman Singh, for example, denied ever knowing Pande when asked about their association. To add to Morrill’s frustration, suspects could never be charged because more often than not, witnesses changed their minds, and often claimed they had confused one man for another (as did happen, when non-‘Hindus’ were witnesses and made judgements based on stereotypical considerations). They were also liable to be killed, or killed themselves in suspicious circumstances. In September 1931, one suspect, Basant Singh, accused in the murder of Pande and others, was tracked to Vancouver in British Columbia, Canada, and arrested. He hanged himself using his turban in his prison cell (*Fresno Bee*, 2 Sept 1931).



Daily News (New York) 23 April 1939 | newspapers.com

In late October 1931, Mukund Singh, the suspect in Pande’s murder, whom the police had to let go for lack of evidence, was arrested in a shootout at a “rice camp” at Richvale, in Butte County (113 kilometres north from Sacramento). The police attributed this to “gang rivalry.” Mukund Singh and some others attacked other Indian workers at the rice farm. Among the latter, Sher Singh Saathi narrowly escaped with his life. Meanwhile another Indian, Lal Singh, who also went by the name of L. S. Manrow, became a police informant in this matter. A student at the University of Nevada, Manrow had found work in California. Days later though, Manrow aka Lal Singh was himself shot dead (*Woodland Daily Democrat*, California, 27 Nov 1931).

Though Mukund Singh once again evaded justice — when two witnesses turned unreliable, and he was let off on grounds of mistaken identity — the shootout exposed the hidden smuggling racket that some, especially those still associated with the remnants of the old Ghadar party, were linked to (*Oroville Mercury Register*, California, 3 Dec 1931). Sher Singh escaped to Holtsville in the Imperial Valley region to the south, fearing for his life because he had knowledge of such a network among his own countrymen, and like Pande and Dhami had been targeted.

Decades of anti-immigration policies

In the 1930s, South Asians, mainly people from Punjab, numbered around 4,000 in the US. Around 2,500–3,000 of them lived in California, most concentrated in the Central Valley area, and further south in the Imperial Valley region, close to the Mexican border. With the passing of several anti-immigration laws from the early 20th century onward, South Asians, like the Chinese and Japanese before them, found themselves constrained in various ways.

California, like several other states, passed the first of its Alien Land Laws in 1913 (also called the Webb-Haney Act) that barred “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from owning land or securing long-term leases over it (except for three years). A second law of 1920 ended such short-term leases and insisted on “guardians” (appointed lessors) submitting evidence every year. In 1917, the Immigration

Act imposed several new restrictions, including a literacy test.

It barred immigration to some categories (those who would be a 'public charge', for example) and from the Asia Pacific (hence, called the Asiatic Barred Zone Act). A 1923 ruling, *Bhagat Singh Thind vs. The United States of America*, ruled categorically that Asians (including “Hindus” and “high-caste Aryans”) were not “free” and “white” as defined by earlier rulings on naturalisation. The decision led to a revocation of citizenship from those such as Thind, and a denial of naturalisation to all those now regarded as “ineligible aliens.”

California’s miscegenation laws in place since 1850 made marriages of “whites” with “negroes”, “mulattoes”, “Mongolians” and those of the “Malay race” illegal.

The Punjabis who stayed on became “resident aliens”, identified by their alien resident papers. The land they once owned was placed in the hands of their children — born, as the historian Karen Leonard has detailed in *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi-Mexican Americans* (Temple University Press, 1994) after some had married Mexican women. Or otherwise, with 'friendly' banks. California’s miscegenation laws in place since 1850 (more specifically, the California Civil Code of 1872, section 60) made marriages of “whites” with “negroes,” “mulattoes,” “Mongolians,” and those of the “Malay race” illegal. While this left the status of Punjabi-Mexican marriages ambiguous (Mexican women were classified as “white” on account of their Spanish heritage), land was, in several instances, held by their American-born children.

