

"To the Masses." Communism and Religion in North India, 1920–47

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Abstract

Among the eldest of its kind in Asia, the Communist Party of India (CPI) pioneered the spread of Marxist politics beyond the European arena. Influenced by both Soviet revolutionary practice and radical nationalism in British India, it operated under conditions not provided for in Marxist theory—foremost the prominence of religion and community in social and political life. The thesis analyzes, first, the theoretical and organizational ‘overhead’ of the CPI in terms of the position of religion in a party communist hierarchy of emancipation. It will therefore question the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the one hand, and Comintern doctrines on the other. Secondly, it scrutinizes the approaches and strategies of the CPI and individual members, often biographically biased, to come to grips with the subcontinental environment under the primacy of mass politics. Thirdly, I discuss communist vistas on revolution on concrete instances including (but not limited to) the Gandhian non-cooperation movement, the Moplah rebellion, the subcontinental proletariat, the problem of communalism, and assertion of minority identities. I argue that the CPI established a pattern of vacillation between qualified rejection and conditional appropriation of religion that loosely constituted two diverging revolutionary paradigms characterizing communist practice from the Soviet outset: Western and Eastern. The specific tradition condensed in the latter eventually would render it plausible to the party to support the Muslim League’s Pakistan demand in the 1940s.

Keywords: Communism, South Asia, Communist Party, Marxism, Religion, British India

Zusammenfassung

Als eine der ersten ihrer Art außerhalb Europas war die Kommunistische Partei Indiens (CPI) bei der Ausbreitung des Marxismus jenseits des europäischen Rahmens vorne mit dabei. Zu ihren prägenden Einflüssen zählten die sowjetische Praxis der Revolutionsjahre und zeitgenössische radikale Spielarten des Nationalismus in Britisch-Indien. Von Beginn an musste sie sich unter Bedingungen behaupten, denen in der Theorie wenig Beachtung zugekommen war – zuvorderst der ungebrochenen Bedeutung von Religion und Gemeinschaft für das politische und soziale Leben des Subkontinents. Die Arbeit untersucht zunächst anhand der Werke von Marx, Engels und Lenin sowie der Komintern den theoretischen und organisatorischen ‚Überbau‘ der CPI auf den Stellenwert von Religion in einem parteikommunistischen Emanzipationsgefüge. In der Folge widmet sie sich den oft biografisch eingefärbten Ansätzen und Strategien der Partei und ihrer Mitglieder, unter dem Primat der ‚Politik für die Masse‘ mit den Verhältnissen auf dem Subkontinent umzugehen. Sie beleuchtet kommunistische Perspektiven auf Revolution anhand konkreter Fälle wie dem passiven Widerstand Gandhis, dem Moplah-Aufstand, der Arbeiterschaft, religiösem Kommunalismus und dem erstarkenden Gemeinschaftsgefühl religiöser Gruppen. Es zeigt sich, dass die Partei beständig zwischen qualifizierter Ablehnung und bedingter Unterstützung religiöser Kultur schwankte, die schematisch zwei divergierende und seit der russischen Revolution erkennbare revolutionäre Paradigmen bilden: ein westliches und ein östliches. Der in Letzterem kondensierte Strang politischer Tradition ermöglichte es schließlich, dass der Partei die Unterstützung für die Pakistanforderung der Muslim League in den 1940er Jahren plausibel erschien.

Schlagworte: Kommunismus, Südasien, Kommunistische Partei, Marxismus, Religion, Britisch-Indien

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Abbreviations

AITUC	All-India Trade Union Congress
Comintern	Communist (or Third) International
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPI[(M)]	Communist Party of India [(Marxist)]
CPR (B)	Communist Party of Russia (Bolshevik)
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSP	Congress Socialist Party
GKU	Girni Kamgar (Red Flag) Union, Bombay
ICP	Indian Communist Party
INC (or Congress)	Indian National Congress
IPTA	Indian People's Theater Association
KKP	Kirti-Kisan Party
KUTV	Kommunistitscheskii Universitet Trudiaschchikhsia Vostoka (Communist University of the Toilers of the East)
ML (or League)	Muslim League
NWFP	North-West Frontier Province
PWA	Progressive Writers' Association
SAD	Shiromani Akali Dal.
SCF	Scheduled Caste Federation
SGPC	Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee
UP	United Provinces
WPP	Workers' and Peasants' Party

Preface

This book is the result of an inspiration from a visit to the Republic of India. In January 2004, a large multi-party rally demanding reforms in the health sector was held in Hyderabad. The Communist Party of India (CPI) contributed a significant number of demonstrators adorned with party insignia—mostly hammer-and-sickle flags. Among them was a bloc of black-clad, largely veiled Muslim women waving these very flags. What occurred to me at the time as just another uncommon sight among the many uncommon sights India offers to outsiders came back to me again a few years later and prodded me forward to explore the matter.

After all, what had been undermined was a pillar of my own left-wing socialization: the principled opposition of communism—as a committed effort (at least in theory) at emancipation of mankind from its self-wrought social and ideological chains—to religion and spirituality. Doesn't Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* commence with the apodeixis that criticism of religion was the prerequisite of all criticism? And hadn't Lenin, the practically minded but ruthless disciple of Marx, once declared that there could be “nothing more abominable than religion”?¹ How, then, could it happen that the official Communist Party of India, generally viewed as a more “ossified” specimen of its kind, could so blatantly betray its own agenda by cooperating with pious religionists?²

My ensuing studies, where I endeavored to trace the root of the matter to the early years of the CPI, revealed more than I had expected: A superficially orthodox party forced into uncommon and often creative approaches to the complex of religion by the latter's sheer social weight, which it struggles to shrug off to the present day. This thesis explores the preconditions and trajectories of these approaches.

The present study could only materialize with the contribution of the following individuals and organizations, whom I would like to express my gratitude to in no particular order.

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¹ *Letter from Lenin to Maxim Gorky*, quoted in J. M. Bochenski, “Marxism-Leninism and Religion,” in *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe*, ed. B. R. Bociurkiw *et al.* (London: Macmillan 1975), 11.

² Robert Hardgrave and Stanley Kochanek, *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation*, 7th ed. (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth 2008), 352 (quote).

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Introduction

Faith is the power of believing things
that we know to be untrue.
—Samuel Butler

A number of indicators support the assumption that communism and religion are fundamentally incompatible. Beyond the pointed criticism and famous polemics in Marx's oeuvre and Marxist tradition, nigh all communist countries have a record of curtailing and suppressing religious activity. More often than not, this included the believers themselves. In case of the Soviet Union, the effective dissolution of the Russian Orthodox Church after the October Revolution and the 1979 intervention in Afghanistan in support of a modernist left-wing regime seem to constitute early and late pillars of an anti-religious continuum. Occasional cooperation, such as the reinstitution of the Orthodox Church during World War II, appears as a strategically conditioned affair. Other observers diagnose a lack of dedication to Marxist³ doctrines, or a gradual erosion of the communist project under imperatives of political pragmatism. In general, however, 'proper' communist views on religion are located in a spectrum ranging from indifferent secularism to aggressive atheism.

By and large, this holds also true for the Communist Party of India (CPI). Even as vote-bank politics and electoral alliances have exacted their realist toll, communists have maintained their staunch reputation as the least communalized political formation on the subcontinent.⁴ Yet, highlighting only the areligious side of the medal does injustice to another, less prominent aspect of the interrelation of communism and religion. It is marked by unproblematic cohabitation, close approximation, and at times even partial conflation. This is not to suggest that a lasting marriage of both had taken place. However, especially in an Asian context religious politics and movements often were (and are) not anathema to communists—not only out of political considerations, but also due to the very structure and thrust of their critical argument. The present study aims to explore the subcontinental communist movement's religious track record in colonial times. By discussing the

³ "Marxism" here refers to the mainstream analytical tradition established after Marx and Engels authored their seminal works. More precisely, it means Soviet Marxism—the strand that attained most influence, prominence, and prestige in the period under review.

⁴ "Communist" and "communist party" here denote only 'official' communism as represented by the national branches affiliated to the Comintern. Furthermore, "subcontinent" and "subcontinental" are used in lieu of "India" and "Indian." Cf. Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, "The Rise and Decline of Communism in South Asia: A Review Essay," *Twentieth Century Communism* 3 (2011): 175.

circumstances of its evolution, it endeavors to contribute to communism's cultural profile from a conceptual and intellectual angle.⁵

From the perspective of paradigms and debates of the present, research gaps often appear as keys to the universal understanding of past phenomena. Concretely, in the light of the contemporary popularity of matters of culture and identity, the lack of a dedicated exploration of the communist religious profile is felt all the more strongly. Yet, the present effort considers itself a contribution to rather than a complete representation of the CPI's colonial period. It aims to add a novel layer to the long-standing congruence between researchers and the respective communist parties: Both have mostly focused on the national and social dimension of the communist project and committed only minor efforts to problematize the intellectual—as against the political—dimension of the religious and communal issue.⁶

Apart from a recent and much-needed measure of diversification, most existing studies fall into one of two categories. The first consists of functionalist and pragmatist political history, which tends to de-ideologize party communism and concentrates on its supposed 'core' business: winning power. The second encompasses Marxist studies analyzing the movement's development under the criterion of 'correct' implementation of Marxism. Both currents concur in that they deny the status as a relevant factor in subcontinental communism to the complex of religion; the first because of its emphasis on pragmatism, the second out of the subordinate position allotted to religion in Marxist theory. Both share the implicit conviction that an intellectual history of religion in a communist context would be as insubstantial as religion itself from a Marxist point of view. The heritage can still be felt. The major body of research, including seminal works on the CPI, has been written from these perspectives. Probably the most authoritative, Gene Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller conceded half a century ago that the tendency to live in an ideal world full of ideological formulae was pronounced among communists. At the same time, however, they

⁵ Steps in this direction have recently been taken; see, for example, the excellent study on M. N. Roy's intellectual history: Kris Manjappa, *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (London: Routledge 2010). With regard to 'Marxist epistemology,' the problems arising from postulating an 'abstract' or 'fundamental' epistemology independent of concrete phenomena in Marx' writings have been convincingly emphasized in Alfred Schmidt, "Einleitung," in *Beiträge zur Marxistischen Erkenntnistheorie*, ed. Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1969), 7. Yet, this does not preclude that a sub-complex adaptation of Marx's epistemological premises—such as on the part of Soviet Marxism, and hence also the CPI—exhibits certain generalizable features.

⁶ The lone exception is Jha Gulab's study *Caste and the Communist Movement* (Delhi: Commonwealth Publ. 1990), which however takes a sociological rather than historical perspective and restricts its scope to a district in northern Bihar.

claimed that it was perfectly feasible to plausibly assess the CPI by altogether disregarding Marxism and focusing on political pragmatism.⁷

Although their merits are numerous, pragmatist and functionalist approaches (and their postmodern revenant, discursive linguistics) tend to exhibit a lack of analytical versatility. It appears in their inability to grasp the qualitative dimension of history once the pragmatic argument fails. Accordingly, Overstreet and Windmiller were not alone in offering only “highly speculative” and equally unsatisfying explanations for the CPI’s politically disastrous pro-Pakistan episode in the 1940s.⁸ The exclusive focus on tactical and strategic considerations of the respective context neglects crucial features that get into sight only if the perspective takes into account political traditions and doctrinal tendencies.

Furthermore, even though the pragmatist school argues against the assertiveness of political Marxism’s doctrinal content, it shares the latter’s epistemological monism by focusing on an ‘essence,’ a sole principle directing the course of events. The difference is only that Marxism posits class struggle as the subcutaneous driving force of history, whereas in pragmatism—resembling a kind of negative anthropology—it is considerations of viability, and ultimately power, that occupy center stage. And lastly, a communist party tends to undermine functionalist premises, as Debnarayan Modak points out. Simply put, it is not just another party: “It is very natural for a liberal political party to switch over from one position to another due to the pragmatic reasons of politics. But [...] a Communist party, which takes shape with the pledge of emancipation [...] has to justify all its policy and the shifts therein ideologically.”⁹

Also, both Marxist and pragmatist studies usually neglect to account for the fact that religion was not a matter of secondary importance in British India. Quite the contrary: Fueled by a mixture of divide-and-rule politics and orientalism ‘from above’ and reciprocating reform movements in the major communities ‘from below,’ modernized religion evolved into a formative instance through which all kinds of political, social, and economic aspirations came to be articulated. By the turn of the 20th century, the religious community had thus grown into a social and political determinant in its own right.

⁷ Gene Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1960), 5, 352. See also J. S. Brar, *The Communist Party in Punjab: The Politics of Survival* (Delhi: South Asia Books 1990), 173; Paul Brass, “Political Parties of the Radical Left in South Asian Politics,” in *Radical Politics in South Asia*, ed. Paul Brass and Marcus Franda (Cambridge [MA]: MIT Press 1973); Brass, *Caste, Faction and Party in Indian Politics*, vol. 1, *Faction and Party* (Delhi: Chanakya Publ. 1983), 2–3.

⁸ Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 216.

⁹ Debnarayan Modak, *Dynamics of the National Question in India: The Communist Approach (1942–1964)* (Kolkata: Progress Publishers 2006), 36.

Communism understood itself as a radically alternative draft by centering on class as the main factor of social processes and political action alike. Still, it was impossible to simply bypass the prominent role of religion as a category central to social formation. Therefore, the religious complex necessarily asserted itself explicitly and implicitly in communist activity on the subcontinent. It molded the CPI's social and ideological profile and informed its *meaning*—in doubt, behind the party's back and against its will.

If a measure of intellectual (or indeed ideological) history is admitted into the consideration, the party's religio-cultural profile becomes meaningful behind its apparently rigid doctrinal façade. In this view, communist theory and practice attest to the versatility of not the *categories* of Marxism, but their *content*.¹⁰ For example, the difference in composition and outlook of the subcontinental proletariat to its Western European counterpart manifested not in a different set of regulatory terms, but under the universalizing cover of classical Marxist vocabulary on the one hand. On the other, 'culturephiliac' political and intellectual strands in the party materialized in the 'nationality period' of the 1940s. It testifies that community and religion could even be accommodated explicitly within a Marxist framework—in this case, by drawing on Lenin's nationality theory. Identifying the resulting *illocutionary divergence* within these Marxist categories creates the space for an understanding and assessment of the quality of subcontinental communism. Therefore, this study asks not *whether*, but *how* a Marxist frame of reference worked under subcontinental conditions; how a revolutionary subject was etched despite, or even because of, the prevalence of religious and communal outlooks, what implications the latter caused, how they were addressed, and in what way the "silent compulsion" (Marx) of empirical conditions affected the communist vision of emancipation—that is, its *meaning*—itself.¹¹

This approach implies that the debates surrounding the 'history of ideas' acquire a degree of relevance. The assault of both social and new cultural history has discredited the focus on elite thought associated with the traditional history of ideas. Most pointedly, Robert Darnton contrasts the elitist concentration on selected philosophical texts with a supposedly more down-to-earth "grubbing in archives" for insights into the actual social incidence of ideas. A

¹⁰ E. M. S. Namboodiripad's claim that Marxist-Leninist theory had been "enriched" by the experiences of its practical application needs to be understood in this way: Namboodiripad, "The Communists' Contribution to the Theory and Practice of Indian Politics," in *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, ed. Jyoti Basu *et al.*, vol. 1, 1917–1928 (Calcutta: National Book Agency 1997), 4 (hereafter *Documents*). Conversely, Bhabani Sen Gupta claims that the CPI had not added to the creative spectrum of applied Marxism: Bhabani Sen Gupta, *Communism in Indian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press 1972), 39.

¹¹ See also Manjapra, *M. N. Roy: Marxism*.

second major gripe concerns the question of context. In his polemic against Arthur Lovejoy, Quentin Skinner forcefully argues for a rigorously contingent understanding of ‘ideas.’ According to him, their explanatory power exhausts itself in contextual use, which denies the possibility of meaning accruing to them beyond concrete time and place.¹²

And yet, these expedient reminders have not been able to delegitimize core concerns of the history of ideas. As Darrin McMahon points out, Darnton’s own results tend to blur the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ texts. Lovejoy himself opposed the formalist immanence of New Criticism and from an early stage insisted that a proper understanding of a text requires “going beyond the work itself,” that is, into its context.¹³ And the rigid grounding of ideas in and their exclusivist limitation to the concrete context of their appearance tends to substitute ahistorical parochialism for mythological universalism.¹⁴

The implications of these debates for the current undertaking are obvious. The interventions of Darnton and others underscore the need for a complementary reading of philosophical-programmatic writings and the practices, including textual ones, ‘from below.’ Not only those of the CPI proper, but of as many of its individual members as possible will have to be considered. Much in the same vein, the immediate context certainly went a long way to determine the CPI’s handling of religion and religiousness. At the same time, the latter’s roots and consequences point beyond it. Peter Gordon rightly cautions against fetishizing “contextualism as a global and exhaustive theory of meaning.”¹⁵ Even if an idea’s practice is limited to a certain context, the image of this practice radiates beyond it and entwines itself with its theoretical concept. For an understanding of the meaning of even localized communism it is pertinent to raise the perspective beyond concrete local, regional, or even national confines. This means weighing in seminal theoretical and practical input from the leading revolutionary authorities—(Bolshevik) Marxism and Soviet revolutionary practice.

