

## Book Review

Raza, Ali., *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India*. 280pp., Cambridge University Press 2020

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It has been forty years since the Subaltern Studies academic collective inaugurated a series of debates that irrevocably transformed colonial historiography in the Indian subcontinent. To read what Ranajit Guha evocatively termed ‘the prose of counter insurgency’ against the grain was to challenge (official) history itself. The imperative of critically interrogating both the colonial archive and state-nationalist master narratives has since been taken on by innumerable historians of British India and the post-colonial subcontinent.

Ali Raza is one of the handful of Pakistani historians to have contributed to this rich and diverse field. Based on a vast array of archival sources, his magisterial book, *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India*, published by Cambridge University Press (2020), charts the lives of predominantly Punjabi communists and anti-colonial freedom fighters in their travels from British India to all corners of the globe. This epic tale of revolutionary internationalism at one and the same time illuminates the class, cultural and political dynamics of Indian society alongside the exigencies of colonial statecraft in the final decades under the Raj.

It is worth dwelling on the fact that Pakistani scholars, in comparison to their Indian counterparts, have produced few histories of leftist thought and politics. *Revolutionary Pasts* was immediately preceded by Kamran Asdar Ali’s work *Communism in Pakistan* (Bloomsbury, 2015), which chronicled theoretical debates within the Communist Party of India (CPI) and its offshoot the Communist Party of Pakistan immediately before and after partition. That book’s major contribution was to show that Pakistan’s otherwise besieged nascent revolutionary left was a quite significant player in debates over the new country’s emergent ‘national culture’.

Raza focuses attention on communists and freedom fighters who do not enjoy the acclaim of big names like M.N. Roy and Sajjad Zaheer. His work is an interrogation of ‘intermediate histories’ or a ‘communism of the everyday’. In bringing to the fore the struggle of ‘seemingly ordinary people’ (p. 8) against the British Empire and its local collaborators in India,

Raza underscores their indelible commitment to a global revolutionary project without precedent.

The book is spread out across eight chapters, charting a period from the outbreak of the First World War through to the immediate post-partition period. Broadly speaking, the revolutionaries that it traces are imbued with a ‘utopian impulse that enable[s] and sustain[s] [their] politics’ (p. 2), an impulse that propels them to herculean deeds and sacrifices. The Soviet Union occupies a central place in these revolutionaries’ imaginaries, their sojourns in the world’s first communist country in turn shaping their own subjectivities. The political struggle at home and trysts with Bolshevism play out alongside an almost fantastical worldwide adventure, featuring other outposts of the British Empire like Singapore and Hong Kong, and ‘free countries’ like the United States and Argentina. This marathon journey – of self-transformation and revolutionary insurrection – concludes back in an Indian homeland on the cusp of decolonisation. Ultimately, however, the protagonists are forced to come to terms with the tragedy of a ‘dream deferred’.

### To be a Punjabi revolutionary

In post-partition Pakistan, Punjab has been anything but a bastion of anti-establishment politics. Since soon after 1947, Pakistani Punjab has in fact served as the bedrock for a unitary state nationalism which has brooked no dissent from the communist left and movements emanating from Pakistan’s Baloch, Pashtun, Sindhi, and other ethnic peripheries. That Raza’s primary protagonists hail from the Punjab, and that the province was in fact a hotbed of revolutionary insurrection for decades before partition, demands a reckoning with the enormous impact of Punjab’s partition on the future politics of both India and Pakistan.

Throughout Raza’s five-decade narrative, Punjabi Sikhs with direct ties to the land are front and centre. Popular narratives about larger-than-life figures like Bhagat Singh have always hinted at the intersection of the Sikh community with the anti-colonial left in the later British period, but Raza undertakes a genuinely deep dive into both the eclectic ideologies of Sikh

communists and freedom fighters as well as their central roles in the globalised struggle against the British Empire.

Starting with an interrogation of the Ghadar movement coordinated by the Sikh diaspora in the Americas in the 1910s and 1920s, the book follows figures such as Naina Singh Dhoot, Sohan Singh Josh and Santokh Singh in charting emergent trajectories for insurrectionary politics over the next few decades. The Kirti Kisan Party, which Raza suggests 'was the most prominent communist network in British Punjab' (p. 24), arguably represented the high point of Sikh radicalism. But Raza also reminds readers that Sikh anti-colonial political sentiment was channeled through decidedly non-secular formations like the Akali movement.

The communist left also had affinities with other religious 'crusades', most notably the Khilafat movement; in the immediate aftermath of WWI, the British Raj in fact had to contend with 'the combined threat of Pan-Islamism and Bolshevism' (p. 53). Which is to make clear that Raza's cast of revolutionaries espoused ideas and engaged in practices such that 'political boundaries were always amorphous and constantly in flux' (p. 10).

Of the prominent Muslim protagonists in Raza's story, Dada Amir Haider Khan stands out. Hailing from a rain-fed village close to Rawalpindi, Dada's life is nothing short of remarkable; he is not only an inimitable organiser but a global adventurer. Raza chronicles his time as a lascar who spends more than a decade on the seas; his acquisition of US citizenship and exposure to the indignities of American racism; his time in the Soviet Union, where he receives extended instruction at the famed Communist University of the Toilers of the East; and his eventual return to India where he endures long periods of detention (both before partition and under the new Pakistani regime after 1947). For the Pakistani reader at least, seeing the world through a (young) Dada's eyes makes clear that to be Punjabi and a revolutionary was, in the heady days leading up to decolonisation, anything but improbable.