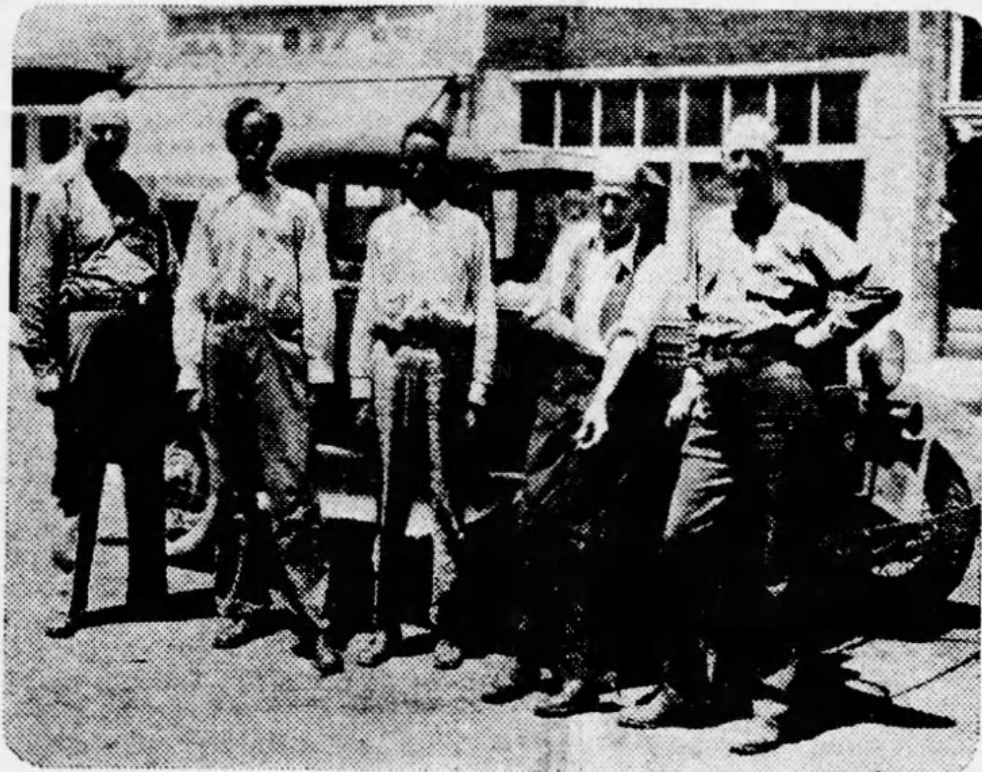
Those who came in after 1924 were deemed illegal and deported. In the years of the Great Depression (1929-34), the numbers of those being deported increased as 'native labour' and citizens accused 'illegal aliens' of taking away jobs, and/or working for lower wages; all of which encouraged smuggling networks to thrive. For instance, there were the “Chinese tongs” operating on both the east and west coasts of the US (*Public Opinion*, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, 24 April 1928), and the Hindus had their own gangs such as one called “the clover-leaf” gang and others that operated in California involving, as the police suspected, members of the old Ghadar party.

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Other legal infrastructure relating to immigration was also firmed up during these decades. Ellis Island in New York and Angel Island off San Francisco were the two entry ports regulating immigration to the US. In 1924, the border patrol came into existence. Five years later, in 1929, the federal government enacted a law to restrict movement of people seeking entry via the US-Mexico border. With section 1325, unlawful entry became “a federal misdemeanour on the first offence, and a felony on the second. Both charges could result in fines or prison time.” In the first decade after section 1325 was passed, the US prosecuted around 44,000 immigrants.

Concomitant with the passage of such laws, the Californian authorities cracked down on smuggling rackets. In July 1933, A. B. Wade — a “white” restaurant owner who lived in Brawley in the Imperial Valley region bordering Mexico — was arrested on charges of smuggling in four Hindus in his wife’s automobile, and arranging to “deliver” them to Marysville further north. Wade was portrayed as a Jekyll-and-Hyde-like character, someone who was a law-abiding, ever-helpful Samaritan, but the failure of his restaurant business had lured him towards smuggling (*Appeal-Democrat*, California, 11 July 1933). The contrast with how the Punjabis were characterised by the police and press couldn’t have been starker.

