

Origins of Communist Party of India, in Tashkent

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Interview with the historian and author Suchetana Chattopadhyay.

2020 marks the centenary of the Left movement in India. An émigré communist party emerged in the course of October 1920 in Soviet Tashkent under M.N. Roy's guidance. The historian and author Suchetana Chattopadhyay in her latest ongoing research has been exploring the circumstances that led to the emergence of this organisation, focussing on untapped archival sources, overlooked sections from political memoirs and newspapers and also drawing on existing materials brought out by researchers and historians from India, Pakistan and other places. In an interview with *Frontline* she has shared some aspects of her research.

An émigré Communist Party emerged in October 1920 in Taskent. "It was the combined impact of the wartime and post-war experiences of political transition as exiles, the Peshawar and Bolshevik conspiracy cases along with militant labour movements of the early 1920s in India which produced activists who were identifiably Left in their political and social orientation. These currents converged to create an all-India communist party network in 1925," she says. Excerpts.

In your current research, you are exploring the beginnings of the communist movement in India from the time of the Muhajirs—the Muslim exiles from India in Soviet Tashkent. Could you please elaborate on your work?

My previous research on the early history of the communist movement in the Indian subcontinent focussed on the life and times of Muzaffar Ahmad, M.N. Roy when he was a young nationalist revolutionary named Narendranath Bhattacharya, and the organisation of imperial surveillance to check the spread of communism in colonial India. I tried to situate them within the wider canvas of revolutionary changes taking place across the early 20th century colonial and semi-colonial world and the international impact of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

The threads of my current research have emerged from these works. The focus is on the Muhajirs, Muslim religious exiles from India who crossed over in batches between 1915 and 1920 to Kabul in order to resist and escape wartime and post-world war British rule in India. Some of them would make their way to Soviet Central Asia and build a small communist party organisation in exile during 1920-21. They were originally pan-Islamists but moved away from this position.

I am looking at untapped archival sources, neglected sections from political memoirs and newspapers, and drawing on pre-existing research by scholars, historians and activists from India, Pakistan and elsewhere to write this history. The emphasis is on building micro arguments on their social situations and evolving political positions against a backdrop of war, revolution and civil war in Central Asia during the 1910s.

How did the shift from their pan-Islamist, anti-imperialist stance to communism take place?

In the era of the Balkan Wars and the beginning of the First World War, pan-Islamism, as a political ideology upholding the unity of Sunni Islam and the authority of its Caliph, the Ottoman Emperor, gained popularity as one of the chief vehicles of anti-colonialism in India. The sovereign authority of the British Crown could be viewed from this perspective as a temporal constraint. A student group emerged in the Government College at Lahore, the capital city of pre-Partition Punjab. Some of these student “runaways” escaped to Kabul. The exposure to the paradoxical modernity of colonial rule, which promised prosperity through education while denying the same in practice and draining the material resources of their surroundings on behalf of colonial capital, as well as concrete experience of repression and racism, propelled these students towards pan-Islam. Not seeking a medieval Caliphate, they wished to live in Muslim societies undergoing modernisation.

Afghanistan, far from being a bold utopia of Islamic resurgence, was to disappoint them. In Kabul, the fugitives became close followers of Obeidullah Sindhi, a respected pan Islamist preacher exiled from India. They formed a “Provisional Government of India” from their location as exiles in Kabul. Sindhi and the Muhajirs envisioned a secular constitutional government presiding over a multi-religious population rather than a military-theocratic dictatorship for India once political freedom was attained. With this aim, they studied the British parliamentary model with interest alongside the Quran.

In October 1915, the Indian-Turkish-German Mission also arrived and failed to convince Amir Habibullah [ruler of Afghanistan from 1901 to 1919] to join the anti-British alliance. Squeezed between Czarist Central Asia and British India, the Afghan government was keen to placate Britain and imposed draconian restrictions on Maulana Sindhi and the Muhajir students.

The post-war situation improved slightly when an anti-British Amir ascended the throne. By this time, the political and social aspirations of the exiles stood shattered. They could not take the risk of returning to India; so, they turned further west towards Russian Central Asia and Turkey. A huge exodus began from India, and their numbers in Afghanistan swelled unexpectedly. The Hijrat of 1920, a religious exodus of Indian Muslims, became a movement. Almost 40,000 refugees crossed into Afghanistan. The Muhajirs keen to join the anti-British war led by Mustafa Kemal in Turkey were allowed to leave.

According to M.N. Roy, around “200 Khilafat pilgrims” arrived in rags in Russian Turkestan. Some Muhajir students, much like the ones who had escaped to Kabul from Lahore in 1915, recalled being warmly welcomed by an assorted crowd of Turkmen, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Russians at Tirmiz. A band played the “Internationale” and the “Red Flag” in their honour. After the cautious and restricted hospitality in Afghanistan, they were bewildered. The civil war, having virtually ended in European Russia, was raging in Central Asia with British support. Tirmiz, cut off from the region and governed by an elected revolutionary committee comprising workers, peasants, students, soldiers, was like a Bolshevik island.

