

BOOKS

# Bengali Bolshevik: Muzaffar Ahmad

Tuesday 23 August 2011, by [PRASHAD Vijay](#) (Date first published: 23 August 2011).

**A historian locates the social and political growth of Muzaffar Ahmad in the intellectual byways and the slums of Calcutta.**

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MUZAFFAR AHMAD (1889-1973) was born on Sandwip, a pirate’s island in the Bay of Bengal, and died in Calcutta (now Kolkata), the city that he embraced and that in many ways made him. His remarkable talents pushed against the centuries of hierarchy that would have condemned him to a life at the margins of history. After running away from home, he was able to seize education from unexpected quarters and eventually came to Calcutta in 1913 to become a writer. Like many other young Muslim intellectuals of his social class, Muzaffar wished to become a cultural activist, eager to use his skills for the purpose of social reform among Muslims. The narrowness of this agenda became clear in the light of the nationalist movement and in the upsurge among the working class by the end of his first decade in Calcutta.

Muzaffar found the Congress suffocating, largely because it was dominated by people who were not embarrassed of their Hindu bhadralok cultural roots and indeed promoted this tradition in what is now known as Hindu revivalism. Muzaffar was too open-minded in temperament for this, and it of course helped him that his own Muslim heritage was repulsed by the cultural sectarianism of the Congress leadership.

What saved Muzaffar was Calcutta. In her remarkable book *An Early Communist*, the historian Suchetana Chattopadhyay locates the social and political growth of Muzaffar Ahmad in the city, not just in the intellectual byways of College Street but also in the slums of the working class, the area in the centre of the city where many of the streets are now named for Muzaffar Ahmed and his comrades (such as Abdul Halim). Unable to make a living doing radical cultural criticism, Muzaffar and his circle, which included the poet Nazrul Islam, lived in dire poverty, unable to treat their illnesses (Muzaffar had tuberculosis) and often unable to eat (as one police informer put it, “so long as they have got no money even for their food, I don’t think that they could do anything”).

This organic link to the working class that surrounded them was sharpened in the 1920s when the workers in and around Calcutta broke through their isolation in a series of remarkable strikes. Workers in paper mills and jute mills, butlers and chefs at major hotels and restaurants, and scavengers of the municipality seized the initiative as the lower middle-class unions, such as the

Employees' Association (of clerical staff workers), vacillated.

"Workers disrupted routines of daily life," Suchetana Chattopadhyay writes, "making other classes and class segments aware of labour struggles and politics." Among those now mindful of the subjectivity of the working class and of its capacity to lead struggles was Muzaffar and his circle. These eruptions from the working class, a large number of whom were Muslim, marked Muzaffar.

In an essay from 1969, Eric Hobsbawm argues, "Each Communist Party was the child of the marriage of two ill-assorted partners, a national left and the October Revolution." In Europe, older social democratic traditions that emerged out of a host of lineages and had covered considerable ground against feudal social hierarchies found themselves run aground by the Great War (1914-1918).

The War itself illuminated the descent of capitalist civilisation: it led to an immense cataclysm, one that discredited both capitalism and the rationality of European modernity. Social democratic parties that carried the ideology and programme of these older traditions collapsed when they walked away from their peace agenda in 1914 and adopted their national prejudices for the war. The October Revolution of 1917 came as a beacon of hope, and many militants and sections of the working class turned to the new communist parties, for "it seemed sensible to follow the recipe of success".

Hobsbawm's formula does not easily apply to places such as India or indeed to the colonial world. In the colonial world, the communist parties emerged properly out of the marriage of two other ill-assorted partners, an anti-colonial mass upsurge and the October Revolution. The coincidence between the Bolshevik success in Russia (1917) and the rise of the Gandhian mass movement (1916-1922, in its first phase) is at the centre of things. In India, the anti-colonial movement had to confront the dross of inherited cultural traditions, including undaunted feudal arrogance and increased religious tension.

IN 1966, WHEN he was released temporarily from prison to attend the funeral of friend and colleague Abdul Halim. The Meerut arrests did little to stop the commitment of people like Muzaffar Ahmad and Abdul Halim, one within jail and the other outside.

