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Orienting India : Interwar Internationalism in an Asian Inflection, 1917-1937

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Cover Page

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Conclusion

> Peoples in the East need not wait for guidance or initiative from the outside world. The Orient has to act irrespective of what others think of doing. It is as necessary for the regeneration of Asia as for the peace and progress of the world at large. We must realise that the East has a mission to fulfil in this world full of miseries and madness. Although the materialist civilisation of the West has given the world many useful and beneficial things, it has failed miserably to make the world happy and peaceful. . . . The Orient will have to give birth to a new Culture suitable for the present world, based on the high ideals of the East.[1]

This dissertation has examined different expressions of Asianism in the interwar period. It has asked how these appeals to 'Asia' functioned, and to what translocal solidarities and affinities they spoke. These invocations of Asia took place along a continuum ranging from artists, intellectuals, and feminists, to religious revivalists, trade unionists, and federationalists. Under the banner of Asia, they wrote texts, started movements, professed solidarities, built networks, crossed borders, and organized conferences. In doing so, they framed their thoughts and actions not on a local or national, but on a continental scale. In order to appeal to Asia, one first had to establish that Asia was a relatively homogenous space. What the Asianist projects analysed in this dissertation had in common, therefore, was the projection onto Asia of collective identities, experiences, and historical trajectories. They also shared visions of a decolonized Asia in a future world order, even if those visions themselves differed.

This dissertation views this narrative of Asianist enthusiasm as part of the larger narrative of interwar internationalism. This 'internationalist moment' is understood as the emergence and proliferation, in multiple centres around the world, of analogous practices of association and claim-making in the interwar years. The proliferation of Indian contributions to international activism and associational life in an Asian inflection should be viewed in this context. The three key events that marked the interwar period—the end of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the establishment of the League of Nations—also drove the Asianist moment in India. From the trade union leaders who advocated for Asia in the halls of Geneva to the revolutionaries who set up printing presses in isolated Kashgar, the activities of Indian Asianists were driven by the new world that emerged from the Great War.

This does not mean that the interwar period was itself a homogenous moment. The 1920s were marked by a mixing of ideologies which resulted in sets of ideas that were, or at least appear so today, far from internally consistent. The projects of many interwar groups shared a patchwork internationalist grammar that drew on a variety of texts, theories, and ideas. For instance, Asianist labour leaders in the Indian trade union movement used idioms now associated with communism, without necessarily considering themselves communist. The statements made in the defence of the trade unionists who stood trial in the Meerut Conspiracy Case demonstrate this. They affirmed their ties to Asianist platforms such as the League Against Imperialism and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, stating that they

[1] A. M. Sahay and T. Muto, *India* (Tokyo: Modern Nippon Sha, 1939), 100–2.

were ‘revolutionaries’ in an anti-imperialist sense, but not communists. Their competitors, who worked to convene the Asiatic Labour Congress, availed themselves of a similar rhetoric but sought inclusion in the Geneva system. In this sense, the appeal of the egalitarian message of socialism cannot be viewed too strictly, for it spoke to the lived realities of both reformist and revolutionary trade union leaders.

The 1930s, by contrast, saw a ‘closing of ideologies’ that made it more difficult for anti-imperialist groups to draw from a variety of movements and ideas, or to seek broad-based support for their agenda. Internationally, this hardening of ideological lines was influenced by the global financial crisis, the Soviet Third Period, and increasing militarism in Japan, all of which shaped the regional and global alignments of Indian Asianists. From the early 1930s onwards, these developments made the initial dream of postwar international peace and decolonization increasingly less plausible. But to Indian internationalists far removed from either continental European or Japanese politics, the 1930s still held possibilities. Until the mid-1930s, for instance, Italy, Japan, and Germany were still widely perceived as holding important lessons for colonial territories that sought to modernise quickly. The membership of the Asian Students Congress in Rome in 1933 and the resulting Oriental Students Association, which operated from Italy until 1935, confirms this. In sum, the opportunities for international association that arose after the First World War and drew to a close (if temporarily) with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, constitute an ‘interwar moment’ of unprecedented internationalist activity.