The present study undertakes to formulate an intellectual history of the political: Of the relevance of religion for, and its impact on, subcontinental communist theory and practice.

¹² Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedia 1775–1800* (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press 1979), 1 (quote); Quentin Skinner, “Meaning und Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002).

¹³ Arthur Lovejoy, “Reflections on the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1, no. 1 (1940): 13 (quote); Darrin McMahon, “The Return of the History of Ideas?,” in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, eds. Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyon (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 20

¹⁴ See the essay by Peter Gordon, “Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas,” in McMahon and Moyon, *Rethinking Modern European*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

Certainly, this is not an operation in a vacuum. In order to understand communist approaches to religion, it is necessary to understand the constellations that made these approaches plausible. Such constellations are probed in a number of cases, including communist self-localizations vis-à-vis spiritualized nationalist and anti-imperialist politics of the early 1920s; the Moplah rebellion on the Malabar coast and the Akali movement in the Punjab; the problem of communalism; the working class; the ascent of community politics in the 1930s; and the CPI's appropriation of religion and culture during the 'nationality period' of the 1940s.

Any history that sets out as an intellectual history is obliged to provide a plausible background for the evolution of the respective 'ideas.' This has often led to extended searches for 'influences' that emphasize the erudition of the researcher rather than situate the object of research. Given that the present narrative centers on a party, I limit the scope of relevant creative input for communist policy formulation and practice to political traditions, social constellations, and events 'on the ground'—all of them formative instances for South Asian communist individuals—on the one hand. On the other, there is Marxism, that is, an eclectic mixture of Marx and Engels's theoretical heritage, early Soviet post-revolutionary practice, and guidelines of the Third or Communist International (Comintern). Notably the Soviet role model is important. Leading party theoretician Elamkulam Manna Sankaran (E. M. S.) Namboodiripad's appraisal that the "guiding star" in the early days of the CPI had been "the practical experience of what was happening in the Soviet Union" attested to the immediate eminence of its revolutionary example.¹⁶

Emphasizing relations of dominance rather than inspiration, recent studies reiterate the early party's dependence on the Soviet Union in general and the Comintern in particular. By now, it is again a commonly cited reason for the "failure" of the CPI. Echoing studies from the cold war era, Thomas Nossiter emphatically denied the existence of an independent communist movement before the 1950s.¹⁷ Dushka Saiyid traces the CPI's inability to respond adequately to conditions on the subcontinent to the "highly centralized and erroneous policy of the Comintern."¹⁸ Robert Hardgrave and Stanley Kochanek agree that

¹⁶ E. M. S. Namboodiripad (interviewee), recorded by Raman Pillai and Hari Dev Sharma (interviewers), 25 October 1978, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi, Oral History Project (hereafter: NMML-OHP), AccNo 794, 64–5. On the activist temper of South Asian communists, see also Colin Mackerras and Nick Knight, *Marxism in Asia* (Delhi: Select Book Service Syndicate 1986), 273–8.

¹⁷ Thomas Nossiter, *Marxist State Governments in India: Politics, Economics and Society* (London: Pinter 1988), 163–8; see also Sen Gupta, *Communism in Indian Politics*, 13.

¹⁸ Dushka Saiyid, *Exporting Communism to India: Why Moscow Failed* (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research 1995), v.

the young party “was largely under Comintern control and followed Moscow directives.”¹⁹ Sobhanlal Datta Gupta reiterates that subcontinental communism’s early history made sense only in the context of the revolutionary parent organization, and identifies a number of occasions when the CPI’s destiny had been “decisively shaped” by intervention from either the Comintern or the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).²⁰

However, injunctions from above cannot form exhaustive explanations for concrete politics, let alone for the evolution of peculiar political traditions. This is especially true for a comparably neglected affair such as religion. As it mostly went below the communist radar, efforts to address it could respond to conditions and developments on the ground—and to ambiguities in Marxist theory—with a greater degree of autonomy. It is a heartfelt concern of the present study to argue against the commonplace contention of communist ‘alienness’ occasioned by the ostensible otherworldliness of Marxist concepts. Quite the contrary. For example, party founder Manabendra Nath (M. N.) Roy (1878–1954) found it perfectly feasible to integrate the fanatical Muslim khilafat émigrés into the fledgling CPI. Similarly, he could claim the early 1920s Akali movement in the Punjab for the revolutionary cause while explicitly affirming its identitary religious character. Both examples contributed to the evolution of traditions that could be, and were, reactivated later, reaching a situated pinnacle in the ‘nationality period.’

Moreover, core tenets of policy formulation remained substantially unchanged by the to and fro in the Comintern’s general line. The most important among these was a positive stance towards the ‘masses.’ Communists entertained a self-image of being the vanguard of rising ‘mass consciousness’—a concept that remained remarkably vague throughout. They invariably viewed it as expressing currents running counter to the social order, ultimately aiming to transcend it. This perception did not result from an overly positive appreciation of the ‘masses’ per se—communists by and large were well aware of the pervading religious outlook on the subcontinent. Rather, they identified mass aspirations as expressions of paramount forces of history. The CPI, then, was to be their midwife, or the method applying itself to its object: the inevitably—if unconsciously—revolutionary ‘masses.’²¹

¹⁹ Hardgrave and Kochanek, *India: Government and Politics*, 346.

²⁰ Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India: 1919–1943; Dialectics of Real and a Possible History* (Kolkata: Seribaan 2006), 2, 297–9. However, the controversy is not settled yet; Suchetana Chattopadhyay argues that one of South Asian communism’s central features is its ability to “criticize and go beyond Comintern directives”: Suchetana Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta 1913–1929* (Delhi: Tulika Books 2011), 232.

²¹ See Muzaffar Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party of India 1920–1929* (Calcutta: National Book Agency 1970), 417.

In comparison, the frequent and violent vacillations in Comintern policy concerned mainly the approach to political formations and social actors such as political organizations and trade unions. The various shifts directly impacted the *range* of non-communist agents considered suitable allies for the—minimalist or maximalist—agenda of the day. While these policies greatly influenced the leeway for communist activity, they only indirectly concerned the courting of the revolutionary subject, the ‘masses.’ An episode such as the emphatic turn towards popular folk culture could indeed have only manifested under the peculiar circumstances and imperatives of “people’s war” in the 1940s. Even so, approximation to indigenous culture had been mooted a decade earlier, when party members such as K. B. Krishna had meditated on the merits of indigenous (religious) culture, and party pamphlets had called for measures only against foreign religious bodies.

It follows that the fault lines of grand policy centering on social and national revolution certainly influenced those of the communist cultural and religious profile, but were far from exhaustively determining them. A tentative periodization could look thus: Following a period of accommodation of grass-roots movements lasting until the early/mid-1920s, skepticism towards straightforward mass politics and its religious ideologemes governed the remainder of the decade. The CPI’s political eclipse from 1929 to the mid-1930s witnessed a cautious, theoretically grounded rapprochement to religious categories of social organization and political articulation. This approximation blossomed into a phase of full-fledged appropriation of communal separatism after the 1937 elections that reached its pinnacle in the ‘nationality period’ from 1942 to 1946. Late in that year, the increasing bitterness between Congress and League, and indeed Hindus and Muslims, convinced the party once more to approach the ‘masses’ on culturally neutral terrain.

The CPI’s reception of Marxist epistemology and the criticism of religion, including the modifications and reifications by Lenin and Stalin, constituted another formative influence. Notably Stalin’s stature as a Marxist theoretician is disputed, and for good reason. His contributions are relevant mostly in the context of the various factional wars inside the Soviet communist party. Not a single text of his has achieved a lasting reputation as a classic.²² Yet, the fact remains that he left a lasting imprint on contemporary Marxism by way of his political stature, and his eventual intra-Soviet monopoly of exegesis of Marx’s and Lenin’s works. Concretely, his implementation of Leninist nationality policy in his capacity as People’s Commissar for Nationality Questions decisively influenced both the

²² On the flexible rigidity—as opposed to orthodox dogmatism—at the core of Stalinism, see Sören Pünjer, “Dogmatisch und Unorthodox: Was ist Stalinismus? Ein Kurzer Lehrgang,” *Bahamas* 54 (2008): 34–5.

Soviet state's character and its outward effect. Stalin molded its imprint on revolutionaries all over the world as a role model and influenced their vision of revolutionary transformation. Therefore, in the context of this study he will be included among the authoritative sources—less on the merits of his genius than on account of the “normative power of the factual” (Georg Jellinek).

Stalin's contribution is particularly relevant with regard to a peculiar kind of revolution in ‘Eastern,’ nationally “suppressed” countries. In contrast to the impetus of cultural self-criticism inherent in the ‘Western’ proletarian revolution, the incorporation of ‘national’ (including cultural and religious) traditions distinguished the ‘Eastern’ variety. The character of this revolution has met with appreciation only in the handful of studies looking beyond Soviet realpolitik. Yuri Slezkine's call for attention to the early Soviet government's fervor to promote ‘national’ (including cultural and religious) particularisms has been slow to find its way into the canon of research. However, his diagnosis, inspired by the earlier work of Edward H. Carr, of a deep-rooted “chronic ethnophilia” is to the point.²³ Furthermore, endowing cultural appropriation with Bolshevik theoretical blessing questions a widespread tenet. It stipulates that the low level of theoretical schooling of subcontinental communists caused by the British censorship of Marxist texts lay at the heart of this purportedly ‘un-Marxist’ practice.²⁴

Elaborating upon and furthering this point, the present study will demonstrate that the CPI's efforts to address the challenge of religion vacillated between the culturally diverging paradigms of anti-imperialist ‘Eastern’ and socialist ‘Western’ revolution.²⁵ The communist obligation to achieve a revolution that was both socialist *and* nationalist accentuated rather

²³ Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–16. Nevertheless, clues to this insight have been available for decades—in Soviet history no less than in the published works of Lenin and Stalin, and even in statements such as this one from a CPGB activist in 1966: “The approach of Marxists to questions of culture and nationality was one which did not want people to forget their origins and language.” Andrew Flinn, “Cypriot, Indian and West Indian Branches of the CPGB, 1945–1970: An Experiment in Self-Organisation?,” *Socialist History* 21 (2002): 47.

²⁴ This is not to say that the question of actual access to Marxist education is irrelevant. Yet, concrete reference figures and modalities of their appropriation are often remarkably similar across ‘educated’ and ‘uneducated’ Marxism. Moreover, the lack of availability of even basic canonical literature in most communist parties in the 1920s was endemic. See Ryazanov's 1924 summary in *Protokoll des V. Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Erlangen: Karl Liebknecht Verlag 1971), 942–4. For a detailed enquiry into the British colonial government's practice of censorship and its limits, see Norman Barrier's illuminating study *Banned: Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India 1907–1947* (Columbia [MO]: University of Missouri Press 1974).

²⁵ Single quotation marks are used to indicate potentially problematic terms, especially ‘mass[es].’ With other terms, such as ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ revolution, quotation marks appear sparingly in order to avoid over-cluttering. Furthermore, the terms ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ refer to the revolutionary paradigms elaborated in chapter I.3 and nothing else.

than softened the contradictions between both. Exonerating empirical ‘mass’ outlook from the odium of reaction—and, hence, defining the meaning and scope of ‘progress’—could well mean two entirely different things: On the one hand, the universalist socialist or Western paradigm rejected religion and religiousness. At the same time, it also tended to bypass their empirical manifestations by drawing on a truncated understanding of Marx’s epistemology, declaring religion essentially insubstantial and insignificant. On the other, the particularist anti-imperialist or Eastern paradigm bypassed even the epistemological question of appearance and essence by directly appropriating ‘nationality’ including its religio-cultural adjuncts. On the whole the overarching imperative to connect to the revolutionary subject mostly precluded criticism of religious mass phenomena. Still, the strategies for their reconciliation to a Marxist framework exhibited considerable, and meaningful, discrepancy.

Scope-wise, this book aims to bring together the different regional and individual strands between 1920 (the party’s foundation) and 1947 (the end of colonial rule). The focus will be on the northern part of the subcontinent, as the communist movement in the South—that is, Kerala and the Malabar coast—has developed a complex and rather unique political-cultural profile that would have been beyond the resources of the present study to properly incorporate. Besides, in the course of the regionalizing trend in research there have been a number of illuminating publications on the matter.²⁶

Indeed, self-limitation to either one of the regional sub-units has become the common tune in research, with the turn towards individual biographies as a comparably recent addition.²⁷ The reason is that the party displays vastly uneven regional silhouettes on political, social, and cultural accounts. A weak or virtually non-existent central party organization has further detracted from a possible protagonist role: Repression was ever most effective against the All-India body. Also, it has ever depended on the assertive regional units, whose existence predates that of the national organization (on the subcontinent proper at least). In fact, the CPI may with some justification be described as a

²⁶ See, for example, P. M. Mammen, *Communalism vs. Communism: A Study of the Socio-Religious Communities and Political Parties in Kerala, 1892–1970* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates 1981); Thomas Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaption* (London: Hurst 1982); Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994).

²⁷ For a number of 21st-century biographical studies, see the grandiose, but unfortunately incomplete work of Sibnarayan Ray, *In Freedom’s Quest: A Study of the Life and Works of M. N. Roy*, 4 vols (Kolkata: Minerva Associates 1998–2007); Suchetana Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*; Manjappa, *M. N. Roy: Marxism*; and, although on the same level neither in sophistication nor diligence, Mortuza Khaled, *A Study in Leadership: Muzaffar Ahmad and the Communist Movement in Bengal* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers 2001).

segmental party in analogy to Burton Stein's conceptualization of the medieval principality of Vijayanagara.²⁸

Nevertheless, a broad perspective merits reconsideration. Comparison, juxtaposition, and synthesis promise a more comprehensive introspection than regional studies have to offer. Certainly, they have done invaluable work without which this study would not have been possible. Considering regional particularism helps to access centrifugal tendencies inherent in the central body. Conversely, it can also foster an understanding of unifying factors bestowing legitimacy on the notion, and indeed the very existence, of such a central body.²⁹

The danger of cursoriness is mitigated by the fact that the reticence of communists to comment on matters of religion reduces the amount of relevant source material, inviting a broader perspective. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the All-India party organization *did* occupy a crucial position in subcontinental communism despite its relative weakness. It was the instance channeling financial support and higher communist knowledge to the activists on the ground. While the sub-units generally held few sympathies for the interventions of, or respect towards, the All-India center, it was a necessary nuisance guaranteeing their own existence as part of official communism and their partaking in prestigious revolutionary wisdom via affiliation to the Comintern. The center possessed a degree of 'guideline competence' grudgingly acknowledged by the provincial units. Therefore, it is only pertinent to complement the consideration of regional communist perspectives with a central perspective.

Writing an intellectual history relating to 'religion' is almost poised to run into conceptual haziness. This is less due to the diverging ways in which communists address religion rather than to its multiple layers of meaning and its complex interrelation with society at large, whether subcontinental or Western.³⁰ There is considerable conceptual overlap with other categories such as 'tradition' or 'culture,' the latter even being considered "one of the two or three most complicated words."³¹ It is not surprising that the considerable and ever-

²⁸ Burton Stein, *Vijayanagara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), esp. 61–7.

²⁹ For a discussion of this concept with regard to India, see Ainslie Embree, "Indian Civilization and Regional Cultures: The Two Realities," in *Region and Nation in India*, ed. Paul Wallace (Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies 1985).

³⁰ *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture: Theories, Themes, Products, and Practices*, eds. Terry Ray Clark and Dan Clanton, Jr. (London: Routledge 2012); see also Keith Yandell and John Paul, "Introduction," in *Religion and Public Culture: Encounters and Identities in Modern South India*, eds. Keith Yandell and John Paul (Richmond: Curzon 2000), v.

³¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, rev. ed. (London: Fontana 1988), 87.

increasing number of studies on the matter has hitherto not led to a universally accepted definition of ‘religion’ or ‘culture.’