### **Confrontation with caste**

The social reform movements and the peasant struggles of the previous century had made some important advances, but they had been thwarted by the colonial state's commitment to a reinvigorated feudalism after the uprising of 1857. No wonder that the memoirs of Indian communist leaders (such as P. Sundarayya, B.T. Ranadive, P. Ramamurti and E.M.S. Namboodiripad) often open with stories of their confrontation with the heinousness of caste oppression, the hallmark of social hierarchy in Indian society.

For Muzaffar, the immediate social issue was the rise of Hindu revivalism, which was the vehicle for the transfusion of the ideology of the landlords into both the Congress and Indian society. Muzaffar's break had to be complex: against colonialism (which was the easiest departure), against bourgeois-landlord nationalism (which was considerably more complex given the allure of Gandhianism) and against capitalism (which was harder in a context where alternatives had not been fully explored).

Nationalism's potential was thrilling in the context of the satyagrahas of 1919 and the Non-cooperation Movement of 1920-22. But its limitations became visible with the failure of the industrialists and the Swaraj Party-Congress during the working-class strikes of the 1920s. They would even refuse a demand for a minimum wage. Gandhianism could not exhaust the full

imagination of the Indian people.

Gandhi's overwhelming influence held together an ensemble of diverse, even contradictory interests. Hindu revivalism gathered with pan-Islamism (Khilafat) in Gandhi's big tent, often at the expense of the broader needs of the people.

In the interests of property and propriety, as Suchetana Chattopadhyay puts it, landlords squelched the smallest demands of the cultivators, industrialists denied the claims of their workers and the socially oppressed had to accede to the reforms from their social superiors rather than wrest them through social struggle.

In periodicals such as *Langal* and *Ganabani*, Muzaffar tried to find a path beyond colonialism, capitalism and bourgeois-landlord nationalism. In an essay from 1926 called *Bharat Kano Swadhin Noy* (Why Is India Not Free?), Muzaffar constructed the granite block that held back the people: the imperialists who controlled the colonial state, the Indian capitalists, landlords and financiers who wanted to inherit the colonial mantle, and Hindu and Muslim clerics whose narrow ideologies corrupted the social body.

There is no sense in combating the latter, he argued in another essay from 1926 (*Kothay Protikar*, or Where Lies Redressal), by invoking the concept of "Hindu-Muslim Unity". That assumed, as Suchetana Chattopadhyay puts it, that "the interests of ordinary people could only be expressed in religious terms".

In 1927, in *Ki Kara Chai* (What is to be Done?), Muzaffar laid out the agenda of the Peasants and Workers Party of Bengal (PWP), which sought to produce mass consciousness (*jana-gana choitonyo*) through militant trade unionism and peasant movements. This alliance of industrial workers and peasants marked the history of Indian communism, even as the PWP and Muzaffar had no luck in the countryside during the 1920s. The communist success in the countryside would come in later decades, validating the insistence that the peasantry be a co-equal social actor with the working class.

In the manner of a few years, Muzaffar produced the ideological basis for what would be the main lines of Indian communism. Contact with the literature of Marxism and with the newly emergent Comintern was minimal. Muzaffar seems to have read his Marxism as much from the few primers that came to him via a clandestine network that relied upon sympathetic postal workers as from the anti-communist books produced in cahoots between the colonial state and such reputed publishers as Oxford University Press (namely, Edmund Candler's *Bolshevism: the Dream and the Fact*, Oxford, 1920).

### **‘Unknown path’**

It was out of his experiences at places such as the Calcutta Docks and in books such as Lenin's *Leftwing Communism* (1920) and S.A. Dange's *Gandhi vs. Lenin* (1921) that Muzaffar charted what Abdul Hamid called their "unknown path". Abani Chaudhuri called Muzaffar Darbeshda since "he resembled a darbesh [dervish]". But Muzaffar was not fully confident, scared that he "was yet to acquire a firm grip over Marxism-Leninism".