The majority of the Muhajirs wished to move on to Turkey; they fell into the hands of the rebels, were treated as infidels, and faced incarceration, semi starvation and possible execution. Rescued by the Red Army, 36 immediately joined Bolshevik military detachments comprising Russians and red Turkmen to fight the counter-revolutionary forces. They were impressed by the example of young Bokharans who had formed a communist party in Tashkent and were active in the new revolutionary government. Confiscation and redistribution of land among the peasants, a revolutionary programme, enjoyed popular support and the general mood of the place influenced them.

Meanwhile, M.N. Roy, the nationalist turned-communist from India who had reached Russia via Mexico, was entrusted by the Bolshevik authorities to look after them. Roy was not at all optimistic that pan-Islamists would take easily to Bolshevism. He nursed a cautious hope that some would join

the civil war on the Bolshevik side against the British-backed counter-revolutionaries and respond to the offer of military training to liberate India. He requisitioned clothes, housing and food for them in Tashkent.

Roy had already mobilised Indian Muslim deserters from the British colonial army, enlisting them into the Red Army's international detachments. Deployed against the British forces in Central Asia's borders, some were raised to officer rank, a status denied to subalterns in the colonial army. Roy later recalled: "The news of their experience could not be kept away from their comrades still in colonial army, and it had a disintegrating effect. The number of deserters increased daily."

Roy made no effort to form a communist party from the ranks of the enthusiastic deserters, mostly peasants in uniform. His previous nationalist training of organising educated and alienated middle-class Hindu upper caste youth in Bengal probably influenced him to seek communist recruits from the Muhajir students. He had already met and persuaded Khushi Mohammad and Mohammad Shafiq to become communists through dialogue and conversations and turned to other young Muhajir students from India, about 50 in number, enrolled in the Indian Military School in Tashkent. Despite their suspicion of communism, some managed to overcome their initial prejudice against an atheist creed. This led to a split among the Muhajirs.

In the end, the section that had turned left wished to form a communist party despite Roy's cautious insistence that there was no hurry. Their pressure led to the formation of an émigré communist party in Tashkent in late October 1920. Mohammad Shafiq, described by Roy as an "intelligent and fairly educated young man" became the secretary. They held regular lectures at the lodging to attract more members, avoided attacking religion, did not utter the word "communism" but promoted a vision of mass revolution from below to liberate India. This was different from the positions advocated by nationalist militants or pan-Islamist preachers.

The Second Congress of the Communist International placed communist parties at the centre of future revolutions across the world. Roy played a key role. He persuaded Lenin and the Comintern to accept his "Supplementary Thesis on the Colonial Question". Roy argued that the struggle for national liberation from imperialism could not be left in the hands of nationalists, prone to make compromises and reinforce class inequality; communist parties had to be formed with the aim of organising workers and peasants so that national liberation became an anti-imperialist and revolutionary class war in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. This was followed by the Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East in September 1920, emphasising the role of mass uprisings to dismantle the formal and informal empires of capital.

It was this environment of internationalist revolutionary surge, from European Russia to Central Asia, with a novel perspective that combined a vision of class struggle with anti-imperialist political and social liberation that contributed to the making of a party-in-exile. The party remained minute in terms of size, though its membership increased. After the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Trade Agreement in March 1921, effectively ending the civil war, the Muhajirs interested in further training, around 36 to 40 in number, joined the University of the Toilers of the East at Moscow from mid 1921.

Roy claims in his recollections, with a degree of sadness, that he arranged for the rest of the Muhajirs, around 100 or so, to be given money so that they could either settle in Central Asia or head for Turkey or return to Afghanistan or India. The Muhajirs who had turned to communism were keen to return to India and organise a left mass base comprising workers and peasants, women and youth, intellectuals and professionals.

How did the Muhajirs initially take to the idea of labour struggle, given that concepts of

trade unionism and industrial capitalism must have been very alien to them?

This is probably best explained through an example. According to Roy, one of the students who had taken part in the Hijrat of 1920, Shaukat Usmani, “intelligent and the most fanatical”, became a communist; his lectures began to have an influence on the others. Usmani, unaware of Roy’s cynical assessments, later wrote that Roy was like a “father figure” to them. Encouraged to read Marx and having a poor idea of industrial capitalism—since he came from a region with little modern industry—he found words such as “bourgeoisie” and “proletariat” to constitute a funny yet intriguing interpretive vocabulary. When asked to read about trade unionism, he impatiently declared that he was not interested in trade and industry, which made Roy and his “American wife” and comrade, Evelyn, burst into laughter. However, he rapidly took to the socialist and internationalist vocabulary of the Comintern and read extensively on the conditions of workers and peasants in colonial and semi-colonial countries.