That said, contributors agree that religion continues to be “one of the most pervasive and important characteristics of human society” whose impact as a factor on human history has, if anything, been underestimated.³² Yet, defining religion abstractly as a coherent system of beliefs and practices “directed toward that which is perceived to be of sacred value and transforming power” is of limited analytical value.³³ Similarly, definitions of ‘culture’ along the lines of a “particular way of life [...] of a people, a period or a group” whose function is “to signify, to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning” hardly resemble a manageable tool of analysis.³⁴ Robert Segal comes no further than distilling a common denominator of regarding religion as “distinctive, irreducibly religious part of other domains of life.”³⁵

Therefore, in view of the close entanglement of religion with other categories of human social life, the lack of a working definition of the concept itself, and the highly subjective transcendent element in religion, this study opts for a phenomenological approach. Instead of discussing religious phenomena and the merit of their identification themselves, the incidence of religious imagery or religious content in political mobilization or social developments (identified with the help of existing studies and source material alike) will be related to the reception in communist quarters. The same principle applies to communist texts whenever they occupy themselves with religious, communal, and also cultural content.

Party journals, pamphlets, and internal documents of the CPI, as well as personal testimonies of individual communists in the form of memoirs, archived interviews, and correspondence form the source material’s mainstay. British files supplement it where pertinent. Notably evidence presented in bigger anti-communist trials, the Kanpur Conspiracy Case (1924) and the Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929–34), contains a plethora of otherwise unavailable material. Personal testimonies have been approached with as much diligence as the author could muster. Loaded with personal vanities, factional rivalries, and

³² Clark, “Introduction,” in Clark and Canton, *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*, 3.

³³ John Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion* (Upper Saddle River [NJ]: Prentice Hall 2008), 10.

³⁴ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (New York: Pearson Education 2009), 1–2. See also Stephen Welch, *The Theory of Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 112–17. For an anti-theoretical definition of ‘culture,’ see Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning* (London: Hurst 2006), esp. 21–3, 86–96, and 145–8.

³⁵ Robert Segal, “Introduction,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert Segal (Oxford: Blackwell 2006), xviii.

generally “full of more fiction than facts,” retrospectives and personal accounts of individual communists merit special caution.³⁶ So do government sources, notably during the scare years around 1920, when surveillance agencies exhibited a pronounced tendency to lump together Bolshevism and pan-Islamism.

The portfolios of the National Archives of India and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, both Delhi, provided the lion’s share of the sources. The Information Bureau files from the West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, also contain a lot of valuable material, especially internal documents and private correspondence. Unfortunately, they have been reclassified as of now (2018). A plethora of party papers is available at the library of the CPI headquarters at Ajoy Bhavan, and in the well-kept collection of the P. C. Joshi Archive of Contemporary History, both Delhi. The Andhra Pradesh State Archives contribute ancillary material. Apart from these, the portfolios of the Center for the Study of Social Sciences, the National Library of India, and the *Ganashakti* office, all in Kolkata, and the Sundarayya Vignana Kendram, Hyderabad, also have been mined for this study. A surge in the amount of material available online has contributed handsomely to the corpus of sources, most importantly in the shape of the collection of the Gokhale Library and the complete online archive of the *Times of India*. Unfortunately, both vaults are not freely accessible (anymore). Lastly, edited sources comprising mainly the works of Marx and Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, reports from Comintern Congresses, and selections of communist party documents complete the material at the core of this study.

The opening chapter provides the background on Marxism and Soviet legacy. Its first part discusses those statements of Marx, Engels, and Lenin most relevant to the formation of the CPI’s approach to religion. These are (a) Marxist epistemology, (b) the criticism of religion, (c) the question of revolutionary subjectivity, that is, of the concrete social group and its consciousness that was to bring about revolutionary transformation, and (d) the changes induced by Lenin’s postulate of the “right of nations to self-determination.” Their discussion proceeds non-dogmatically, that is, does not posit them as a legacy against which to measure the CPI’s own theorizing or performance. Rather, they figure as sources taken up by and reflected in later communist practice. The chapter’s last part centers on early post-revolutionary Soviet practice and highlights Stalin’s implementation of ‘nationality policy,’ focusing on the bifurcation of revolution into a Western and an Eastern paradigm.

³⁶ Gautam Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal’s Freedom Movement: 1917–1929* (Delhi: People’s Publishing House 1970), v.

Chapter II shifts the perspective to the subcontinent. Its first part explores the direct and indirect influence of the swadeshi and khilafat movements and the North American ghadr party on the future subcontinental communists. It highlights the intellectual atmosphere upon the foundation of the CPI, the education of the first cadres, and the religiously tainted anti-imperialism pervading both. The chapter's second part deals with the CPI's first years until the 1925 Kanpur communist conference. After an exposition of contemporary takes at revolution and socialism, it scrutinizes the cultural networks of, the religious allegiances forged, and the political connections built by the early protagonists of subcontinental communism. These were the Calcutta group of Muzaffar Ahmad, the Bombay communists around Sripad Amrit (S. A.) Dange's journal *Socialist*, and the Madras trade union activist Singaravelu Chettiar. The concluding section on the Kanpur conference illustrates the contemporary closeness and overlap of communist and religious notions and idioms.

Focusing on communist endeavors to enroot in a subcontinental environment, the third chapter takes a closer look at three grass-roots complexes forming central instances of communist attention during the 1920s. The first part examines the modalities of communist appropriation of the Moplah rebellion and the Akali movement. The second section discusses the communist understanding and handling of communalism. If Roy established a strongly anti-bourgeois narrative in his émigré analyses, local conditions could prompt communists 'on the spot' to resort to diverging characterizations of communal unrest. This was true especially of the 1926 Calcutta riots. The last portion concentrates on the communist definition and appropriation of the subcontinent's proletariat. It problematizes the plausibility and feasibility of communist epistemology and categories vis-à-vis the realities of working-class consciousness, epitomized in the 1929 communal riot in Bombay.

Chapter IV accompanies the CPI into the 1930s. It broaches the issues of the failure of communist front organizations, the twists and turns in the Comintern line, the leadership's self-education in Marxism at the Meerut prison, and the gradual opening up of subcontinental categories of political articulation from a communist angle, specifically 'community.' For the latter development, the approach of the CPI's political neighbor, the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), will be drawn on. By discussing the interrelation of the overarching political line with the—at first theoretical—programmatic approximation to indigenous religion and community, the conditions for and patterns of future communist communophilia are mapped. The chapter's final segment focuses on the prelude to the 'nationality period' of the 1940s: The interpretative reconfiguration and eventual appropriation of Muslim communalism in the aftermath of the 1937 elections.

The closing fifth chapter is dedicated to the portrayal of the CPI's episode of supreme situatedness from 1942 until shortly before independence. Tracing the party's impulse to devise new ways of national unity by implementing a highly localized version of Leninist nationality policy, the chapter explores the blatantly cultural and religious dimensions of this intense and outstanding phase in the party's history. It discusses the extent to which "national," religious and cultural propaganda became indistinguishable, leading to a comprehensive 'culturalization' of the communist view of the subcontinent by the mid-1940s. Finally, the closing part focuses on the last-minute efforts of the CPI to ditch its nationality policy, and on the limits of communist epistemology by showcasing the unflinching efforts to retain revolutionary optimism in the face of the 1947 hecatombs.

If not indicated otherwise, all emphases are original.

I Delimiting Progress

I.1 Epistemology, Consciousness, and Revolution

I.1.1 The Essence as Science

Dissatisfaction with the apparently phenomenal character of things has ever been a feature of the quest for understanding. The approach of distinguishing between content and form, between the essence and appearance of a thing has informed much of what is understood as the modern apex of epistemology: science.³⁷ Typically, within this dichotomy the focus of interest has been on the former component, leading to the tendency for form and appearance to gradually become “symptoms rather than causes.”³⁸ After the demise of religious dogma as the central instance of objectivity, recognition of something as ‘scientific’ has conferred the highest level of acclamation and respectability. Marxism, a child of the classical bourgeois age, was no different. Referring to Hegelian dialectics, the materialist analysis of society developed by Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) undertook to adhere to the standards of scientific procedure, notably in its later days. Soon, their followers claimed to wield a “proper science which could produce all that was to be expected from such a science.”³⁹

The relation of appearance and essence is of fundamental importance to Marx’s oeuvre. His peculiar dialectical treatment of the question is best illustrated in the analysis of the commodity, the core element of the critique of political economy. Basically, a commodity has a double character: Being simultaneously a material thing and an abstract container of working time, it is a sensory–non-sensory thing. A material thing can have usage value without having (exchange) value, but not vice versa: Usage value is a thing’s materiality upon which the exchange value thrives and endows the thing with qualities wholly unrelated to its material self. However, this is not just an illusion. Under the predominance of capitalist relations of production and exchange, the thing appears *primarily as something it*

³⁷ See Frank Kuhne, “Marx’ Ideologiebegriff im *Kapital*.” In *Das Automatische Subjekt bei Marx: Studien zum ‘Kapital’*, ed. H.-G. Bensch and F. Kuhne (Lüneburg: zu Klampen 1998), 20–1.

³⁸ Thomas Ryba, “Phenomenology of Religion,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert Segal (Oxford: Blackwell 2006), 95.

³⁹ Lucien Sève, *Marxismus und Theorie der Persönlichkeit*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt: Verlag Marxistische Blätter 1977), 23–4. This ‘scientification’ manifested itself in frequent recourses to natural sciences, whose believed almightiness was often invoked to support Marx’s tenets: Iring Fetscher, “Von der Philosophie des Proletariats zur proletarischen Weltanschauung,” in *Marxismus-Studien: Zweite Folge*, ed. Iring Fetscher (Tübingen: Mohr 1957), 27–8.

is not: as a bearer of value, of abstract, crystallized societal labor—in short, a commodity. If the usage value refers to the sensual, material quality of a thing (the content of its essence), the value represents the ideological quirks and twists (the form of its appearance) that the thing acquires as a consequence of being produced and circulated in a capitalist society.⁴⁰

The implications of this realization for the consciousness of the members of capitalist society prompted Marx to include an excursus of crucial importance—the section on the commodity fetish in the first volume of *Capital*. Basically, Marxism’s impellent message consists of making society’s proletarian section conscious of the nature and cause of their misery—that is, the production of commodities instead of things—and, secondarily, acquainting them with the means to rid themselves of it. In contrast, the section on the commodity fetish implicitly but incisively questions the prerequisites for revolutionary action by emphasizing capitalism’s totalizing tendency. This tendency affects each section of society equally, including the proletariat: The hybrid and contradictory quality that products of labor assume when they are produced as commodities becomes a natural quality of these products in the minds of the members of a commodity-producing society. Marx termed this mental naturalization ideology, “necessarily wrong consciousness.” It is this entanglement of and confusion around essence and appearance that lies at the heart of the quasi-automatic reproduction of capitalist relations by the members of capitalist society.⁴¹

This cursory glance illustrates the centrality of the analytical distinction between essence and appearance to Marx’s approach—and his recognition of the far-reaching enmeshment of the two. Separating them from each other was “abstract mysticism” to him.⁴² In contrast, mainstream Marxism has tended to favor a simpler, essence-heavy interpretation of social relations. And yet its characteristic reductionism could link up to and further certain notions developed in Marx and Engels’s oeuvre. The *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of the State* concluded that if appearance contradicted essence, the latter was more central to understanding.⁴³ In *Capital*, Marx remarked that the appearance of things often inversely represented their “true” nature.⁴⁴ Engels cast the matter in a more

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: Third Volume*, MEW 25:51–8; and 293–6 for a description of “merchant capital” as “pure being.”

⁴¹ Marx, *Capital: First Volume*, MEW 23:85–90. See also Kuhne, “Marx’ Ideologiebegriff,” 20–4. The section on the commodity fetish has been a highly formative factor in the genesis of later critical Marxist thought in the vein of Karl Korsch, the early Georg Lukács, and the Frankfurt Institute of Social Study.

⁴² Marx, “Critique of Hegelian State Law,” in MEW 1:265 (quote); see also Hans-Georg Backhaus, “Zur Dialektik der Wertform,” in *Beiträge zur Marxistischen Erkenntnistheorie*, ed. Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1969), 131.

⁴³ Marx, “Critique of Hegelian,” 258.

⁴⁴ Marx, *Capital: First Volume*, 559, 609.

straightforward mold: where chance was fiddling about on the surface, “it is governed by inner hidden laws, and it merely becomes a matter of discovering these laws.”⁴⁵

It was also Engels’s work that provided the template to manageably hierarchize the relationship between appearance and essence. In his immensely influential analytical division of society into base and superstructure, production relations in their entirety formed the basis of every social environment. A certain kind of superstructure complemented the base according to the historical stage of development. It consisted of both a legal and an “ideological apparatus” comprised of morals, philosophy, and religion, among others. Even if the relations of production could not exhaustively determine the superstructure, the latter depended heavily on them.⁴⁶

Most subsequent historical materialists conceded only very limited autonomy to this “ideological apparatus.” In their view, its only role as a ‘useful’ part of the society it belonged to was to legitimize the configuration of the base.⁴⁷ While determined, its own power of determination was negligible. Engels admitted the operation of “innumerable crisscrossing forces” in the constitution of historical events. However, in the final analysis he could bring himself no further than conceding that elements belonging to the superstructure determined the *form* of social struggles, but never their (invariably economic) *content*. Engels’s late admission that his and Marx’s formulations were “partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it” went largely unnoticed—no more than a footnote in the historical tragedy of Marxism.⁴⁸

I.1.2 The Physics of Metaphysics

In Marxist tradition, it was religion and religiosity that became prime examples of the operation of forces of the superstructure. They formed standard cases for the unequivocal hierarchization of appearance and essence, and form and content. Even though Marx never wrote a treatise on religion proper, his statements on the matter (besides earning him a place among the most pointed critics of metaphysical belief systems) serve as argumentative

⁴⁵ Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy,” in MEW 21:297.

⁴⁶ Engels, “Letter to Joseph Bloch,” 22 September 1890, in MEW 37:462.

⁴⁷ See Marx, “The Critique of Political Economy: Preface,” in MEW 13:9.

⁴⁸ Engels, “Letter to Joseph Bloch,” 462.

pillars for a sustained de-essentialization of religion. Also, he saw no need to pay special attention to it. Henri Chambre comments that while reading Marx “one gets the impression that he refers to religion and the religious problem only in passing,” on the occasion of another topic.⁴⁹

In the vein of Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx started out by considering god and religion as creations of man, instead of the other way round.⁵⁰ Ultimately dismissing the state as a factor in the emancipation from religion in *On the Jewish Question*, Marx turned to a “practical-materialist” interpretation in the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. This latter piece contains his most famous phrases on the subject: “The criticism of religion is the prerequisite for all criticism [...] Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who either hasn’t yet found himself or has already lost himself again.”⁵¹ Its roots lay in the social relations:

This state and this society produce religion, which is an *inverted consciousness of the world*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d’honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against *that world* whose spiritual *aroma* is religion. *Religious* suffering is at one and the same time the *expression* of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.⁵²

From these formidable aphorisms, Marx deduced the necessity for philosophy to become a radical, socially transformative force: “The criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that *for man the supreme being is man*, and thus with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions* in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected, and contemptible being.”⁵³ The criticism of religion led to criticism of the world that made religion necessary:

That the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself *as an independent realm* in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, in itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice.⁵⁴ (Emphasis added.)

Yet argumentative patterns and numerous allusions suggest that Marx didn’t regard religion as utterly insubstantial. Although “religious sentiment” was the product of social conditions, Marx was clear that the result was in fact an “independent realm” whose illusionary

⁴⁹ Henri Chambre, *De Karl Marx à Mao-Tsé-Tung: Introduction Critique au Marxisme-Léninisme* (Paris: SPES 1962), 23. Yet the further argument that Marx’s interpretation of religion was an illustration of his description of the material world holds only in a typically reductionist vein: Cf. Johannes Kadenbach, *Das Religionsverständnis von Karl Marx* (München: Schöningh 1970), 2–4, 128.

⁵⁰ Marx, “Critique of Hegelian,” 231.

⁵¹ Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in MEW 1:378.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 385.

⁵⁴ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, MEW 3:6–7.

character—much like the exchange value in the case of the commodity—was nonetheless *real*.⁵⁵ This was because religion was not an ontic given, but resulted from human agency within certain social conditions that in turn endowed the products of this agency with sense. The relation between spiritual phenomena and material social conditions therefore could not be a uniformly hierarchical one as the former could claim a degree, however limited, of ideological autonomy.