Nevertheless, what he came up with was unique, his writings on India not unlike those of his Peruvian counterpart, José Carlos Mariátegui (1890-1930), whose 1928 magnum opus is *Seven Interpretive Essays in Peruvian Reality*. As Suchetana Chattopadhyay puts it, not only did Muzaffar produce "the first systematic attempt to adapt Marxist-Leninist ideas to the Bengal context", but he

was first “among the communists in the colonial world...to write on and perceive fascism and imperialism as episodes in the enmeshed lives of class and capital”.

The work that Muzaffar and the very small party that formed around him did in Calcutta and in a few other parts of Bengal gave them the confidence to push back against any attempt to be directed by the Foreign Bureau of the Third International (Comintern). The shifts in the Comintern line in 1928 (keep distance from bourgeois nationalists) and in 1935 (form a popular front with bourgeois nationalists) did not fully mark the work in Calcutta.

Muzaffar was always wary of being subsumed by the Congress, and so the 1928 Comintern diktat had no especial bearing. The communists had already decided to build up their independent presence and to work in principled alliance with the nationalists and agrarian populists when it suited them.

Suchetana Chattopadhyay reveals the correspondence between Muzaffar (“Edward”) and M.N. Roy, where the former strongly criticised Roy for his flirtation with Hindu revivalism, notably the people around Atmashakti. Muzaffar wrote to Roy in January 1927 to point out that Shapurji Saklatvala, the British communist leader, had refused “to acknowledge the existence” of communists in India during his visit. In their March 1927 report to the Comintern, Mohammad Ali and Clemens Dutt criticised Saklatvala and others for a hierarchical attitude to the Indian communists, and validated the view that Communist Party of India leaders “do not see why they should accept instructions from any outside body”. The Comintern agreed. It gives us a sense of the fierce independence of a strand of Indian communism from the centripetal tendencies of Moscow’s institutions.

Suchetana Chattopadhyay does an exemplary job in constructing the scene of the audacity of the communists. She provides a rich description of the obvious constraints they faced, notably from the colonial state (whose agents tried to isolate and destroy the militants at the same time as they provided a documentary record of their activities). But there are other less obvious, but equally important, constraints that Suchetana Chattopadhyay discusses, which are often elided in histories of communism: the militants often broke social taboos in their personal lives and that not only alienated them from their own class but kept them apart from the working class and the peasantry.

Communists are loath to talk about themselves. I remember going to interview veteran communist members in Bengal and being confronted with textbook accounts of history: if asked “what did you do in the strike of 1972”, they would say, “In 1972, the owners of the factory refused to....” Their own lives had been subsumed into their party and their struggle; personal destiny was not so significant to them. This is precisely why the memoirs of communists are so frequently without any discussion of personal feelings, and certainly not of personal ambitions.

It is to Suchetana Chattopadhyay’s credit that we are able to understand so much about the everyday lives of the communists – how they slept, what little they ate, who they met, what they felt. This is not peripheral to the analysis. The early communists were mainly intellectuals from the lower or upper middle class (of the latter, the most interesting example is Soumendranath Tagore). Yet, they associated with the working class and formed friendships with people such as Shamsul Huda (a dock worker from East Bengal), Mastan (a match factory worker), Mohammad Haris (a tobacco worker) and Gulbahar Bibi (a rice-mill worker).

In their communitarian housing, Nazrul Islam was prone to break out into song (he wrote *Bidrohi* during the visit to India of M.N. Roy’s associate Nalini Gupta in 1921). A Special Branch officer reported in 1927 that they “were generally disliked by others, on account of their questionable society”. Their unique mode of living incubated new forms of sociality. Gandhi’s own community drew from well-regarded Hindu traditions of ashram life, but the communists seemed like down-on-

heel bohemians rather than ascetics. The cultural gulf that opened up was hard to close, in particular because the communists wished to close it to their advantage.