Viewed from a European perspective, the internationalist moment is bounded on either side by the conclusion of the Paris Peace Treaty in 1919 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. However, Indian Asianism, at least in its revolutionary inflection, was strongly influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917. From an Asian perspective, the establishment of the Soviet Union, with its professed anti-imperialist principles, provided a powerful alternative to the ‘Wilsonian Moment’ proposed by Erez Manela. Lenin’s repudiation of secret treaties spoke more forcefully to anti-imperialist sentiments than Wilson’s doctrine of self-determination. Equally important, the interwar period, as well as the internationalist moment, ended in Asia with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. The analytical framework of interwar internationalism is thus not intended to cast the narrative of Indian Asianism in a Eurocentric historiographical mould. Rather, it shows how the activities of Indian Asianists were linked to a larger internationalist moment, and how they harnessed its opportunities to shape a regionalism tailored to their specific concerns.

Finally, most Asianist movements were interrupted when the Sino-Japanese War shattered their members’ hopes of Asian unity and solidarity. It must be noted, however, that while 1937 brought many Asianist projects to a sudden halt, few Asianist visions ended definitively. After the further interruption of the Second World War, they resurfaced with strong continuities of themes and participants. In this sense, the Second World War marks an interruption, rather than a rupture. So does the attainment of independence in 1947. To many Asianists, the shaping of a new Asian future became more important at decolonization, not less so. For this reason, this dissertation also describes the afterlives of interwar Asianist ideas and projects in the 1940s and 1950s.

The interwar internationalist moment as an analytical frame is to be preferred over the conceptual tools offered by the historiography of Pan-Asianism. First, the movements and

people in the case studies examined above had stronger ties to the internationalist sprit of the interwar years, than to the changing regionalist tendencies emerging in East Asia. Second, as may be expected, the historiography of Pan-Asianism is strongly East Asia-centric: if Indian actors are represented at all, they figure as recipients of ideologies that originated in places far removed from India and Indian concerns. They are presented as receivers and transmitters, as historical nonfigures whose ideas were derivative of Asianist concepts circulating at various moments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Ottoman Empire and Japan. This leaves no room for Asianist visions that originated on the subcontinent itself and were driven by locally-shaped agendas, and it overlooks visions of Asia that did not focus either on East Asia or on a Muslim world that was conflated with Asia. One motive for writing this dissertation has been to widen this narrow understanding of Asian regionalism, and to demonstrate the existence of an 'Indian Asianism' with its own proponents, centres, agendas, and worldviews. The lens of interwar internationalism renders visible these wider networks of solidarity and affinity.

It is important to note that the movements and people in the case studies detailed in the five chapters above did stand in conversation with organizations, individuals, and events in East Asia. Indian Asianists strongly felt the impact of events such as the demise of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, the expulsion of communists from the Kuomintang, the Manchuria crisis, and—most important—the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. The intent of this dissertation was emphatically not to exclude East Asia from the narrative of Indian Asianism. Rather, it provides a fuller overview of Indian Asianism, locating activities with and in East Asia as part of a larger set of Asianist engagements. Moreover, the activities of Indian Asianists in Japan were intimately linked to Asianist projects elsewhere in Asia. The travels of Mahendra Pratap, for instance, joined projects in Central Asia and China to those in Japan. And Anand Mohan Sahay tied his activities in Japan to Indian diasporic groups in Southeast Asia.

The interwar years were marked by a celebration of the interconnectedness of the world and the proliferation of international associational life. However, it was also a period that has been dubbed the 'high noon' of nationalism, especially in the colonial world. The chosen case studies have demonstrated that Asianism did transcend, but did not necessarily subvert, the nation-state. There were many transterritorial aspects to the 'nation in formation', even if these have sometimes been less visible in narratives of the struggle for independence. To the majority of Indian Asianists, nationalism and internationalism were not contradictory, and certainly not mutually exclusive. Many anticolonial internationalists had visions of a new Asian order in which independent India would occupy an important place, just as many Indian nationalists had visions of independence which also included visions of a new Asian order, or saw their struggle explicitly in the context of an 'Asian Renaissance.' The question of scale, and whether Indian Asianist projects linked back to local, communal, and national concerns, therefore needs to be answered in the affirmative. To federationalists, for example, Asian cooperation was a prerequisite for decolonization, and would therefore lead to India's independence. To revolutionaries in places such as Tashkent, Baku, and Kashgar, an Asia-wide overthrow of existing orders would lead to a free India of greater justice and equality.