Marxism, beginning with Engels, tended to separate religion from human agency, and reduced the former to a structural appendix of society. In the *Anti-Dühring*, Engels dismissed religion as “nothing else than the phantasmagorical reflection in the minds of men of those external forces which dominate their daily existence, a reflection in which earthly forces assume the shape of supernatural forces.” Gods were nothing more than representatives of historical forces. The power of the gods lasted only as long as these forces reigned supreme. Their overthrow would end the religious reflection, “for the simple reason that there will be nothing left to reflect.”⁵⁶

This straightforward and manageable characterization of religion as a secondary mental reflex to relations of production would govern mainstream Marxism. More sophisticated considerations and complications of the relation of religion, consciousness, and material conditions could not win through. Rather, the dominant Marxist vein of criticism of religion would lean on one of Marx’s dicta that seemed to trace all sorts of ideology to an easily identifiable stratum:

In every epoch, the ruling thoughts are the thoughts of the ruling class. [...] The class which disposes over the means of material production simultaneously disposes over the means for spiritual production, hence it disposes over the commonality of thoughts of those lacking the means for spiritual production. The ruling thoughts are nothing more than the ideal expression of the *ruling material conditions*.⁵⁷ (Emphasis added.)

Importantly, the Marxist mainstream would read Marx’s de-personalizing caveat in the last sentence as a re-personalization. Capitalist society would be understood less as the objective and abstract rule of capitalist *relations of production* than as the subjective, concrete rule of the bourgeois *class*. From the point of view of Marxist agitators, capitalism, dominance, and religion were *bourgeois* capitalism, dominance, and religion. All of these were real among non-bourgeois social strata not so much as a result of totalized, anonymous social processes

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ All quotes in Engels, “Anti-Dühring,” in MEW 20:294–5; see also Helmut Gollwitzer, “Die Marxistische Religionskritik und Christlicher Glaube,” in *Marxismus-Studien: Vierte Folge*, ed. Iring Fetscher (Tübingen: Mohr 1962), 29.

⁵⁷ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 46.

involving all parts of society, but of the meddling of class enemies who artificially implanted them from outside.⁵⁸

I.1.3 “Proletarian Consciousness”

Indeed, when it came to the population segment that was to take up the struggle for socialism, problematization of consciousness had to yield before historical optimism. This optimism, subsequently systematized into a dogma in Marxism, derived from the role and position of the working class, or proletariat, in the process of production.

The *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* characterized the proletariat as an “estate which is the liquidation of all estates.” The proletariat was “not the mass oppressed mechanically by the burden of society, but emerged from its *acute liquidation*.”⁵⁹ This liquidation had come about by industrialization, which had deprived the small producers of their means of production and forced them to sell their labor force. Similarly, industrialization had summarily dealt with other vestiges of traditional society: “It destroyed as far as possible ideology, religion, morality, etc. and where it could not do this, made them into a palpable lie.”⁶⁰

In spite of all the misery, deprivation, and suffering concomitant with this process, Marx hailed it as progressive because it ended the parochial narrowness of pre-bourgeois society. Communism was the answer to this development, its negation and fulfilment at the same time. And it was ‘automatically’ growing out of social conflicts of the epoch: “The theoretical tenets of the communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented or discovered by this or that do-gooder. They are only general expressions of actual relations of an existing class struggle.”⁶¹ Here Marx and Engels made their most crucial designation: The existence of a declassed and exploited stratum of society necessarily implicated the existence of class struggle. Under capitalism, the proletariat was the “only revolutionary class” and the agent of “proletarian consciousness.”⁶²

⁵⁸ This understanding remains popular to the present day. For example, John Raines argues that Marx’s “central critique [...] against religion is a critique of how elites have used and still use their religion”: John Raines, *Marx on Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2002), 169. See also Gollwitzer, “Die Marxistische Religionskritik,” 2, 29.

⁵⁹ Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” 390–1.

⁶⁰ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 60.

⁶¹ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in MEW 4:474–5.

⁶² Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 69; “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 472.

The last category, essential for the proletariat if it were to develop from an objectively disadvantaged class (a ‘class in itself’) to one consciously pursuing its interests (a ‘class for itself’), turned out to be most precarious. For what constituted “proletarian consciousness?” Was it the actual mind-set of the empirical working class, or the avowed determination to overthrow the present order of society? If these were not one and the same, to what extent would a non-revolutionary “proletarian consciousness” be excused by being proletarian socially, and thus the mere quality “proletarian” ontologized as a category of progress in its own right?

To answer this question, it is important to understand that ‘truth’ was not an intellectual concept for Marx, but very much a matter of sensory practice in a social process—and thereby related to ideology, false consciousness. Hence he proceeded from the assumption that the truth of communism—including practical “proletarian consciousness”—had to be performed in order to be at all conceivable. Nothing less than revolution itself was required for the production of communist consciousness. “In the revolutionary act changing oneself merges with changing the conditions,” with the proletariat shedding “all that still had remained with it from its previous social position.”⁶³

However, the proletariat had already cast off much of its ideological ballast in the process of its constitution. “If the mass ever had some theoretical ideas, for example, religion, they have since long ago been dissolved by the circumstances.”⁶⁴ The *Communist Manifesto* stipulated that “the laws, morals, religion are to [the worker] bourgeois prejudices behind which hide as many bourgeois interests.”⁶⁵ In his famous studies on the *Condition of the Working Classes in England*, Engels concluded that if the workers had ever had “some religion it is only nominal, not even theoretical—practically [they live] only for this world.” And further: “Among the masses one finds complete indifference towards religion everywhere.”⁶⁶

Moreover, Engels himself went on to practically demonstrate the elasticity of the boundaries of irreligious ‘proletarian consciousness’ on the example of Christian “communist” peasant communities in the USA. Engels emphasized the religious tolerance of the “*Harmonists*,” who conceded to all members their own opinion “so long as they let the others be and abstain from sowing dissension on matters of faith.” Obviously, Engels’s vague appraisal could well cover repressive communitarian religiosity. Neither that the

⁶³ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 68, 70, 195.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁵ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 472.

⁶⁶ Engels, “The Condition of the Working Classes in England,” in MEW 2:352–3.

village school rejected “sciences” nor the fact that the community had built a “palace” for the priest to live in seemed to trouble him.⁶⁷ He regarded it as an “obvious matter of indifference whether those who prove by their actions the practicability of communal living believe in one God, in twenty or in none at all; if they have an irrational religion, this is an obstacle in the way of communal living.”⁶⁸ This ambiguous formulation conveniently ignored the specific character of both “irrational religion” and “communal living.” This complex would evolve into a sore spot in Marxist heritage, as even Marx failed to arrive at a consistent position on pre-bourgeois forms of “communal living” such as the Russian peasant commune.⁶⁹

With this in mind, the slogans fleshing out the role and activity of “the communists” acquired a somewhat different flavor. The *Communist Manifesto* proclaimed that they “have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.” They “support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.”⁷⁰ In the implementation of this pledge, the meaning of what constituted “revolutionary” was to become crucial. Buoyed by the *Zeitgeist* of 1848, Marx and Engels assumed that the remodeling of social relations would naturally take place along the lines of the *Communist Manifesto*. But as it would turn out, their phrasing allowed for the support of quite diverse efforts at social remodeling as long as they could be linked to the “interests of the proletariat.”

Partly as a precaution against arbitrary use of the term ‘revolutionary,’ Marx had laid down a much-neglected minimum demand for communists worth their salt in the 18th *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: To shed the “traditions of all dead generations” weighing “like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” He cautioned that they could assert themselves even under the guise of revolutionary change, and advocated the avoidance of those who “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes.” A modern revolution could derive its “poetry” only from the future, and it could not begin until it had “cast off all superstition in the past.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ Engels, “Description of Recently Founded Communist Colonies Still in Existence,” in MEW 2, 526–7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 522.

⁶⁹ See his multiple attempts to weigh tentatively socialist against reactionary parochial features in his letters to Vera Zasulich; MEW 19:384–406. In any case, Utpal Ghosh’s interpolation of revolutionary potential in Marx’s and Engels’s writings on Russian and Asian peasants seems far-fetched: Utpal Ghosh, *The Communist Party of India and India’s Freedom Struggle 1937–1947* (Calcutta: Pearl Publishers 1996), 4.

⁷⁰ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 474, 493.

⁷¹ Marx, “The 18th Brumaire,” 115, 117.

I.2 From Philosophy to Function. The Bolshevization of Marxism

As the protagonist of the first ‘successful’ revolution under the banner of Marxism, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (1870–1924), alias Lenin, probably deserves the distinction of being the most seminal implementer of Marxism in history. Two main factors determined his approach: the (still largely feudal) conditions in his native country Russia, and the impulse to translate Marxist tenets into practical politics.

I.2.1 “Third-Rate Opinions”: Bolshevik Atheism

Due to the eminent position of the Russian Orthodox Church in both Czarist government and Russian society, Lenin’s record of occupation with religious matters is more comprehensive than Marx’s and Engels’s. His practical disposition drove him to prefer unambiguous stances on social phenomena over intricate dialectics, and peremptory solutions to potential twists and contradictions over a philosophy of self-doubt. In the first place, he held that inferior considerations must not obstruct revolutionary mobilization: Addressing the village poor, Lenin declared that the social democrats advocated freedom of conscience including the right to proselytization.⁷² Also, he was ready to countenance cooperation with priests and churchmen in the struggle against despotism. “We socialists must lend this movement our support, carrying the demands of honest and sincere members of the clergy to their conclusion.” The criterion was whether the priests were ready to use the “spiritual power” of their “weapon” (!) in the socialist sense. In addition, he maintained that Czarist oppression rendered even religion a victim, and even regretted that the workers had failed to extend support to it. This inclusive stance was possible because history had purportedly divested religion of its hold over the core Bolshevik constituency.⁷³

The modern class-conscious worker, reared by large-scale factory industry and enlightened by urban life, contemptuously casts aside religious prejudices, leaves heaven to the priests and [...] takes the side of socialism, which enlists science in the battle against the fog of religion.⁷⁴

Under conditions of modernity, the anti-religious thrust of the communist movement lost urgency. Rather than being a separate doctrine, atheism was to proceed from the entirety of

⁷² Lenin, “To Village Poverty,” in LW 6:401–2.

⁷³ Lenin, “Socialism and Religion,” in LW 10:72 (quotes); Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*

⁷⁴ Lenin, “Socialism and Religion,” 71.

the party program, the implementation of which would solve the problem of religion. Lenin was all for combating the half-heartedness of

‘Christians’. But that does not mean in the least that the religious question ought to be advanced to first place, where it does not belong at all; nor does it mean that we should allow the forces of the really revolutionary economic and political struggle to be split up on account of third-rate opinions or senseless ideas, rapidly losing all political importance, rapidly being swept out as rubbish by the very course of economic development.⁷⁵

Yet in case that the “economic development” lacked secularizing punch, Lenin would conflate the “ruling thoughts” (Marx)—or any un-communist consciousness, for that matter—with the concrete ruling *class*, disregarding abstract social *relations*. Endemic religiosity, he declared, was kept alive artificially:

The economic oppression of the workers inevitably calls forth and engenders every kind of political oppression and social humiliation, the coarsening and darkening of the spiritual and moral life of the masses. [...] Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses.⁷⁶

It was the “reactionary bourgeoisie” that took to resurrecting religious politics and sectarian unrest in order to divert the “masses” from the struggle against society’s fundamental political and economic relations. The ‘false,’ religious part of consciousness—tellingly, a falseness that in Lenin’s view extended no further than interreligious strife—was reduced to bourgeois meddling. This anticipated the departure from criticism of religion as an ideology towards its perception as a technique of rule. Operationalizing it as one of the “instruments of bourgeois reaction that serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class,” Lenin bent Marx’s famous quote on religion as “opium *of* the people” (emphasis added) almost to the point of declaring religion an opium *for* the people, administered by the cunning hands of the bourgeoisie.⁷⁷

Accordingly, Marxists had “to *know how* to combat religion,” which necessitated a “dialectical materialist” approach—the core of which consisted of leaving the fight against religion to the changing socio-economic conditions. Class war assumed priority over atheist propaganda.⁷⁸ Lenin was ready to countenance the consequences of this stance. For example, in the case of a strike, Marxists were

obliged to prioritize the success of the strike movement and to work decidedly against splitting the workers into atheists and Christians. [...] Under these circumstances atheist propaganda can be redundant, even obnoxious [...] from the point of view of true advance of the class struggle.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 70.

⁷⁷ Lenin, “Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion,” in LW 15:405.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 408.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 409.

It was only logical, therefore, that Lenin would relegate atheism to a secondary phenomenon on the revolutionary party's agenda: "We are absolutely opposed to giving the slightest offence to their [pious workers'; PH] religious convictions, but we recruit them in order to educate them in the spirit of our programme."⁸⁰

Even taking recourse to socialism's affinity to the world of religious terms was a perfectly viable option. An "agitator" could employ idioms "most common to the unenlightened mass" for educational ends. Communists had to avoid creating the impression of "overemphasizing" the struggle against religion, which could lead to "obfuscation of the difference between bourgeois and socialist struggle against religion."⁸¹ What mattered in the assessment of religion and the struggle against it alike, then, was their social location more than anything else.

When it came to the application of these formulae after the October Revolution, the imperatives arising from the precarious situation of the Bolsheviks confirmed the theoretical thrust: As a pragmatist, Lenin had a keen sense of the limited viability of attacks on 'mass culture,' especially in the tense post-revolutionary years; and as a historical materialist, religiosity hardly mattered in the final analysis anyway. The resulting *hierarchy of emancipation* of the Bolsheviks accordingly compromised libertarian principles. For example, in 1918 Lenin exhorted the delegates at the first All-Russian Female Workers' Congress to be patient on the issue of abolition of patriarchal customs. The injurious effect of such measures on religious sentiment would outweigh the ideal damage to a communist project of emancipation tolerating these customs—ignoring the very material disadvantages women were told to put up with.⁸²

His 1919 draft of the program of the Communist Party of Russia (Bolshevik) (CPR[B]) envisaged the separation of state and church as the first stage on the way to the attainment of the "factual emancipation of the working masses from religious prejudices," aided by "scientifically enlightening and anti-religious propaganda." However, "injuring religious sentiments" had to be avoided because it "merely leads to the reinforcement of religious fanaticism."⁸³ The exact nature of the envisaged propaganda remained obscure, since he did

⁸⁰ Ibid., 411.

⁸¹ Ibid., 412–14.

⁸² Lenin, "Speech on the First All-Russian Women Workers' Congress," in LW 28:176.

⁸³ Lenin, "Draft Programme of the CPR(B)," in LW 29:118. In early Soviet times, there were intense debates on this question. Radicals such as Emilyan Yaroslavsky (later head of the Union of Militant Atheists) advocated confrontation and censure of religion whenever possible, while at least until the mid-1920s the party generally adhered to Lenin's views and saw "no point at all in putting anti-religious agitation in a place of first importance": Central Committee of the RKP, "On Anti-Religious Agitation and Propaganda among Women

not reveal the secret of how to combat “religious prejudices” without hurting “religious sentiments,” or even how to properly distinguish between the two. Lenin’s maxim was to avoid “sharp measures” as they “could rouse the masses against us.”⁸⁴ Be that as it may—but what “masses,” and what about the workers, the proper subject of revolutionary change?

1.2.2 Exit Workers, Enter the ‘Masses’

Although the proletariat was the proper revolutionary class, by the early 20th century there had still been no comprehensive proletarian upheaval. The problem was, as August Thalheimer put it, that “under capitalist conditions, only a minority of the workers was able to liberate their minds entirely.”⁸⁵ Lenin for once arrived at the insight that the messianic class had trouble living up to its historical role, and came to repose remarkably little faith in its innate revolutionary capability. As early as 1902, he had argued in *What Is to Be Done* that the workers “were not, and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system [...] theirs was not yet Social-Democratic consciousness.” If left to themselves the workers would develop only “trade-union consciousness,” that is, “the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc.”⁸⁶

In this situation, “political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*.” The state of affairs demanded “a high degree of consciousness from us Social-Democrats.” ‘True’ social democrats had to provide the workers with “real, comprehensive, and live political knowledge.” This was to be the task of the “vanguard”—an organization of professional revolutionaries.⁸⁷

Apart from conceiving of a vanguard party as the guiding light towards revolution, this early text by Lenin introduced another novel category: the “masses.” Formally, they

Workers and Peasants,” in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. William Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: Ardis 1984), 201–4.

⁸⁴ Lenin, “Speech on the First All-Russian Women Workers’ Congress,” in LW 28:176.