With the shift to communism, did they altogether abandon their original anti-imperialist stand? Or did they in any way redefine it?

Their anti-imperialist orientation did not change. Their ideology and world view changed. The novelty, social weight and political force of certain ideas over others made some of the Muhajir students turn to communism in an atmosphere of chaos, civil war and revolution. The social content of their anti-imperialism as members of a colonised intelligentsia was transformed under the combined impact of circumstances and new thinking. The Bolshevik support to post-war movements against colonialism and semi-colonialism in Asia and friendly relations with Turkey and Afghanistan, since all were confronting British invasion, made many Muhajir students turn left.

The process involved rejecting the visions of state and society offered by Indian pan-Islamist and nationalist leaders. Instead of adopting the proffered model of a constitutional government which conserved proprietor authority and kept the rule of private property intact, some were turning to a new model of governance based on self-rule of the poor. Coming from the milieu of a derooted intelligentsia and impoverished agrarian classes, they were familiar with penury and destitution. The second route evoked an empathy for self-governance from below and persuaded them to join the Bolsheviks.

Please explain how the communist movement originating in Tashkent come to influence India nearly 2,500 km away.

The Muhajirs who had turned to “Bolshevism”, as I attempted to explain in a recent article, wanted to return to India and uproot colonial rule. As mentioned, the ex-Muhajir communists planned to join the ongoing anti-colonial mass upsurge in India and establish contact in labour circles. Usmani, who came back, was convicted in the Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case of 1924, alongside Muzaffar Ahmad and S.A. Dange, already active in Calcutta and Bombay, as well as Nalini Gupta, Roy’s emissary. When he left Moscow, Usmani was unaware that the ex-Muhajirs were already being arrested from June 1921 onwards by the colonial state. Secret trials and rigorous imprisonment awaited them at Peshawar, the frontier city. Their long journey was coming to an end. The imperial understanding of Muslim rebels as peripatetic, transterritorial, dangerous subversives in the employ of hostile powers was extended to them. The Muhajirs-turned-communists crossed the harsh terrain of the Pamir, mostly by foot, travelling from Soviet Central Asia to Afghanistan, and then entered India’s northwest frontier.

Among the seven convicted in the Peshawar Bolshevik Conspiracy Case of 1922-23, some remained with the communist movement, partially or wholly during the 1920s or even later. By inserting spies among the Muhajirs between 1915 and 1920, the colonial intelligence laboriously tracked their

movements. One of the secret agents, Abdur Qadir, while offering a full account of their travel to Tashkent and Moscow, perhaps unconsciously hinted at the social dimension of their political transformation: "The term by which communists, including ourselves refer to each other is 'Tawarish', which means Comrade."

For those who remained on the left, an altered perspective came to influence the way they related at a deeper level, politically and socially, to the world. Abdul Majid, convicted at Peshawar, returned to Lahore, his home city, upon release from prison. Addressing a meeting organised by a left-wing Punjabi youth group, Majid spoke of his first-hand experience as a Muhajir in Central Asia, the conditions in Afghanistan, the encounter with Turkmen counter-revolutionaries, and the futility of pan-Islamist politics. He had sought but failed to attain emancipation within an identarian structure, forever withholding an elusive promise of Islamic brotherhood and unity. From a Muhajir, he had become a "Bolshevik".

It was the combined impact of the war-time and post-war experiences of political transition as exiles, the Peshawar and Bolshevik conspiracy cases along with militant labour movements of the early 1920s in India that produced activists who were identifiably left in their political and social orientation. These currents converged to create an all-India communist party network in 1925 and the formation of Workers and Peasant Parties, most notably in Punjab, Bombay and Bengal. These were open organisations of the Communist Party of India, which was a banned organisation under colonial rule and forced to work secretly.

Finally, I wish to return to Tashkent in 1920. India House in Tashkent had become a centre for both communist and anti-British revolutionary ideas and activities. Can you tell us what it was like inside that building?

India House was a one-storey building located between the old and modern parts of Tashkent. This building became the residence of the Muhajirs from different social backgrounds and age groups, including some of the young students who turned in a left direction. The inner life of India House came to showcase the differences over the Bolshevik Revolution among the Muhajirs. Roy recalled that the Bolsheviks provided the Indian Muhajirs with all the basic comforts at a time when they themselves were undergoing extreme hardship. A house committee was formed so that the emigrants could manage their own affairs. It was this atmosphere of self-management and debate that generated an interest in left politics and its social content among Usmani and some of the others.

Usmani recalled that there were differences between the pan-Islamists and Roy's group in India House over communism and religion. For a while, he steered clear of both groups but ultimately joined the communists.

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