Hindu Smuggler Caught In Hub



—Sackrider Photo

What may prove to be the wedge with which California's great Hindu, Chinese and narcotics smuggling ring is split was driven in Marysville when A. B. Wade, white, of Brawley was captured with two Hindus, smuggled over the Mexican border. Wade's car was ingeniously reconstructed under the seat to provide concealment for his cargo. Between Chief of Police Dorrel La Fortune and Patrolman Tad Allread, captors shown at the extremes of the picture, are, from left; Mahn Singh, Bola Singh and Wade.

Appeal-Democrat (Marysville, California). 11 July 1933 | newspapers.com

The ‘elusive’ mastermind

Meanwhile, the “murders” continued and the search for the “elusive” mastermind gathered apace. On 25 April 1933, the *Oakland Tribune* and the *Fresno Bee* quoted the attorney R. F. Peckham who represented the state in a San Francisco court. The murders, Peckham said, were the work of “an organization, with six professional murderers who ensure none of its members shall be deported. It smuggles in people via Mexico and demands money from them.” Peckham specifically named the Ghadar party, to which Bishan Singh, and his wife, Behane—presumably, a corruption of the word *behen*, sister—belonged, and who were now challenged with deportation proceedings.

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This same organisation and its “six hired gunmen” who were still at large had been responsible for the killing of three informants—Dhami (1930), Pande (March 1931), and Lal Singh (November 1931). Soon after, immigration inspector Patrick Farrelly added to the insoluble murkiness of it all when he accused “Behen Singh” of being the Oriental woman who presided over this “assassination cult.” Behen Singh (or Behane, as it appears in some newspapers) had reportedly given “orders” for the informant who

had revealed her “illegal” status to the authorities to be killed.

Two months later, on 13 June 1933, Sher Singh, who had fled south to Holtsville, was found dead along with his sweetheart, Amelia Valdez, in her mother’s house. Both had died of bullet wounds (*Los Angeles Times*, 14 June 1933). As Leonard has written, these tragic deaths spawned two separate accounts. In the north, in the Yuba City area, it was attributed as a revenge killing— for Sher Singh had leaked information to the authorities. In the south it was seen as an “ill-fated romance”, an act of despair. The young people had killed themselves knowing they would be the target, sooner or later, of an act of vengeance.



Daily News (New York). 23 April 1939 | newspapers.com

Seven days later, Dharm (or Dharim) Singh was killed by Lachhman Singh (Pande’s supposed benefactor) on Ryer Island, in Sacramento. One of the wealthier Punjabis who had held land in association with Dalip Singh Saund (later the first Asian American elected to the House of Representatives, the lower house of the US Congress) and Hermohinder Sodhi; Dharm Singh’s murder was seen as a retaliatory act for Sher Singh’s unaccounted for death. The police disclosed that Dharim had been under surveillance ever since Pande’s body had been found not far from his farm. Nevertheless, all that Lachhman Singh would say after his arrest was: “I am sorry, I did it. But it had to be done.” After this, he too was found dead; he hanged himself in his cell (*Oakland Tribune*, 24 June 1933; *Sacramento Bee*, 21 June 1933).

As World War II heated up following the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, signalling America’s entry to the War, illegal movement of men from Asia declined.

The murders dwindled away towards the late 1930s (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 10 March 1936), or maybe these did not merit much mention in newspapers anymore. Morrill, the zealous and indefatigable investigator died in 1940, aged 57; he had been ailing for over a year after a botched-up sinus operation (*San Francisco Examiner*, 29 Feb 1940). And as World War II heated up in the Pacific region following the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, signalling America’s entry to the War, undocumented movement of men from Asia did see a decline.

In 1946, spearheaded by the J. J. Singh-led India League of America, and the National Committee for India’s Freedom, formed by Anup Singh and others, and other bodies, the Luce-Cellar Bill was passed. This granted citizenship to the 4,000-odd 'resident India-born aliens' in the US and an annual quota of 100 migrants from India and the Philippines.

On 14 May 1952, Pande reappeared in the news more than two decades after his brutal, still unexplained murder. The *Oakland Tribune* reported that his meagre savings of \$142.72, still unclaimed, would be turned over to the state treasury in accordance with California’s abandoned property laws. At least one report—that relating to his apparent wealth—finally had an answer.