#### **A state of paranoia**

Even so, Dada Amir Haider Khan stands out because the western tracts of Punjab that eventually became part of Pakistan were characterised by far less revolutionary fervour than the central and eastern parts of the province. Migrations in and around partition robbed the nascent Pakistani communist left of even those Sikh revolutionary cadres that were based in the province's biggest city Lahore.

Partition emaciated a revolutionary vanguard that had always punched well above its weight, but formal decolonisation brought no respite from paranoid state functionaries. Indeed, one of the major themes that runs through the entire book is how the colonial state – and its successor – obsessed about and repeatedly sought to neuter an ostensibly pervasive communist menace. Raza notes at the outset of the book how the 'trope of foreignness' has been deployed to delegitimize

the Left in the subcontinent from colonial times through to the present day.

Yet the global sensibilities espoused by his Indian (and later Pakistani) protagonists were anything but 'foreign'. The left's 'politics of disavowal', even as it broke with any number of social conventions, reflected a deep connection with Indian society; as Raza notes, 'the "people" were family' (p. 133).

This, of course, did not necessarily bring the left any closer to its revolutionary horizon. The combination of the colonial state's paranoia and the unparalleled commitment of communist cadres sustained a 'Red Scare' which culminated in the Meerut Conspiracy Case of 1929. This spectacularly choreographed affair concluded in a judgment that 'equated Communist Internationalism with anti-nationalism', thereby permanently 'driv[ing] a wedge between nationalism and communism' (p. 193).

It is from this point onwards that Raza's narrative takes an explicit turn. While the 'utopianism and Millenarianism' of Meerut convicts like Sohan Singh Josh 'still powerfully flickered through' (p. 198), this moment marks a decisive break between the communist left and the Indian nationalist movement under Gandhi's tutelage. It is noteworthy that Raza's assertive assessment about Meerut 'runs counter to a near historiographical consensus which accepts that Meerut worked in the favour of the communist movement' (p. 202).

Leftist revolutionaries certainly did not let up in the last decade and a half before partition, continuing to organise workers, peasants, students, and supporters in the diaspora. They remained at the forefront of the rising anti-imperialist wave across India, despite factionalism and intrigue within their own circles. As formal independence from British rule approached, however, the left was increasingly isolated from the nationalist movements that spoke for the masses and would eventually inherit the reins of state power in the name of 'the people'.

#### **Time and the universal**

By the end of the book, the almost unquenchable optimism of at least some of Raza's protagonists gives way to the sober realisation that the emergent postcolonial nation-state is anything but a substantial break from Empire and the rule of capital. Raza dedicates a significant part of the last two chapters to discussion of the Communist Party of India's (CPI) 'People's War' and Pakistan positions, reflecting on how its 'tactics smacked of desperation' (p. 228). From around 1942 onwards, the communist left found itself besieged from many sides, especially in Punjab where communalisation of politics was proceeding apace. While Raza documents the inroads made within the Punjab Muslim League around the 1946 election by stalwarts like Danial Latifi and Mian Iftikharuddin, the die had already been cast.

Sickening violence around Partition confirmed the frittering away of the utopian impulses that had felt irresistible only a

few decades earlier. That revolutionaries who fought tooth and nail against the Empire subsequently faced criminalisation by the 'free' states of India and Pakistan exacerbated an already acute sense of loss. Yet at the same time, Raza is at pains to insist that revolutionary utopias were, and *are*, not irrevocably lost.

For much of the book, Raza ruminates on the almost millennial belief held by his revolutionary subjects in a universal History that would inevitably culminate in a society free of exploitation. In the forty years since the heyday of revolutionary internationalism has passed, both left academic and political trends around the world have put paid to teleological readings of history characterised by 'inevitable' trajectories and preordained outcomes.

Yet revolutionaries, and Marxist readings of history, are, as Raza's account painstakingly demonstrates, hardly uniform. Following Walter Benjamin, Raza shows his subjects to have subscribed to a 'conception of time in which every moment was alive with radical possibilities that could fracture the present and liberate it from an otherwise recursive and hollowed-out continuum of time' (p. 15).

While those subjects and the era that Raza documents are long gone, he reminds us that 'utopian and revolutionary pasts still have a lot to teach us', for they are 'an invitation to alternate ethical subjectivities and possibilities that seem increasingly foreclosed in contemporary South Asia today'. Present and future revolutionaries are and will be different from the ones Raza has so majestically brought to life in this book, but he leaves us in no doubt that to espouse universal sensibilities, to struggle for transformation of the self, and to imagine a shared future free of exploitation of all kinds – all are horizons worth upholding. The manuscript ends fittingly with the poignant words: 'We need these subjects. We need these dreamers' (p. 253-4).

### References

Ali, Kamran. A., 2015. *Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism 1947–1972*. Bloomsbury Publishing

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