⁸⁵ August Thalheimer, *Einführung in den Dialektischen Materialismus (die Moderne Weltanschauung): Sechzehn Vorträge, Gehalten an der Sun-Yat-Sen-Universität zu Moskau vom 5. Februar bis 23. Mai 1927* (Berlin: Verlag für Literatur und Politik 1928), 28–31.

⁸⁶ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, on <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm>, last checked on 14 December 2014.

⁸⁷ All quotes *ibid*.

constituted the “majority” comprising not only workers, but also all other exploited population segments. Lenin explicitly referred to the rural proletariat and poor peasants.⁸⁸ Yet the course of the term’s application revealed the vagueness of its meaning and scope. It provided a convenient way of referring to large population sections whose explicit identification would have invited disquieting investigations into the adequacy of their inclusion in the revolutionary phalanx (notably the peasantry, which Marx had regarded as hopelessly backward). This vagueness turned out to be advantageous for the term’s career. In comparison to the workers, the stocks of the “masses” rose steeply in Lenin’s model of revolution, even more so once the extra-European world came into revolutionary perspective. The task of a communist avant-garde worth its salt consisted of “serving the masses and expressing *their* correctly identified interests.”⁸⁹ Lenin imagined the ideal social democrat as a “*tribune of the people*” rather than a petty trade union secretary.⁹⁰ Postulates along these lines left considerable space for the interpretation of what exactly “serving” the “people” meant, and what was identified as the essence of their “interests.”

To the extent that an innate ‘proletarian consciousness’ evolving into mere “trade-union consciousness” was explicitly distrusted, the working class lost its distinctiveness as a revolutionary factor. In fact, Lenin’s considerations ushered in the gradual replacement of *proletarian*—that is, socialist—revolution with *mass*—that is, populist—revolution. The consequence was the transfer of an ontologized notion of progress from the proletariat onto the ‘masses’ as the rising agent of revolutionary essence. This transfer would really come into its own in Lenin’s most fateful revolutionary innovation: the discovery of the national question.

I.2.3 The National Extension

Benedict Anderson stipulated that nationalism had proven “an uncomfortable *anomaly* for Marxist theory and, precisely for that reason, has been largely elided, rather than confronted.”⁹¹ Even while this is correct insofar as Marxism has produced little in the way of systematic analysis of nationalism, Anderson missed the point. What is remarkable is not

⁸⁸ Lenin, “Speech in Defense of the Tactic of the Comintern,” in LW 32:498–504.

⁸⁹ Lenin, “How V. Zasulich Demolishes Liquidationism,” in LW 19:400.

⁹⁰ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*

⁹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso 1983), 13.

that Marxism has elided nationalism. It is rather that despite the chasm between both frames of reference and the resulting, oftentimes fierce, mutual opposition, there has been such an abundance of interplay of these two largely historically parallel and even contingent concepts; and that mainstream Marxism became guilty of, as Neil Lazarus has put it, “overestimation of the emancipatory potential of independence.”⁹²

In a historical materialist view, the homogenization of population and territory associated with the creation of nation-states clearly was more progressive than feudal fragmentation. Marx regarded large and economically contiguous territories as helpful for the unfolding of capitalism, and hence the proletariat’s power. In other cases, a bourgeois form of government constituted a preferable alternative to feudal despotism. Generally, however, national questions never attracted much of Marx’s and Engels’s attention, let alone sympathy.⁹³

This changed appreciably over the course of Marxism’s development. When Lenin published his seminal 1914 essay *On the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, the matter had long been the subject of heated debate.⁹⁴ His contribution consisted of declaring nationalism an indispensable part of history. Since the bourgeoisie’s victories over feudalism had everywhere been won with the help of national movements, it was a necessary component of the transition from a feudal society to a bourgeois one. Also, production and distribution of commodities could flourish only when the bourgeoisie conquered the “inner market” and created a contiguous territory. The full and free development of said territory’s language and literature was another requirement for “truly free and comprehensive trade corresponding to modern capitalism.”⁹⁵

For all these reasons, the process of national unification was a “huge historical progress.”⁹⁶ The deceptive appearance of reactionary nationalism concealed the seeds of socialist progress burgeoning in the “awakening of the masses from the feudal slumber,” in their fight for people’s rule and national sovereignty. The struggle for socialism had to phrase all democratic questions—including the national one—in a revolutionary way.⁹⁷ This

⁹² Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1990), 23.

⁹³ Modak, *Dynamics of the National Question*, 10–13.

⁹⁴ For a summary, see Uwe Halbach, *Das Sowjetische Vielvölkerimperium: Nationalitätenpolitik und Nationale Frage* (Mannheim: BI-Taschenbuch-Verlag 1992), 20–3.

⁹⁵ Lenin, “On the Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” in LW 20:398–9.

⁹⁶ Lenin, “Critical Remarks on the National Question,” in LW 20:14.

⁹⁷ Lenin, “The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” in LW 21:420.

was especially relevant for colonial countries. With regard to them, Lenin declared that the “class-conscious proletarians can take no other path than the national.”⁹⁸

Such a characterization implied two crucial designations. First, regarding the creation of nation-states as a prerequisite for socialism endowed nationalism itself with an innately progressive quality. Furthermore, in contrast to Marx, who had ever argued the case for the establishment of bourgeois-capitalist *relations* in whatever shape, Lenin defined their most common political *form*—the bourgeois nation-state—as the intermediary goal. Second, by advocating the creation of linguistically and—as illustrated by the reference to literature—*culturally* contiguous territories, the communist project of universal emancipation developed a soft spot for ethnic, linguistic, and religious particularism. Lenin’s avowals to the contrary, dismissing “national culture” as a bourgeois maneuver, could not prevent the logic of the identification of the two from unfolding—particularly because mobilization for the right of all nations to their own nation-states soon grew into the proletariat’s “*most important practical task*.” The supreme Bolshevik himself held that those who did not seize every popular movement against imperialism in order to further the proletariat’s struggle for socialism were bad revolutionaries.⁹⁹

Even though it may seem tempting, it is not sufficient to label this approach mere political pragmatism in the face of mushrooming national movements. Beyond his operationalizing impetus, Lenin insisted that Marxism had to remain at the pulse of the current of history in order to retain its relevance as a revolutionary philosophy. Large-scale mobilization outside its purview indicated that it had lost touch with the historical development which, according to historical materialism, inevitably unfolded towards socialism. An infuriated Lenin, exhibiting the typical synthesis of philosophical esotericism and pragmatic politics, maintained in a heated discussion over national self-determination with CPR(B) theoretician Nikolai Bucharin that it was absurd not to acknowledge what was happening as it would assert itself anyway.¹⁰⁰

Put bluntly, the very existence of popular movements made them into proponents of socialism irrespective of their agenda. Both the political necessity to broaden the revolutionary base and the conviction that the fostering of revolution was inevitable even in seemingly unconnected quarters, interacted in shaping the specific Leninist approach.

⁹⁸ Lenin, “Referat über das Thema ‘Das Proletariat und der Krieg,’” in LW 36:278.

⁹⁹ Lenin, “On the Right of Nations,” 417 (quote); see also Lenin, “The Revolutionary Proletariat,” 416; Lenin, “Critical Remarks to the National Question,” 9–11; and Lenin, “The Results of the Discussion on Self-Determination,” in LW 22:365–6.

¹⁰⁰ Lenin, “Speech at the VIII Party Conference of the CPR(B),” in LW 29:158.

Theoretically, the appropriation of nationalism mirrored the turn towards the ‘masses’ in lieu of the proletariat. In time, this led to the obfuscation of Lenin’s own distinction between progressive nationalism and reactionary national culture, and introduced religion and culture into the core of Marxist campaigns.

I.3 Progress Applied: The Eastern Face of the Soviet Janus

Herbert Aptheker, senior member of the Communist Party of the USA, reproduced a common misunderstanding when he opined that the Russian revolution marked the dawn of the “post-religious phase of human history.”¹⁰¹ With regard to Soviet Muslims, the opposite might be argued; besides, Aptheker’s assessment does not hold even with respect to Christianity. William G. Rosenberg concludes that the CPR(B)’s anti-religious measures were “remarkably mild.” This is even more noteworthy if one takes into account the Orthodox clergy’s vehement anti-Bolshevist stance during the civil war. Even though the Russian Orthodox Church had been expropriated and relieved of most of its social functions after the revolution, the Bolshevik focus on the Church as an institution implied that the non-institutionalized parts of Soviet Christianity were beyond the reach of religious legislation and anticlerical measures.¹⁰² For instance, evangelical sects prospered under the new regime. On a related note, it has been argued that Soviet morals essentially conformed to conservative Christian norms.¹⁰³ However, as the focus of this study is on the example provided by the Soviet approach towards the ‘East,’ it is Islam rather than Christianity that will be considered in the following and the unfolding of Bolshevik policy suggests that an examination of the religious issue is best undertaken on the premises of Soviet nationality policy.

¹⁰¹ Apteker, “Marxism, Religion and Revolution,” 20.

¹⁰² Rosenberg, *Bolshevik Visions*, 171 (quote); Hans Bräker, “Die Religionsphilosophische Diskussion in der Sowjetunion. Zur Heutigen Auseinandersetzung des Marxismus-Leninismus mit dem Christentum,” in *Marxismus-Studien: Sechste Folge; Weltreligionen und Marxismus vor der Wissenschaftlich-Technischen Welt*, ed. Ulrich Duchrow (Tübingen: Mohr 1969), 119.

¹⁰³ See chapters 4 and 10 in John Shelton Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State 1917–1950* (Boston: Little Brown 1953); on Soviet evangelicals, see Dianne Kirby, “Kommunismus, Islam und US-Außenpolitik zu Beginn des Kalten Krieges,” in *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung 2009*, ed. Ulrich Mählert *et al.* (Berlin: Aufbau 2009), 165; see also David Priestland, *Weltgeschichte des Kommunismus: Von der Französischen Revolution bis Heute* (München: Siedler 2009), 132.

1.3.1 The Cultural Divide of Revolution

Fleshing out self-determination of nations after the revolution was left to Lenin's lieutenants, notably Josef Vissarionovich Jugashvili, alias Stalin (1879–1953), the People's Commissar for Nationality Questions in the immediate post-revolutionary years. In principle, Stalin shared Lenin's conviction that nationalism, although historically important, diverted attention away from the class struggle and was opposed to socialist internationalism. "The principle of self-determination must be an instrument in the struggle for socialism and must be subordinated to the principles of socialism."¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, Stalin's nationality policy exhibited a peculiar interpretation of these "principles of socialism." Nationalities were to receive regional autonomy, special rights, and were technically even entitled to leave the Soviet state. Even though neither Lenin nor Stalin would countenance actual secessions, practically equating them with counter-revolution, these concessions represented their honest conviction that nationally and culturally unfettered development was considered a revolutionary achievement in its own right, and best attained under the tutelage of the Bolsheviks, who obviously deemed themselves the better nationalists. Stalin even declared that every nation had the right to return to its traditional order if it wished to.¹⁰⁵

On the cultural plane, Stalin was ready to foster such a return himself. For while the CPR(B) considered the population of the Eastern territories "culturally backward," a revolutionary perspective demanded that the nationalities themselves, as a historically progressive factor, be judged more respectfully. Their delayed evolution was declared a consequence of Czarist oppression, and the Russian proletariat, belonging to the erstwhile oppressing nation, had to proceed with "special caution and special attention towards the [...] national feelings among the working masses of the suppressed [...] nations."¹⁰⁶ The way to "raise the cultural level" consisted of the "development of maximum autonomy,"

¹⁰⁴ Edward Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan 1954), 26, 426.

¹⁰⁵ Stalin, "The Policy of the Soviet Government on the National Question in Russia," in SW 4:310; Halbach, *Das Sowjetische Vielvölkerimperium*, 21–2; see also Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979), 73–4. On Stalin's guidelines on nationality policy see Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist Leninist Strategy* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press 1984), 42; on the return to tradition see Stalin, "To the Soviets and the Party Organisations of Turkestan," in SW 4:203–4; and Modak, *Dynamics of the National Question*, 18–21.

¹⁰⁶ Stalin, "Our Tasks in the East," in SW 4:209–10 (quotes). On the reputation of Central Asia in the CPR(B) see Botakoz Kassymbekova and Christian Teichmann, "The Red Man's Burden: Soviet European Officials in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s," in *Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Fear and Radicalization*, ed. Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thum (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2013), 163–4.

apparently the silver bullet of emancipation. It was only logical, then, that the obvious difference of such an ethnophilic approach to the considerably more culturally self-critical thrust of the revolution in the Russian heartland led Stalin to distinguish between the “*proletarian revolution of the West and the anti-imperialist movement of the East*”¹⁰⁷ (emphasis added).

This conceptual division merits closer attention. The distinction between a class-centric approach on the one hand and one based on culturally defined collectives (or nationalities) on the other would assert itself to the degree of dissolution of any unitary vision of emancipation. Given the remote, tenuous, and above all hypothetical character of the link between the branches of revolution—in Stalin’s words, nebulous educational efforts—what he really seemed to envisage and proceeded to give practical shape to were two *diverging* kinds of revolution: On the one hand, Russian culture was considered to be infested with the vestiges of Czarist rule and therefore urgently in need of reform. On the other, in the case of the East, the Bolsheviks regarded questionable cultural features such as patriarchy and religiosity as artificially fostered and as basically external phenomena.¹⁰⁸

From this viewpoint, the major obstacle to the implementation of revolutionary tenets could only be the “haste, often becoming gross tactlessness [...] in the matter of sovietiz-ing [sic] the border regions.” Their population was to partake in the “higher moral and material proletarian culture,” albeit in “forms corresponding to the way of life and the national imprint of these masses.” For example, if the people of Dagestan, “heavily infected by religious prejudices, follow the communists ‘on the grounds of the sharia’ it is clear that the direct path of struggle against religious prejudices in this land has to be replaced by indirect, more cautious paths.”¹⁰⁹

These “more cautious” paths to the “higher and material proletarian culture” culminated in Stalin’s declaration in November 1920 at the Congress of the Peoples of Dagestan that “the Russian government grants the full right to self-determination according to its own laws and customs to every people. The Soviet government deems the sharia a [...] justified, traditional right.”¹¹⁰ After the victorious conclusion of the civil war, this could be no

¹⁰⁷ Stalin, “Our Tasks in the East,” 211.

¹⁰⁸ See Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 2003), 35–41. Jeremy Smith agrees that “while Proletkult and other artistic and historical movements were trying to establish a clear break with the past in Moscow, in the non-Russian regions the trend was towards promoting the nations’ historical roots”: Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–23* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1999), 169.

¹⁰⁹ All quotes in Stalin, “The Policy of the Soviet,” 318–19.

¹¹⁰ “Congress of the Peoples of Dagestan,” in SW 4:348–50.

admission of weakness. The mullahs of the Terek region equally benefited from the benevolence towards Islamic law when Stalin reassured them that the Soviet government had no intention “to declare war on the sharia.”¹¹¹

This had not materialized out of thin air. Already in December 1917, the Kremlin had issued a manifesto addressed to the “working Moslems” declaring inviolable all their “faiths and customs” together with national and “cultural institutions.”¹¹² In January 1918, a Commissariat for the Internal Affairs of Muslims (Muskom) was established; a central Bureau for Muslim Communist Organizations followed in November. Already in July, the Bolsheviks had appealed to Muslim workers to join a socialist army made up exclusively of Muslims. A separate Muslim communist party was also set up.¹¹³

A similar pattern was adopted towards ‘national-revolutionary’ currents among the Buddhist population, in whose case the Bolshevik vision linked up with the tradition, rituals, and messianic expectations of the Lamaist world.¹¹⁴ As long as there were no efforts at political separation, which—such as the Basmachi rebellion—were ruthlessly crushed, accounting for the “forms corresponding to the way of life” generally discouraged intervention into, and rather promoted, their ‘internal’ cultural affairs. These endeavors to revolutionize Muslims in the Eastern way fortified rather than transformed their societies and, through continued positive reference to Islam, relegated them to a different revolutionary class.

The Congress of the Peoples of the East, convened in Baku in September 1920, epitomized the Bolshevik approach. The call for attendance had already likened participation at the gathering to the “Hajj” and undertook to situate itself in the traditional horizon of its addressees: “Formerly you used to cross the desert to visit the sacred places: Now cross deserts and mountains and rivers to meet together and discuss how to free yourselves from

¹¹¹ “Congress of the Peoples of the Terek Region,” in SW 4:354. In 1922, the Soviet government restored confiscated religious property to the ulama and recognized Friday as a Muslim holiday: Georg von Stackelberg, “The Tenacity of Islam in Soviet Central Asia,” in *Religion and the Search for New Ideals in the USSR*, ed. William Fletcher and Antony Strover (Allahabad: Prager 1967), 93.