This also meant that one did not need to be exiled, travelling, or otherwise mobile to participate in this Asianist moment. Tagore's Viśva Bharati University in West Bengal, for instance, was arguably one of the best places to be an Asianist. Also, it was not necessary to

be part of a small educated and moneyed elite. The muhajirs who crossed the Pamirs on foot to help restore the caliphate, or the lascars who trafficked in Asianist literature throughout Asia on commercial shipping lines, were neither educated nor moneyed. By the early 1920s, it was abundantly clear that Asianism, especially in the context of Asian anti-imperialist solidarity, had the potential to become a broad-based movement. This caused the Government of India to consider 'Pan-Asiatic sentiments' as a threat to political stability, similar to 'Bolshevik conspiracy' and 'Pan-Islamism'. In addition, there was some misunderstanding among British intelligence services as to how to understand Pan-Asianism, and what it sought to achieve:

> For some months there have been indications that, in furtherance of the pan-Asiatic movement, Japanese official authorities have decided, that they must insinuate themselves into the good graces of Muhammedans in Asia. To this end, it is understood they are employing Chinese, Russian and Indian Muhammedans who are being sent to Chinese and Russian Turkestan, to Afghanistan and also to Northern India. . . . While the activities of these and similar itinerant propagandists are not likely to produce very much immediate effect, a more dangerous means of penetration which the Japanese have under contemplation, is their entry into the Far East pilgrim trade with Jeddah. The attractions resulting from heavily subsidised Japanese pilgrim ships are very obvious, and there is every possibility that a successful prosecution of this project may give Japan a monopoly in the pilgrim traffic, a powerful weapon whereby to assert herself as the champion of Asiatic countries.[2]

As has been demonstrated in chapter 4, Indian revolutionaries were indeed active in Russian and Chinese Turkestan, but their projects there were a far cry from spreading Japanese propaganda. And while Japan did try to appeal to Muslim Asia, as the work of Çemil Aydin and Selçuk Esenbel shows, they also appealed to Buddhists and Hindus. Periodicals such as *Young East* formulated a Buddhism for the 'modern age' which targeted all of Asia, and Rashbehari Bose sought to harness his Japanese network to construct Hindu temples in Japan. In this context, it is important to note that it was not so much Indians in Japanese pay, as Indians petitioning the Japanese with their projects, that stand out in the archival record today. However, this intelligence assessment does demonstrate how hard it could be to separate different Asianist groups and initiatives. This ties back to the ideological flexibility noted above, which treated political thought as an intellectual buffet from which different ideas could be sampled, as long as they served the resurgence of Asia.

To colonial surveillance, this presented a problem. Intelligence officers such as David Petrie and Cecil Kaye were specifically tasked with assessing the threat posed by international contacts, groups, and movements. But they could only do so by attaching labels to them to which many of the Asianists themselves would have strongly objected. The overlaps between the ideas and rhetoric of revolutionary and reformist trade unionists has already been noted above, but this fluidity of categories applied to many of the Asianists examined in the

[2] APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/480 Indians in Japan, 1934: Extract from Weekly Report Intelligence Director: Aspect of the Pan-Asiatic Movement, 15/12/1934.

preceding chapters. They formulated programs which they themselves did not see as contradictory, as they considered their goal—a new Asian order through Asian solidarity and cooperation—to be abundantly clear. Barkatullah's combination of Pan-Islamism and communism, or Mahendra Pratap's combination of Buddhist pacifism and an Asian Army, are cases in point.