One of their early periodicals, *Dhumketu* (The Comet), published an essay in 1922 by Mahamaya Debi (*Narir Mukti Kon Pathe*, or Which is the Road to Women's Emancipation?). This is at a time when Gandhi developed a re-engineered patriarchy, with women to enter the national movement but not as independent actors; they would come in the role of *Sita* ("it is your image we worship in the temples," he said). The communists' new ideas of social interaction made them both beloved for their eccentricities and for their social generosity but also victims of gossip for their unusual or questionable lifestyles.

## **Writing about Communism**

Suchetana Chattopadhyay's history of the early years of Muzaffar Ahmad's career, therefore, becomes as much a history of the early years of the communist movement. It could not be otherwise. Gramsci alerts us, in his *Prison Notebooks*, that "the history of any given party can only emerge from the complex portrayal of the totality of society and state (often with international ramifications too). Hence it may be said that to write the history of a party means nothing less than to write the general history of a country from a monographic viewpoint, in order to highlight a particular aspect of it."

The author's task is not to write the history of the emergence of the Communist Party, but that is precisely what she has done, and she has located it in all of Gramsci's methodological particulars, attending to the dynamic between the people and the political economy, aware of the political formations that stood just outside the optic of the early communists, immersed in the complex battle between Muzaffar's circle, the granite block that opposed anti-colonialism and the nationalists. What we have here is adherence to the Marxist protocol of plotting the dialectical relationship between events and political economy, but written with an enviable elegance.

Indian history-writing has typically ignored the activities of the communists. The rise of Hindutva since the 1980s created a flurry of research activity to understand the social roots of Hindu revivalism and then of the way the formations of the Hindu Right prepared the terrain for their electoral explosion in the 1980s. It has been assumed in the first two decades after 1947 that the Hindu Right had been caged, and so history-writing tended to minimise its importance. Much has changed since then, and there is now an overwhelming corpus of work on the Hindu Right and its intellectual life (we have all read M.S. Golwalkar, whereas he would not have been read in his own day, largely because his writing is tedious and his logic is miserable).

There is, however, silence on the role of the communists in Indian history. Apart from too few memoirs of communist leaders and a few collections of their writings, as well as the collections of communist public documents, little is written about the parties and their impact. There are, of course, Cold War variety books, and a few books that do their very best to explore the work of the communists but cannot help but be repelled by their own prior prejudices.

The impact of the Subaltern Studies Group, one would have thought, might have revived the interest in the Indian Left, but it had the opposite effect: all the fragments of the Indian polity make their appearance, but the analytical fragment of "class" is almost seen as alien to the project as does the institutional formation of the Left. Muzaffar tackled this view in 1926, in an essay called *Sreni Sangram* (Class Struggle), where he pointed out that class is not a foreign idea, since "class struggle exists in society because classes exist".

Trade union activity and communist organising is barely referred to in this scholarship – a gap that

is all the more stunning if one knows the immense contribution made by ordinary trade unionists and communists in the lives of the vast majority of the population (into the shadow of history will go people such as Vidya Munshi and M. Singaravelan, B. Srinivasa Rao and Feroz-ud-din Mansur, as well as the remarkable Dada Amir Haidar Khan).

Muzaffar's party-building activities were disrupted in 1929 by state repression (he and 30 others were arrested and taken to Meerut for a trial that ran until 1933). Suchetana Chattopadhyay gives us a full sense of the massive intervention by the state into the lives of the radicals - with their mail searched, their friends harassed, informers on their tail, and jail as a constant theme.

The Meerut arrests effectively picked up most of the leadership and many of the main organisers. But this did little to stop the commitment of people like Muzaffar and Abdul Halim, one within jail and the other outside. Their relentlessness prepared the terrain for the transference of the allegiance of the peasantry from the agrarian populists and of the working class from the Congress-led unions to the Communist Party and its mass affiliates. That was to come in the period that sits outside this book.

Suchetana Chattopadhyay has the historical imagination capable of tackling the crucial period that follows, when the activities of the communists become more central to the life of Bengal, and of course India. I am waiting for that volume.

VIJAY PRASHAD

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\* From Frontline, Volume 28 - Issue 18 :: Aug. 27-Sep. 09, 2011:  
<http://www.frontline.in/stories/20110909281807500.htm>