¹¹² “Message from V. I. Lenin, Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars and J. V. Stalin, People’s Commissar for Nationalities Affairs, to all the Working Moslems of Russia and of the East,” in *Milestones of Soviet Foreign Policy 1917–1967* (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1967), 34–5. See also Lenin’s “Response to the Questions of an American Journalist,” in LW 29:508; and for Stalin, see above.

¹¹³ Azade-Ayşe, Rorlich, “Islam under Communist Rule: Volga-Ural Muslims,” *Central Asian Survey* 1 (1982):18; Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* 1:318–20. On the Jadids, see Haugen, *The Establishment of National*, 52–67.

¹¹⁴ Emanuel Sarkisyanz, *Russland und der Messianismus des Orients: Sendungsbewusstsein und Politischer Chiliasmus des Ostens* (Tübingen: Mohr 1955), 381–91. On the corresponding Bolshevik practice in Mongolia, see Fujiko Isono, “The Mongolian Revolution of 1921,” *Modern Asian Studies* 10 (1976).

the chains of servitude.” The overwhelmingly conservative outlook of the delegates did not bother Grigori Zinoviev, the conference’s convener and General Secretary of the Communist International: “We know that most of you [...] hold different views from ours. This does not matter [...] All we ask you is to struggle against capitalism and to throw off the foreign political yoke.”¹¹⁵

The speakers after him translated these exhortations into their own terms. Enver Pasha, an iconic figure of the contemporary pan-Islamic movement, stated that his life followed the path charted out by Allah. An unnamed Egyptian delegate gave a “very curious account” (Carr) of his view of how Bolshevik inspiration could lead the “Oriental peoples” to liberty: “The Orient” expected Bolshevism to bring about the revival of Islam, for which he considered it the crucial ingredient.¹¹⁶ Narbutabek, a lawyer from Turkestan, demanded that Muslim Central Asia be rid of foreigners, including Russians; and Jalal-ud-din Korkmasev from Dagestan boasted of having embarked on ghazawat, a “holy war.”¹¹⁷ And a petition from Abdur Rab Barq, head of the Revolutionary Association of subcontinental national revolutionaries in Tashkent (see chapter II.1.4) called for support for the struggle of oppressed India without intervention in the family or religious life of the population.¹¹⁸

Zinoviev himself demonstrated, to the delight of the audience, that the notion of ghazawat went down well with the Bolsheviks:

Comrades! Brothers! The time has come when you can start on the organization of a true and holy people’s war against the robbers and oppressors. [...] Brothers, we summon you to a holy war, in the first place against English imperialism! (Stormy applause. Prolonged hurrahs. The members of the congress rise from their seats and brandish their weapons. [...] The delegates stand and clap applause. The cry rings out: ‘We swear it’).¹¹⁹

Karl Radek averred that “the eastern policy of the Soviet Government is [...] no diplomatic manoeuvre [...] to win advantages for the Soviet republic,” an avowal underpinned by Stalin’s simultaneous institution of sharia law.¹²⁰ The framework of Eastern mobilization was a consequence of firm revolutionary ‘othering’ replete with its own set of revolutionary categories. They centered on ‘nation,’ which implied culture and religion—in the Soviet case, notably Islam. The enthusiasm for native religion is aptly demonstrated by a

¹¹⁵ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* 1:260–1 (quotes). Most recent studies agree on the count of 1,891 delegates: Kiran Maitra, *Marxism in India. From Decline to Debacle* (Delhi: Roli Books 2012), 45; and Schwartz, “Kommunismus und Islam im 20. Jahrhundert,” in Mähler et al., *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* 2009, 130.

¹¹⁶ All quotes *ibid.*, 260–1; see also Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 101.

¹¹⁷ Brian Pearce, trans., *Congress of the Peoples of the East—Baku, September 1920* (London: New Park Publ. 1977), 67.

¹¹⁸ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* 1:263.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* 1:261.

¹²⁰ Pearce, *Congress of the Peoples*, 41.

temporarily popular, if ultimately marginal, strand of left-wing thought: Muslim national communism.

I.3.2 “Muslim National Communism”

The Bolshevik thrust to accommodate Central Asian Islam clearly resonated among the latter. After the October Revolution, a number of reformist-minded movements emerged with the aim of setting up a kind of ‘Muslim communism.’ They proclaimed, and proceeded to give theoretical substance to, a fundamental compatibility of communism and Islam. Among them, the group around Volga Tatar strongman Mirsaid Sultangaliev (1892–1940) played a pioneering role. Their “Muslim national communism” could do without most tenets of Marxism. Instead of the workers, it was the suppressed *nations* that formed a class on a global scale, and therefore class struggle took place on an international plane only: “Muslim peoples are proletarian peoples.”¹²¹ This directly referred to Lenin, who had stated in 1919 that

socialist revolution will not only and not in the main be a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians of each country against their own bourgeoisie, no, it will be a struggle of all countries suppressed by imperialism against international imperialism.¹²²

Sultangaliev stressed the need to renounce atheist criticism: “No anti-religious propaganda will succeed as long as the Eastern peoples remain exploited.”¹²³ Rather, the Muslim national communists undertook to situate socialist and communist principles in their respective cultures in order to legitimize ‘indigenous’ forms of communism. Historical analogies harked back to the glorious days of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. Islam was the common bond uniting Muslim national communism and the ‘golden age’ of Muslim civilization.¹²⁴

For some years, Sultangaliev enjoyed considerable prestige as the pre-eminent Muslim communist in the CPR(B) and served as Stalin’s main expert on Muslim questions. He was also a professor at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (see chapter II.1.5) and edited a journal on nationality questions. Many of his tenets easily connected with

¹²¹ Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism*, xxx, 42, 48.

¹²² Lenin, “Speech at the Second All-Russian Congress of Communist Organizations of the Peoples of the East,” in LW 30:144.

¹²³ Rorlich, “Islam under Communist Rule,” 19.

¹²⁴ Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism*, 49–50.

Bolshevik ones. Sultangaliev's 1923 expulsion from the CPR(B) didn't occur on the grounds of his Islamophilia—as a matter of fact, Stalin defended his theoretical capacities in the very speech calling for his ousting—but because of conspiratorial activities.¹²⁵

In fact, there materialized a degree of 'harmonization' between Islam and communism. Soon after the Bolshevik takeover, the head of the Kazakh Council of Peoples' Commissars dedicated an unequivocal poem to the revolution: "Today is a glorious day for the whole of celebrated Islam [...]. Today the gates of paradise open and true believers offer obeisance devoutly." In Turkmen folklore, Lenin's lieutenants were likened to Sufi disciples, and Lenin himself seems to have been worshipped religiously. In one of the "Lenin legends" from Central Asia, he appears as Allah's chosen sent to establish a divine order.¹²⁶ Inversely, a romanticist strand among Bolsheviks, represented most prominently by Larissa Reisner, indulged in similar, if less religious, mystifications of Islamic Central Asia.¹²⁷

Nevertheless, two qualifications have to be kept in mind. First, tolerance and support of Islam were not unconditional: The assertion of religious and cultural ambitions in a separatist political framework was always met with ruthless repression. Thus, the Central Asian Basmachi rebellion was put down by force. Yet, significantly, the accompanying propaganda railed against feudal-bourgeois separatism, not Islamic traditionalism.¹²⁸ Second, the inclusive stance changed from the late 1920s onwards, when a more militant course of action was adopted. Still, in view of the readiness of Soviet governments to resort to bloody coercion in the enforcement of their aims, repressive measures against Islam seem comparably mild.¹²⁹

In order to gradually shift the perspective towards the subcontinent, the last part of this chapter deals with Bolshevik policies in Central Asia. Soviet Turkestan provided a formative experience for various groups of exiled revolutionaries, some of whom would form the CPI. The Soviet environment would constitute an important influence in the molding of their revolutionary perspectives.

¹²⁵ On the "Sultan-Galiev Affair," see Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National*, 228–36; on Stalin's role, Fazal-ul-Rahir Khan Marwat, *The Basmachi Movement in Central Asia: A Study in Political Development* (Peshawar: Emjay Books 1985), 115–16.

¹²⁶ All quotes in Sarkisyanz, *Rußland und der Messianismus*, 269–72.

¹²⁷ See Schwartz, "Kommunismus und Islam," 132–3, and Cathy Porter, *Larissa Reisner* (London: Virago 1988), 116–20.

¹²⁸ Haugen, *The Establishment of National*, 82–4.

¹²⁹ The worst Azade-Ayse Rorlich manages to discern is a "multi-lingual media campaign" against Volga Tatar Islam: Rorlich, "Islam under Communist Rule," 21–4. Truly systematic repression including deportation, forced labor, and execution was applied only to Orthodox priests, and only prior to WWII: Priestland, *Weltgeschichte des Kommunismus*, 185, 195, 228.

I.3.3 On the Ground in Turkestan

Turkestan was Imperial Russia's Central Asian territory east of the Caspian Sea and south of the Kazakh steppe. Yet apart from the identity of the overlords, conquest didn't change much—Czarist rule “did not affect the patriarchal order [...] and traditional forms of religious education were kept intact.” Unsurprisingly, the indigenous political outfits springing up after February 1917 had a clearly Muslim agenda and were often influenced by fundamentalist religious or pan-Turkic ideas. A number of them eventually revolted against Soviet rule.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, the Bolshevik Soviet at Tashkent, in power since September 1917, enjoyed a measure of support from such ‘nationalist’ forces, and on critical occasions actively sought cooperation themselves.¹³¹

To achieve this, the Bolsheviks on the spot successfully aroused a sense of victimization and cultural endangerment. A Central Asian journal wrote in August 1919 that the British were out to Christianize all other religions, especially Islam.¹³² At a Bolshevik rally in Merv, a speaker averred that the Soviet government would liberate Muslim workers. Yet in the spirit of Sultangaliev's slogan “Muslim peoples are proletarian peoples” he characterized not the native exploiting class, but the British as the main enemies—not of material proletarian interests, but of Islam. The rally closed with the slogan: “Long live Islam and the true followers of Islam!”¹³³ A Bolshevik flyer, probably from Ashkhabad, similarly denounced the British as “enemies of our lives and our religion [...] Long live defenders of the Moslem faith in Turkestan. Long live the all-powerful Khalifate. Death to the British and their anti-Moslem might.”¹³⁴

Far from revealing the need to improvise for the retention of Bolshevik power, postulations of this kind were exemplary implementations of Eastern revolution. In September 1920, the CPR(B)'s Central Committee transmitted detailed instructions on how to conduct propaganda work in Asia. Every revolutionary cell had to win over a member of

¹³⁰ Dov Yaroshevski, “The Central Government and Peripheral Opposition in Khiva, 1910–1924,” in Ro'i, *The USSR and the Muslim World*, 20 (quote); see also Baymirza Hayit, “*Basmatschi*.” *Nationaler Kampf Turkestans in den Jahren 1917 bis 1934* (Köln: Dreisam 1992), 22, 27–31; and Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National*, 126.

¹³¹ Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National*, 128–9; on the effectiveness of religious accommodation for mass enlistment of Muslims in the Red Army, see Marwat, *The Basmachi Movement*, 46–51, and Hayit, “*Basmatschi*”, esp. 146.

¹³² “The Voice of the Poor,” National Archives of India, Home/Political Files (hereafter: Home/Poll) 1919 Nr. 4 December.

¹³³ “Bolshevik Designs on Afghanistan and India,” National Archives of India, Foreign/Political Files (hereafter: Foreign/Poll) 1920 February Nr. 71-171, 26.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

the local clergy in order to have the “centres of spiritual life [...] become the centre of revolutionary propaganda.” Naturally, this predetermined the latter’s character: “The strictest injunctions are given to show the greatest consideration to the religious rites and ritual of the Mahomedans, Parsees, Sunnites, Brahmins, Lamaists,” and so on.¹³⁵ Strikingly, the text explicitly referred to Brahmins, the ritual and social elite of Hindu society, highlighting the remoteness of Bolshevik policy in the East from commitment to social transformation.

In the case of nomadic tribes, close relations had to be established with the chiefs, and generally the “greatest respect should be shown to the customs of every tribe, however great may be their divergences from the ideas of Communism.”¹³⁶ At least there were tangible results: in 1921, the Somolvestok (Socialist Youth of the East), affiliated with the “League for Eastern Liberation,” called for a “Holy War” and successfully enlisted the cooperation of “warlike tribes,” some of whom joined the Red Army.¹³⁷

Mohammed Barakatullah, erstwhile head of the Indian Provisional Government in Kabul during the First World War, was an eminent propagandist of the Eastern paradigm in Central Asia. His anti-imperialist credentials as envoy of King Amanullah of Afghanistan (who sought an alliance with the Soviets during his 1919 war with the British) earned him the opportunity to chalk out his position in the *Izvestiya*.¹³⁸

I am neither a communist nor a socialist, but my political programme entails the expulsion of the British from Asia. I am an implacable foe of the capitalization of Asia by Europe, the principal representatives of which are the British. [...] In this [...] respect we are natural allies.¹³⁹

However, his views went beyond simple anti-imperialism. A couple of months before, he had drawn parallels between socialist and Islamic visions in his pamphlet *Bolshevism and the Islamic Body-Politic*, a piece widely distributed in Central Asia with Bolshevik assistance: Just as the workers of the west had identified “personal ownership” as the source of all worldly evils, Islam had instituted the commandment of charity. His romanticizing references to the early days of Islam bore obvious parallels to Salafism: The first caliphs’ treasury vaults had inexhaustibly mitigated the misery of the poor. Just as the theistic religions, socialism had been “revealed” in order to end “destitution, indigence, toil,

¹³⁵ All quotes from *Reports of the Director, Central Intelligence*, 14 February 1921, Home/Poll/1921 Nr. 90 March, 20. This led to “unrestricted promotion of non-socialist culture” outside the Russian heartland: Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National*, 169.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ *Times of India*, 5 March 1921.

¹³⁸ *Reports of the Director, Central Intelligence*, 13 October 1919, Home/Poll/1919 Nr. 454-457 September, 11–12.

¹³⁹ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* 1:239.

misfortune and oppression.” Barakatullah exhorted Muslims to heed the “divine cry” of “brother Lenin.” He also actively rallied Muslims along the Volga river and in Central Asia to the Soviet cause.¹⁴⁰

The approach seemed to resonate. British intelligence agencies worried that Soviet support for Amanullah had “given some color to this new *pose* of the Bolsheviks that they are the friends of the Muhammadans”¹⁴¹ (emphasis added). Yet they missed the fact that in addition to possible political gains, Soviet championing of Afghan independence and Muslim self-determination was a direct result of the commitment to secure “independent and free development” for all peoples and cultures. Even after the conclusion of the 1921 Anglo-Soviet trade agreement, Bolshevik policy remained committed to the implementation of its vision for the East. Islam continued to play a vital part in it, and to receive concessions. Article 10 of the 1921 treaty between Soviet Russia and Turkey subjected citizens to the laws of their country of residence, with exceptions made only in military service and concerning “family rights [and] the right of inheritance.”¹⁴² Radical Islam’s anti-imperialist proponents, such as the colony of the Wahhabi “Hindustan fanatics” near Chamarkand in the NWFP (North Western Frontier Province), continued to receive Bolshevik assistance.¹⁴³

A practical example of a working arrangement between communist activists and the traditional life-world of Central Asia’s non-Russian inhabitants is provided by M. N. Roy himself. His *Memoirs* recount his participation in the Bolshevik conquest of Bokhara in September 1920. Roy had reasoned beforehand that without Bolshevik intervention “the Muslims [sic] masses would be the victims [of counter-revolution] [...] The purpose of the revolution would be [...] to protect the Islamic masses throughout Central Asia against the [...] feudal ruling class.” In view of the repeated emphasis on the population’s dominant religion, it seems that even the Muslim-ness of the “Muslim masses” had to be protected from corrosive influence. Indeed, the prevailing outlook infused a considerable dose of

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in *Reports of the Director, Central Intelligence*, 13 October 1919, Home/Poll/1919 Nr. 454-457 September, 11–12. See also “Bolshevik Designs on Afghanistan and India,” 44–6, and Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal’s Freedom*, 30. For an exposition of Barakatullah’s views, see Moisej Persits, *Revolutionaries of India in Soviet Russia: Mainsprings of the Communist Movement in the East* (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1983), 45–9.