Once an individual, group, or movement had been assessed as a threat, another question entirely was where to find the Asianists in question. Asianist networks were fluid and their constituent parts often highly mobile. As has been shown in chapter 4, governments attempted to control the movement of people and literature but were often unsuccessful. One avenue was to refuse the passport applications of suspected individuals, or refuse travel to sites where a gathering of significance was planned. The refusal of passports to K. N. Joglekar and D. R. Thengdi, for example, was explicitly intended to prevent them from attending the League Against Imperialism conference and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat's gathering in Hankou. However, this did not prevent activists who were already abroad for different reasons, such as university studies, to attend such events. The large student participation of the Brussels conference in 1927 and the Rome conference in 1933 clearly demonstrate this.

A second avenue, then, was to prevent communications between activists at home and abroad. Letters, telegrams, and wired funds could be intercepted. The Sea Customs Act served as a legal basis to confiscate proscribed literature, and the DIBs created lists of organizations and individuals whose communications were to be monitored. However, this could only be achieved after formulating a clear picture of the networks, friendships, and associations in question. The difficulties this represented to the DIB in Calcutta, for instance, show that this was almost impossible. For who was to judge the personal politics of incoming academics? Giuseppe Tucci came to study and to teach at Santiniketan, but his encounters there would later build the Oriental Students Congress. Makiko Hoshi came to teach tea ceremony and flower arrangement, but was also Rashbehari Bose's sister-in-law, and used her stay to attend the All-Asia Women's Congress in Lahore.

A third avenue was to physically monitor incoming ships by checking cargo and interviewing travellers. But as noted in chapter 4, the travel certificates of lascars were virtually interchangeable, which made their identities hard to confirm. New sailors were often enlisted at the last minute, and the chaos in the harbours enabled even individuals already under suspicion to disembark without being apprehended. Literature and pamphlets were equally hard to intercept: much literature made its way into India simply by providing it with inconspicuous covers. The most famous example is the Paris edition of Veer Savarkar's *The Indian War of Independence—1857*, which reached India inside the covers of the *Pickwick Papers* and *Don Quixote*. Texts carried by lascars, moreover, did not appear on cargo lists at all. Land routes presented an even bigger problem, as demonstrated by the number of muhajirs who crossed the Pamirs into Afghanistan, and from there travelled onwards to sites outside British control, such as Baku, Tashkent, and Moscow.

The travels and sojourns of Indian Asianists further demonstrate the necessity to broaden our understanding of the main internationalist sites of the interwar period. Centres in Europe and the United States, such as London, Berlin, Paris, San Francisco, and New York have been well-documented by, among others, Kris Manjapra, Benjamin Zachariah, Brent

Hayes Edwards, Mrinalini Sinha, and Maia Ramnath. Interwar internationalism in its specific Asian inflection, however, had its own nodal points where different groups converged. As demonstrated in chapters 1 to 4, the networks of Indian Asianists linked activities in the United States and Europe to Asian sites. The Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat operated from Hankou, and later from Vladivostok. In Moscow, the University of the Toilers of the East linked Asianists from many different countries, and attracted visits from itinerant Asianists such as Abdur Rab, Barkatullah, and Pratap. Through them, links were created to Tashkent and Kabul. Sea routes linked yet other Asianist centres, as between Singapore, Bangkok, and the port cities of Japan.

To a large extent, these sites were connected through the traffic of texts and individuals. Networks of affinity, based on personal friendships but also on family ties, further ensured the overlapping of different Asianists and the groups to which they belonged. Jawaharlal Nehru, for example, linked platforms such as the League Against Imperialism to Asianists in the Indian National Congress such as Chittaranjan Das. But Nehru's friendship with Virendranath Chattopadhyay also ensured that he was kept abreast of developments in Berlin, and through the Berlin circle, of the activities of communist revolutionaries in Central Asia. Itinerant career Asianists such as Abani Mukherjee were even more embedded in different internationalist circles. Muherjee had worked with Rashbehari Bose as early as the First World War, and had travelled through Japan, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies. Travelling through the latter, he met Dutch communist Sebald Rutgers, then a director of public works in Medan, who put him in touch with the Communist International. Through the mediation of Rutgers, Mukherjee attended the Baku Congress in 1920, and through Baku he became part of the Indian revolutionary networks in Soviet Asia.