¹⁴¹ *Reports of the Director, Central Intelligence*, 16 June 1919, Home/Poll/1919 Nr. 701-704 June, 21.

¹⁴² “Treaty between Russia and Turkey,” in *Milestones of Soviet Foreign*, 56.

¹⁴³ David Petrie, *Communism in India 1924–1927*. Reprint, ed. Mahadevaprasad Saha (Calcutta: Editions Indian 1972), 178–9. See also the sustained Bolshevik efforts in Jeddah to rally Muslim pilgrims against imperialism: *Ibid.*, 182–5; West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, Information Bureau Files (hereafter WBIB) File 17/26 SL 114/1926, xv–xvi.

religion into the Bokharan Revolutionary Committee's deliberations: Communists "were advised not to do anything which might offend the religious sentiments of the masses." In order to win over the Muslim clergy, Roy even studied the Koran to a point where he could "justify the Revolution on scriptural authority."¹⁴⁴

Indeed, given the general lack of education among the population, it was the mullahs who grew into crucial factors for the revolution's implementation. Upon marching into Bokhara, the emir's estate was nationalized and "administered by the Chief Imam as a trust." To Roy, incorporation of religious elements did not in the least detract from Bolshevik determination "to protect and promote the interests of the downtrodden masses."¹⁴⁵ An anecdote confirmed this congruence: During a conference of people's representatives, the call for prayer sounded; yet most delegates, overwhelmingly in favor of joining the prayer, were not sure whether this would conform with the new state's character. Roy claims to have saved the day by proclaiming that revolution was not about having "quarrel with any religion," and suggested that the meeting be suspended for prayer.¹⁴⁶ His appreciation of Bolshevik policy towards religious communities belies pragmatist interpretations of his intervention:

The Russian Bolsheviks not only stood for the liberation of the colonial peoples [...] they had actually set free millions of Muslims subjugated for centuries by Czarist absolutism. Now it was the turn of the liberated Muslims to extend a helping hand to their brethren across the frontier.¹⁴⁷

Obviously, to Roy, as to Stalin before, 'Muslim' superseded nationality as the main feature of Central Asia's non-Russian inhabitants, and was a quality that distinguished them from 'colonial peoples.' Under communist tutelage, it was not that the minds of Central Asian nationalities were to be 'liberated' from Islam, but that Muslims were to be 'liberated' from foreign influence. Having outgrown a primarily religious frame of reference, Islam had come to acquire a national and ethnic dimension imbued with a strong component of essentialized resistance. Hence, Roy deemed it perfectly natural for Soviet Muslims to set out, as Muslims, to help other Muslims "liberate" themselves, also as Muslims. This is the Eastern revolution in a nutshell, substituting 'Muslims' for 'workers.' Since Roy would be the pivotal figure in the CPI's early years, it is difficult to see why fanatical religiosity should have been problematic for the first subcontinental communists, who are just about to enter the stage.

¹⁴⁴ All quotes in Manabendra Nath Roy, *Memoirs* (Delhi: Ajanta Books 1984), 446–7.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 449.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 469.

Synopsis of Chapter I

The basic Marxist mode of analysis, distinguishing between essence and appearance, defined the terrain on which communist responses to religion and religiosity would grow. Marx himself thought it important not to neglect appearance. However, his famous aphorisms on religion characterized it as an ideological reflection of the misery caused by relations of production. Mainstream Marxism appropriated his heritage in a polarized and substantialized manner. Lenin conceived of social constellations fostering the development of religious ideology mainly as conscious and active meddling by the ruling classes. As a consequence, religiosity among the revolutionary subject seemed artificial, ephemeral, and therefore largely unproblematic.

Marx and Engels identified the proletariat as the class standing to gain most from radical social change. This was ontologized by later Marxists as an inherently progressive and revolutionary quality to which the proletariat and, later, the ‘masses’ had to be awoken. Both figured as population sections coerced into a society initiated, run, and directed by the ruling classes. Resisting it almost automatically became progressive.

Lenin expanded this set-up with a key element. He supplemented the international of workers with the international of “suppressed nations.” Although Lenin refused to acknowledge “national culture,” the conceptual neglect of appearance (that is, ideological phenomena outside economics) led to the incorporation of culture into the Bolsheviks’ agenda. The categorical distinction between “suppressing” and “suppressed” nations yielded an equally categorical distinction between the respective content of revolution. While “suppressing” nations in the West were deemed needful of cultural and social self-criticism, “independent and free development” (necessarily including culture and religion) assumed primacy in the case of “suppressed” nations in the East.

This fundamental division constituted the meaning of Stalin’s passing distinction between an Eastern revolution and a Western one. Indeed, it pointed to two diverging paradigms with far-reaching implications for the consideration of religion. In the West, it remained an insubstantial anomaly either ignored or fought. In the East, it could itself function as a vehicle of progress as part of a resistant “nationality.” The elevation of Muslims to a quasi-national collective of resistance in early Soviet policy would provide a momentous example for subcontinental communists.

II Communist Roots: Spiritual Politics and the ‘Masses’

II.1 Tapping Religious Resistance

II.1.1 Swadeshi and Hindu Revivalism

The early Indian National Congress (INC) was virtually the antithesis of Bolshevik notions of progressive politics. It represented upper-class interests, it didn't oppose British rule, and it had no mass base. However, the obvious divergence of British liberal ideas and the political realities in colonial governance, together with the colonial state's persistent refusal to acknowledge the INC's memoranda soon eroded exclusivist—and, together with it, liberal—notions of politics. The spark that eventually lit a widespread fire of unrest originated in tangible political developments and ignited a long-brewing ferment of discontent with British rule. Nationalist quarters, then overwhelmingly Hindu, widely perceived the government's decision to partition Bengal in 1905 as a blow aimed at Bengali (and, on a larger scale, national and inter-communal) unity. The outrage triggered a mass movement extending far beyond the province. According to Satyabrata Rai Chowduri, it swelled into a “mighty torrent of nationalism” and laid the groundwork for the “Indian revolution.”¹⁴⁸

This “mighty torrent” was inundated with the ‘spirit’ of *Bande Mataram*, of religious devotion to the deified motherland. Deeply couched in Hindu idioms, the surge in nationalist sentiment was not so much theistic as religiously political. Dietrich Reetz succinctly puts it: “It was the system of intellectual and social norms within a particular religion rather than the belief in God that became the bedrock of infant nationalism.”¹⁴⁹ The protagonists were mostly Hindus motivated by a mixture of (Bengali) nationalist feelings and apprehensions about losing part of ‘their’ Bengal to Muslims, who formed the majority in the eastern part. Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950) in Bengal and Bal Gangadhar Tilak

¹⁴⁸ Satyabrata Rai Chowduri, *Leftism in India, 1917–1947* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 2007), 2. On the movement's background and the failure of moderate nationalism's reformist agenda see Bipan Chandra, *History of Modern India*, 3rd ed. (Delhi: Orient Blackswan 2010), 242–8; and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993), 32–45.

¹⁴⁹ Dietrich Reetz, “Religion and Group Identity: Comparing Three Regional Movements in Colonial India,” in *Essays on South Asian Society, Culture and Politics*, ed. Annemarie Hafner (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch 1995), 74.

(1856–1920) in Maharashtra were the movement’s most vociferous proponents. It was particularly the latter who would attain a place of honor in communist historiography.¹⁵⁰

Along with other nationalists such as Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal, Tilak initiated a vigorous anti-British campaign manifesting itself in rallies and propaganda for a boycott of British in favor of native products (swadeshi). The movement’s bedrock consisted of “social reaction and superstition, symbolised in [Tilak’s] defence of child marriage and the protection of the cow.”¹⁵¹ Tilak also championed the revival of Hindu festivities such as the Shivaji and Ganapati festivals. The former in particular had distinctly anti-Muslim overtones. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya taught that working for the public good was an essential part of true faith and thus sacralized political and social action; Swami Vivekananda, a Bengali religious reformer, preached a spirit of sacrifice based on the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Vedanta*. All this struck a chord with the ‘masses.’ Tilak’s conviction for sedition in 1908 initiated a renewed upsurge of protest. It included a political strike by Bombay workers venerating the convict as “Tilak Maharaj,” in the course of which around 200 of them were killed—a manifestation acknowledged by Lenin as “conscious political mass struggle.” Although the bulk of the population—the peasantry—remained largely unaffected, the movement’s influence on the later nationalist movement was tremendous.¹⁵²

The first reason why a clearly non-socialist movement predating the activity of the CPI by one-and-a-half decades is featured here is that it forms *the* communist link to nationalist politics. Notably, comrades from Maharashtra stand out. To Ganghadar Moreishwar Adhikari (1898–1981), an eminent party theoretician, Tilak’s “valuable ideas” had drawn the “ordinary class” into a mass movement whose outlook seemed of little interest to him.

¹⁵⁰ Chowduri, *Leftism in India*, 3, and Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947* (Delhi: Macmillan 1983), 114–15. For the repercussions of the partition of Bengal on the subcontinent see Chandra, *History of Modern India*, 248–50. For an exploration of early Hindu radicalism see Ray, *In Freedom’s Quest*, vol.1, 1887–1922, 7–11.

¹⁵¹ Georges Lieten, *Colonialism, Class and Nation: The Confrontation in Bombay around 1930* (Calcutta: Bagchi 1984), 68–9 (quote). See also Chandra, *History of Modern India*, 250–1. For an insightful commentary on the influence of the contemporary British orientalist discourse on this revivalist movement see Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994), 20–1. On Tilak’s penchant for Aryanism and its structural parallels to contemporary European racism see Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths* (Oxford: Berg 2001), 35–6; and Christophe Jaffrelot, “La Derive Ethnique du Nationalisme Indien,” in *La Déchirement des Nations*, ed. Jaques Rupnik (Paris: Éd. du Seuil 1995), 232.

¹⁵² Lenin, “Inflammable Material in World Politics,” in LW 15:178–9 (quote). See also Chandra, *History of Modern India*, 247, 253–6, 265 (quote); Chowduri, *Leftism in India*, 4; Ray, *In Freedom’s Quest* 1:15–16; and E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, 2nd ed. (Tiruvananthapuram: Social Scientist Press 1993), 215.

Accordingly, he revered Tilak “as a fighter and a savior.”¹⁵³ Adhikari’s cousin and CPI grandee, Bhalchandra Trimbak Ranadive (1904–90), was similarly enthusiastic, and Dange took a directly apologetic stance: “Naturally in those days [...] there was no question of being an atheist or anything.” Much in the manner of a counter-overflow, religion’s ubiquity effected its neutralization. Even Namboodiripad’s far-sighted criticism of Hinduism as a factor detrimental to political consciousness came to a positive verdict on the movement.¹⁵⁴

The other reason is that the political socialization of a number of CPI pioneers had taken place in this environment. Among them were Tirumal Acharya, Abani Mukherjee, and particularly Narendra Nath Bhattacharya alias Manabendra Nath (M. N.) Roy.¹⁵⁵ Born into a Brahmin family in the Bengal district of 24 Parganas, Roy graduated from the Bengal Technical Institute in 1907 and plunged into political action right away.¹⁵⁶ As mass politics was less attractive to his revolutionary impatience than underground terrorism, he joined the milieu of the Anushila Samiti revolutionary terrorist groups.

Here, “revolutionary” refers to commitment to a radically Hindu national awakening. To a far greater degree than in the swadeshi campaign, this political vision was steeped in Hindu mythology. It sacralized violent action and sacrifice, and was characterized by casteist elitism and pronounced disdain for Muslims. Roy’s biographer Sibnarayan Ray describes him as “a *brahmachari* whose devotion as a *sakta* to the mother goddess had been reinforced and politicized by his [...] devotion to the motherland.”¹⁵⁷ Having proven his revolutionary mettle, Roy was chosen to procure arms and money from imperial Germany in Southeast Asia in 1915. With plans failing and the British secret service on his heels, he

¹⁵³ Ganghadar Moheshwar Adhikari (interviewee), recorded by Hari Dev Sharma (interviewer), 1 March 1977, NMML-OHP, AccNo 378, 8–9.

¹⁵⁴ Sripad Amrit Dange (interviewee), recorded by Hari Dev Sharma (interviewer), 21 June 1981, NMML-OHP, AccNo 823, 5, 22 (quote); “An Interview with B. T. Ranadive,” in *Essays on Indian Nationalism*, ed. Bipan Chandra, 2nd rev. ed. (Delhi: Har-Anand Publ. 1999), 207; Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian*, 98–114.

¹⁵⁵ For a rough biographical sketch of Mukherjee, see *Reports of the Director, Central Intelligence*, 19 July 1920, Home/Poll/1920 Nr. 104 July, 15. In the early 1920s, he fell out with Roy and had to part ways with South Asian communism. Employed in academic professions, he lived in the Soviet Union, where he (along with other subcontinental revolutionaries such as G. A. K. Luhani, Khushi Mohammad, and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya) eventually fell victim to the great purges in 1937; see Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny*, 271, 274.

¹⁵⁶ Sourendra Mohan Ganguly, *Leftism in India: M. N. Roy and Indian Politics 1920–1948* (Calcutta: Minerva 1984), 1; Ray, *M. N. Roy: Philosopher-Revolutionary: A Symposium* (Calcutta: Renaissance Publishers 1959), 65.

¹⁵⁷ Ray, *In Freedom’s Quest* 1:21. For a fairly extensive account of subcontinental underground terrorism in the first decade of the 20th century, see Krüger, *Die Internationale Arbeiterbewegung* 1:194–208. For a (communist) review of the terrorists’ outlook, see Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 20–1; and for Roy’s own account, see Roy, *Memoirs*, 162–215.

escaped to the USA and later to Mexico, where he immersed himself in socialist politics and took part in the formation of the Mexican Communist Party.¹⁵⁸

To be sure, his political and personal views underwent considerable change. Roy himself spoke of a transition “from puritanism to liberation,”¹⁵⁹ and professed having “lived through a couple of centuries of cultural history” during his stay in America.¹⁶⁰ His first wife Evelyn Trent testified to the non-linear trajectory of the process of outgrowing traditional modes of thought by commenting diplomatically that “he had to pass through many evolutionary phases in his own development.”¹⁶¹ Political journalist Carleton Beals indicated as much in a retrospective appraisal of Roy: “Except for desiring Indian independence, he was in no sense a radical, for he believed firmly in child marriage, the caste system, and most of the traditional evils.”¹⁶²

Roy’s outlook still embraced the supremacy of Hindu culture. In the vein of Vivekananda, he counted the concepts of cosmic unity and of identity of the individual with the universe’s existence among “India’s contribution to the progress of humanity” in his 1918 pamphlet *India: Her Past, Present and Future*.¹⁶³ This included distaste for the political self-assertion of India’s Muslims, allegedly the culprits of the increasing inter-communal rift: since the partition of Bengal, “many thoughtless Moslems, inspired by the government, have committed crimes against the peace-loving Hindus.”¹⁶⁴ Suspecting the government’s evil machinations behind unpalatable developments was a pattern of interpretation popular not only with the Hindu right but also with leftists ever after—an overlap facilitating the transition from one to the other.

After his arrival in Mexico, Roy studied Hegel and Marx and turned towards socialism. His radical contributions to the Mexican Socialist Party’s paper attracted the attention of the Bolsheviks. The discussions with Mikhail Borodin, a Comintern emissary, accelerated Roy’s drift towards the left. Both had a part in the conversion of the Mexican Socialist Party

¹⁵⁸ This episode is well researched and can be found in greater detail in, for example, Cecil Kaye, *Communism in India: With Unpublished Documents from National Archives of India (1919–1924)*, reprint, ed. Roy Subodh (Calcutta: Eds. Indian 1971), 3; Narisetti Innaiah, *Evelyn Trent alias Shanthi Devi: Founder Member of Exile Indian Communist Party* (Hyderabad: Booklinks 1995), 16–17; Ganguly, *Leftism in India*, 4–6; on the intellectual background of Roy, see chapters 1 & 2 of Manjappa, *M. N. Roy: Marxism*, and condensed in Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “From Communism to ‘Social Democracy’: The Rise and Resilience of Communist Parties in India, 1920–1995,” *Social Science* 61, no. 1 (1997): 101.

¹⁵⁹ Leonard Gordon, “Portrait of a Bengal Revolutionary,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 27 (1967–8): 214.

¹⁶⁰ Roy, *Memoirs*, 225.

¹⁶¹ Roy, *Letter to Richard Park*, 8 June 1956, quoted in Innaiah, *Evelyn Trent*, 72.