Such networks of affinity also ensured that the activities of itinerant Asianists circled back to India. Rashbehari Bose, for instance, corresponded intensively with Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan, opening up channels of travel for Indian students to Japan. But Bose was also in touch with Savarkar, which ensured the exchange of ideas between Japanese visions of Pan-Asianism and the Hindu Mahasabha's communal perspective of Asia as an inherently Hindu-Buddhist space. Likewise, people like Amiyanath Sarkar linked the Oriental Students Association in Rome to the academic circles of Calcutta, but he also wrote prolifically for Indian newspapers on Italy's sponsorship of anti-imperialist movements.

The interconnections that emerge from these narratives prove that these Asianisms not only existed across a wide political and religious spectrum, but that different Asianist domains also overlapped significantly. Trade unionists in India were in touch with Indian revolutionaries in Central Asia. Academics in India were in touch with exiled revolutionaries in Europe and Japan. After independence, it was these pre-existing networks that shaped the participation of the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi. As demonstrated in chapter 5, it was not only the content of the ARC that answered to the interwar internationalist spirit, but also the continuities that its participants represented. At the ARC, trade union veterans such as N. M. Joshi participated alongside international women's rights activists such as Sarojini Naidu and Hansa Mehta, as well as Calcutta academics such as Kalidas Nag and Tan Yun-Shan.

This shows that many Asianist circuits were open-ended, and that individuals could be members of multiple Asianist groups or move from one to the other. But the question remains,

whether these networks were self-referential in the sense that they remained the purview of a small cosmopolitan elite. To an extent, this question needs to be answered in the affirmative. Studying abroad, the financial demands of travel, and the linguistic abilities necessary to participate in the internationalist centres of Europe and the United States, were the domain of a small group individuals from privileged backgrounds. However, too strong a focus on the mobile lives and prolific writings of individuals such as Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Taraknath Das, and Rashbehari Bose, belies other Asian solidarities and projects in the interwar period.

First, the question of how an independent India would situate itself in a decolonizing Asia, and how and by whom this new 'Asia' was to be shaped, was discussed in a much larger environment than the writings of a few isolated intellectuals. Asianist projects were hotly debated in the larger public sphere. This conversation took place in widely read dailies such as the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Times of India*, and the *Bombay Chronicle*. Editorial articles, op-ed pieces, and letters to the editor demonstrate the engagement with Asian cooperation and solidarity among a larger group of journalists and public figures, and also the general readership. This interest decreases at the level of vernacular newspapers, although it is not absent there either: this is demonstrated by the number of articles on the exploits of Mahendra Pratap in Hindi newspapers such as the Agra-based सैनिक (Sainik) and the Varanasi-based आज (Āj). Sainik even published a regular feature called राजा महेंद्र प्रताप के पत्र (letter from Raja Mahendra Pratap), in which his plans for Pan-Asia and world federation were explained. This larger public engagement is also evident in the engagement of individual trade unions with Asian issues even in the face of local strikes, and the large crowds drawn by the ARC and the Delhi Conference of Asian countries in 1955.

Second, two groups deserve attention as non-elites that actively responded to appeals to translocal solidarity cast in an Asianist mould. First, approximately two hundred muhajirs responded to the call for *hijrat* after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Disillusion over unkept British promises with regard to the caliphate and the holy places of Islam had sparked their journey across the Pamir mountain range. These muhajirs were on their way to Anatolia, but ended up in Central Asia in the revolutionary schools of Tashkent and Moscow, and several of them ended up at the Baku Congress in 1920. Second, lascars were not only transmitters of Asianist texts, or mediators who helped Asianists to travel under the radar; they could also be activists themselves. The Indian boycott of Dutch shipping during the Indonesian revolution demonstrates this. Australian, Indonesian, and Indian unionists worked together to forcibly free a crew of lascars who were made to load Dutch ammunition bound for Indonesia onto a ship in the North Sydney docks. And several hundred Indian sailors adopted a strategy of non-cooperation, refusing to work with materials bound for the Netherlands Indies.

The reception of revolutionaries who returned after independence is a further indication of Indian interest in internationalist and Asianist activism. On the surface, they represented a group that had kept aloof from the nationalist mainstream. In fact, many of them had been explicitly anti-Gandhian and had explicitly rejected non-violent methods in their writings. It is interesting to note, therefore, that in the 1950s, these revolutionaries were celebrated. They were incorporated into a new narrative of the struggle of independence that honoured their contribution to anti-imperialism regardless of their ideological leanings or political alliances. Three hundred former revolutionaries gathered at the first Old Revolutionaries' Conference, among them Mahendra Pratap and Bhupendranath Dutta.

Although many communist Asianists, most notably Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, had perished in the Great Purges, their legacy was not forgotten. Their contribution was commemorated, and the conference reports in the press show that their rhetoric of an egalitarian Asian order was very much alive. In particular, the conference participants were critical of the new Nehruvian government. Citing their credentials in the revolutionary movement, they stated that *Swaraj* had not yet arrived for ordinary people, and that further work was urgently needed. It is interesting to note that the revolutionaries' Asianism was as alive as ever, and that, in hindsight their disparate Asianist projects could be moulded into a single narrative of activism for the anti-imperialist cause:

> The young student revolutionaries living abroad made foreign connections. They brought Indian Politics in the International arena. Sun Yat-sen helped the revolutionaries. Leon Trotsky . . . took up their cause. The extremist socialists of Germany and elsewhere held up their hands in horror that the Asian nationalists had worked with the central powers. . . . [They] did not realize that the Asian peoples were fighting for independence.[3]

The Asian Relations Conference further demonstrates that this afterlife of the interwar Asianist moment was not confined to old revolutionary exiles. The continuity of participants has already been noted. But the ARC also answered to the Asianist moment in the sense that it was widely seen as a new opportunity to remake the future of Asia. It harked back to the non-state Asianism of the interwar years in several ways. It was a gathering of academic and cultural organizations, rather than of government representatives. It also was the only postwar conference to invite all of Asia, including not only Soviet Russia and the Central Asian Soviet Republics, but also US-occupied Japan. This inclusive Asianist atmosphere spoke to the internationalist moment rather than to the political constellation at the time.

It is at this non-state level that we must look for continuities in the post-war period. Much historiography moves seamlessly from the League Against Imperialism to Bandung.[4] However, it is more productive to look for the afterlife of the internationalist moment where it originated: in the public sphere. Seen in this light, new continuities of participants and people emerge, from the Asian Socialist Conference, to the Asian Women's Conference, and the Conference of Asian Countries, which gave birth to the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Movement.

Finally, the historical trajectories from 'Baku' to 'Bandung', or from 'the Oppressed Peoples of the East' to 'Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity', raise interesting questions about the lasting consequences of the internationalist moment from the late colonial to the postcolonial period. More specifically, it compels us to consider the extent to which the geographies of Asian anti-imperialism in the period 1917–37 continued to shape Indian state and society during decolonization. In what ways did conceptions of regionalism and anti-imperialism change when decolonization took place, but the visions of a decolonized Asia, carefully

[3] ZMO, Horst Krüger Nachlass, Box 34 file 256-1: Old Revolutionaries Conference, by Bhupendranath Dutta.
[4] See, for example, Prasad, *The Darker Nations*, 16–50.

grafted in interwar years, failed to materialize? These questions warrant further scholarly research that far exceeds the scope of this project on interwar Asianism in India.

The histories of the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Movement, the Afro-Asian Youth Movement, the Afro-Asian Writers' Movement, and the Afro-Asian Women's Movement, all suggest a strong continuity of themes from the internationalist moment of the interwar years. They also suggest that for many people and groups, their concerns about future regional and world order had not changed along with the new political constellations. World federation, peace, solidarity, and equality were considered no less important than before the war. In some cases, they were considered even more important. The outcomes of the research conducted for this dissertation suggest that the regional impact of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, and of India's independence in 1947, should be regarded less as 'ruptures' than as 'interruptions', in a longer narrative of internationalism in an Asian inflection.