¹⁶² Carleton Beals, *Glass Houses* (Philadelphia: Lippincott 1938), 44. Ray claims the opposite and portrays Roy as contemptuous of caste rules from an early stage: Ray, *In Freedom’s Quest* 1:21.

¹⁶³ *Selected Works of M. N. Roy*, ed. Sibnarayan Ray, vol. 1, 1917–1922 (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1987), 92.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

into the Mexican Communist Party, which eventually nominated Roy as a delegate to the II Comintern congress in Moscow in 1920.¹⁶⁵

Roy's case is a paradigmatic example of the emergence of subcontinental communism from a mixture of socialist and religious-nationalist thought. Although he gradually discarded the religious components of his outlook, they remained acceptable 'entry points' into communism—they had been part of his own experience and had constituted the ideological terrain on which Roy's communist consciousness eventually grew. This immensely facilitated the integration of other actors into the fold of communism, whose case was structurally similar: radical Muslims leaving the subcontinent to fight for the Ottoman caliphate on the one hand, and nationalist Sikh revolutionaries from the North America-based Ghadr party on the other.

II.1.2 Minority Responses: Ghadrites and the Muhajirin

Radical nationalism extended far beyond the Indian subcontinent and found one of its incarnations in an association of revolutionaries on the North American Pacific coast. Originally a more modest party, the involvement of Lala Har Dayal (1884–1939) led to its radicalization and rebranding under an unequivocal label, ghadr ("revolt"). Through its eponymous paper, the party declared itself to be an implacable "enemy of the British Raj" and exhorted "Indian young men" to "take up arms soon." Accordingly, *Ghadr* published poems glorifying the subcontinent's martial past. The Ghadrites made quick organizational advances and by 1914 had established branches in a number of countries outside North America.¹⁶⁶

The Ghadr Party is generally credited with commitment to secularism unattained by other contemporary outfits. Clause 10 of the party constitution declared religion the "individual concern of each member." Caste distinctions were to be abolished, and inter-

¹⁶⁵ Ganguly, *Leftism in India*, 4–8. The Communist Party of Mexico was the first of its kind outside revolutionary Russia.

¹⁶⁶ *Political Reports*, Home/Poll/1914 No. 42–43(a) January (quotes); Ajeet Javed, *Left Politics in Punjab 1935–47* (Delhi: Durga Publications 1988), 53–6. On revolutionary lyricism, see Ved Vatak, "Introduction," in *Ghadr Party's Lahore Conspiracy Case, 1915: Judgment* (Meerut: Archana Publications 2006), VIII.

dining was customary in the party ashram.¹⁶⁷ However, the party was quite homogenous and consisted overwhelmingly of Sikhs, among whom caste distinctions traditionally mattered less. Furthermore, conflicts and power struggles within the party could well develop into religious polarization. Also, Ghadr propaganda often picked up religious themes, such as accusing the British of destroying not only the subcontinent's temples, but also its religions proper.¹⁶⁸

Similar oddities abound in the short but turbulent history of the Ghadrites. One reason for their appeal was that notwithstanding the (sometimes utopian) calls for revolution, the Ghadrites largely conformed to subcontinental colonial modernity, where the communities were central instances for the articulation of political and social aspirations. Moving within these precincts, Ghadrite appeals often addressed the subcontinent's population in terms of their communal affiliation. Thus, *Ghadr* would woo the "Warrior Sikhs, Mussalmans and lion-hearted Rajputs,"¹⁶⁹ while Lala Har Dayal called on the "Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs [to] be brave sons of Mother India," and tried to rouse them into action on the grounds that

your temples and mosques are being pulled down. Your religion is not safe. You are forbidden to eat beef and pork by your religion, but the white people eat both daily. [...] From the mosques and temples they have driven out good people. There remain [...] titled gentry [who] are traitors to the country.¹⁷⁰

Obviously, the "titled gentry" were "traitors" in a much greater measure than "good" religious "people" could ever be. The real meaning of the Ghadrite pledges to secularism became apparent in Har Dayal's lament that the influence and status of religious institutions were currently unavailable to his revolutionary project.

The proximity of religious and revolutionary outlooks also appears in a 1914 letter from a Ghadrite to a correspondent in the Jullundur district. Written to convince the recipient, apparently an individual with a religious audience, to take up propaganda work in the British army, the letter exhibits the seamless transition of religious into revolutionary ideologemes: "Formerly you preached religion among the Sikhs. Now you must set aside thoughts of religion and give lectures about the country."¹⁷¹ *Ghadr*'s praise of the ruler of a princely state for donating to a religious school, taking exception only to its being run by

¹⁶⁷ Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Gadar Party: A Short History*, vol. 1 (Delhi: People's Publishing House 1977), 160 (quote); on caste, see *Ghadr Party's Lahore*, 83, and on the party's reputation, see Vatuk, "Introduction," ix–x.

¹⁶⁸ See *Ghadr Party's Lahore*, 68, 74, 80. On internecine struggles in the Ghadr Party, see Ray, *In Freedom's Quest* 1:48. See also *Ghadr Party* 2006, 56–7.

¹⁶⁹ *Ghadr*, 17 February 1914, quoted in Josh, *Hindustan Gadar Party* 1:178.

¹⁷⁰ *Ghadr*, 14 July 1914, quoted in *ibid.*, 192–3.

¹⁷¹ *Political Reports*, Home/Poll/1914 No. 124-28 (b) July.

Europeans, offered similar encouragement. Unsurprisingly, the Ghadrites also undertook to rouse Muslim sentiments on the khilafat issue.¹⁷²

Although religious revivalism was ultimately extrinsic to their vision, the Ghadrites exhibited few reservations to basing not only their propaganda, but also their activity on religious themes. Accordingly, when many returned to the subcontinent after the outbreak of war with a view to orchestrating a national upheaval, religious festivals were their first and foremost venues of mobilization.¹⁷³

A plot for a coordinated rebellion of army regiments on the subcontinent was foiled by the British, but this did not dispel their revolutionary grit. Many acknowledged that clandestine methods were unfit to tackle the complex constellations on the subcontinent, or reasoned that a revolution required expert support. The result was a gradual approximation to the Comintern and the involvement of Ghadrites in the CPI. A number of activists, among them Santokh Singh, proceeded to set up a communist organization in rural Punjab—the Kirti-Kisan Party (KKP)—and would maintain their own, to an extent ‘Sikh-ized,’ variety of peasant communism in an uneasy partnership with the provincial CPI unit (see also chapter V.1.3).¹⁷⁴

For all its impact on Muslim thought, the movement for inner-Islamic reform and strong attachment to British rule led by Syed Ahmad Khan in the second half of the 19th century had never been the uncontested representative of Muslim opinion. An anti-colonial strand had lingered on, represented by the inheritors of 19th century Wahhabism such as the Deoband school and the proponents of pan-Islamic sentiment. The latter had gained ground significantly after Jamal-ud-Din al-Afghani’s visit to the subcontinent in the 1880s.¹⁷⁵ Also, resentment against the colonial rulers increased in inverse proportion with the Ottoman Empire’s stature as the sole surviving Muslim power of note. The cession of Egypt, and notably the 1912 Balkan wars, increasingly painted the British as its main enemy.

On the subcontinent, the revocation of the Bengal partition in 1911, the denial of university status to the Muslim college in Aligarh in 1912, and the demolition of a mosque

¹⁷² *Ghadr Party’s Lahore*, 78, 84.

¹⁷³ Javed, *Left Politics in Punjab*, 62.

¹⁷⁴ On Ghadr-Comintern cooperation, see Home/Poll/1935 Nr. 7/6, 3. On the October revolution’s influence on Ghadrite thought, see Javed, *Left Politics in Punjab*, 64–7. On the evolution of the KKP and its nucleus, the paper *Kirti*, see Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism: An Autobiography* (Delhi: Patriot Publishers 1991), 200–7, and Josh, *Hindustan Gadar Party*, vol. 2, *Towards Scientific Socialism* (Delhi: People’s Publishing House 1978), 224–5.

¹⁷⁵ On al-Afghani’s legacy on the subcontinent see the benchmark study by Nikki Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani”: A Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1972), esp. 143–81.

in Kanpur for road construction in 1913 took a heavy toll on the British reputation among Muslims. These events confirmed a sense of marginalization and deprivation among a community not only behind in most social indicators, but also wary of Hindu revivalism. In response, religious identitarianism gained ground to such a degree that the community's relative outward calm was highly deceptive.¹⁷⁶

The simmering discontent erupted when the prospect of the Ottoman Empire's dismemberment became tangible after the end of the war. With the cession of all non-Turkic territories, the holy sites of Islam were in danger of coming under infidel control. Against this, a broad movement led by the Ali brothers emerged in 1919 and swelled into the largest popular Muslim upheaval against British rule since 1857. While this khilafat (caliphate) movement resulted from a plethora of different factors and motivations, it cast the multifarious discontent in an unambiguously religious mold.¹⁷⁷

Mohamed Ali had declared the Ottoman state's existence a "vital matter of faith" essential to any Muslim's "eternal salvation."¹⁷⁸ Other demands made by him and his brother Shaukat involved opposition to any restriction of the Ottoman Empire's power status; called for the restoration of Muslim holy sites, as well as territory lost in the past (namely Egypt, Tripoli, and possessions in the Balkans), to its tutelage; and claimed to respect the allegiance of Muslims to the caliph.¹⁷⁹ The movement's anti-imperialist scope was restricted to Muslim countries or communities. It demanded self-determination only for "the inhabitants of all territories that have been under Ottoman and other Moslem

¹⁷⁶ The development of (pan-Islamic) Muslim consciousness after 1857 cannot be traced in detail here. For an overview, see Khizar Ansari, "Pan-Islam and the Making of the Early Indian Muslim Socialists," *Modern Asian Studies* 20 (1986): 510–15, and M. Naeem Qureshi, "The Ulama of British India and the Hijrat of 1920," *Modern Asian Studies* 13 (1979): 41–4. The Kanpur mosque incident is discussed in Saad Khairi, *Jinnah Reinterpreted: The Journey from Indian Nationalism to Muslim Statehood* (Karachi: Oxford University Press 1995), 83–4; on the Aligarh issue, see Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London: Routledge 2000), 197.

¹⁷⁷ This diversity in motivations and aspirations is reflected in the widely diverging studies. A short—and not representative—range of assessments: Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press 1982) grounds the movement's religious dimension in a discourse analysis. Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 191–200, attributes its success to the effective transformation of specific issues related to Ottoman rule into a general Muslim feeling of being disadvantaged; Pakistani historian Saad Khairi, *Jinnah Reinterpreted*, 171, embraces it as "a religious movement for and in the name of Islam." Conversely, to Bipan Chandra, *History of Modern India*, 294, it was "an aspect of the general spread of anti-imperialist feelings among the Muslims"; Ghosh, *The Communist Party of India*, 13, pigeon-holes it among the national revolutionary currents; and Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 72, deems it a "militant political act [...] to liberate their native land."

¹⁷⁸ "Letter from Mohamed Ali and Shaukat Ali to the Viceroy," 24 April 1919, in *Unpublished Letters of the Ali Brothers*, ed. Shan Muhammad (Delhi: Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i-Delli 1979), 155.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 155–62.

Government,” supervised by a predominantly Muslim board consisting of “Rulers of Muslim Indian States, divines and political leaders.”¹⁸⁰

If the demands were not met, the question arose whether “we and other Indian Mussulmans can any longer remain under British subjection.”¹⁸¹ The demand for conservation of the caliphate pointed to the feasibility of infidel rule in India. This connection yielded two possibilities. First, allying with the emerging Congress-led non-cooperation movement against British rule, an opportunity eagerly seized upon by Mohandas Gandhi. Second, to escape illegitimate British rule through a large-scale emigration movement, the hijrat.¹⁸²

This movement of emigration began in earnest in summer 1920, “when batch after batch of Muslims [...] left India for Afghanistan on the pretext that they would not stay in a country and under a Government which was oppressing their co-religionists in Turkey and elsewhere.”¹⁸³ Amir Amanullah of Afghanistan fueled the drive to leave by promising plots of land and loans to the muhajirin (emigrants), fanning their “millenarian hopes” for a religiously and materially better life.¹⁸⁴ By mid-August, more than 40,000 people had departed for Afghanistan. At that point, probably dissatisfied with the predominantly low social profile of most of the arrivals, Amanullah closed the borders again, leading to the hijrat’s “sudden [...] collapse.”¹⁸⁵

Smaller, more radical groups among the emigrants had left with the aim of fighting actively—either for the preservation of the caliphate or, from outside, against infidel British rule. Already in 1915, a party of Muslim students had left Lahore in order to foment a revolution among the tribes in Afghanistan and the NWFP. Several of them joined Obeidullah Sindhi’s “army of god.” It was to fight for the subcontinent’s liberation under pan-Islamist auspices.¹⁸⁶ These first muhajirin built a network of contacts throughout

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 162.

¹⁸¹ “Letter from Mohamed Ali and Shaukat Ali to the Viceroy,” 24 April 1919, in *ibid.*, 155. See also the resolutions of the annual khilafat conferences in, for example, *Fortnightly Reports*, Home/Poll/1920 Nr. 89 July, 10–12.

¹⁸² For a detailed study on the hijrat, see Dietrich Reetz, *Hijrat: The Flight of the Faithful; A British File on the Exodus of Muslim Peasants from North India to Afghanistan in 1920* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch 1995).

¹⁸³ Lalan Prasad Sinha, *The Left-Wing in India, 1919–47* (Muzaffarpur: New Publ. 1965), 73. For an overview of the attitudes of different factions of the Muslim clergy towards the exodus, see Qureshi, *The Ulama*.

¹⁸⁴ Reetz, *Hijrat: The Flight*, 81–2.

¹⁸⁵ *Fortnightly Reports*, Home/Poll/1920 Nr. 112 August, 19 (quote). The sudden closure of the borders left thousands dead and tens of thousands stranded. On this oft-omitted chapter of the khilafat movement, see Qureshi, *The Ulama*, 53–7; and also Ansari, *Pan-Islam and the Making*, 521.

¹⁸⁶ Home/Poll/1921 June Nr. 187, 17; Kaye, *Communism in India*, 9, 340. According to Barooah, Sindhi was just “another pan-Islamite Indian”: Nirode Barooah, *Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), 64. For an in-depth study of the Indian Provisional Government and its revolutionary legacy, see *ibid.*, 39–66; see also Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 21–3.

Central Asia with other revolutionaries such as Mahendra Pratap, Mohammed Barakatullah, and Abdur Rab Barq, as well as, last but not least, the Bolsheviks. In fact, a vigorous revolutionary traffic took place between Kabul and Soviet Turkestan. Although actual cooperation was limited, the connections upon which the next generation of muhajirin would draw had been established.¹⁸⁷

In July 1920, the first caravan of determined young men set out towards Soviet Turkestan, arriving in Tashkent in October.¹⁸⁸ Despite endeavors to win the emigrants over, the Bolsheviks did not “put any pressure upon these pro-Khilafat people” and readily brought the most fervent ones to the Turkish border.¹⁸⁹ In Tashkent, the muhajirin hoped to receive military training and assistance for their cause. However, this was to happen only indirectly. Instead, Roy, the new Comintern in charge of revolution on the subcontinent, went about organizing them according to the approach he had developed at the 2nd World Congress of the Comintern just a few months before. The Communist Party of India (CPI) would be the ultimate result of his efforts.

II.1.3 “Closest Contact with the Broadest Sections”: The Comintern

The Communist International (Comintern) had been founded in March 1919 as the instrument to spread revolution around the globe. Although the Bolsheviks’ primary hopes hinged on Europe, the attention paid to colonial countries—especially in Asia—increased at the same time as revolutionary hopes in the old world crumbled. Convened in July and August 1920, the Comintern’s 2nd World Congress was the stage for a first surge of interest in the extra-European world.

Although technically a delegate of the Mexican communist party, Roy spoke for India during the proceedings, and instantly shot to prominence by challenging Lenin’s approach to revolution in the colonial countries. The issue revolved around the role of the colonial

¹⁸⁷ For an exhaustive account of Indian (revolutionary) involvement in Central Asia see G. L. Dmitriev, *Indian Revolutionaries in Central Asia* (Gurgaon: Hope India Publ. 2002), chapter 1. On the family background of the émigrés’ radicalism, see Ansari, “Pan-Islam and the Making,” 530.

¹⁸⁸ See the vivid (second-hand) account of the journey in Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 161–6, the colorful personal reminiscences in Shaukat Usmani, *Historic Trips of a Revolutionary: Sojourn in the Soviet Union* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers 1977), 3–44, and the well-researched section in Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 73–81.

¹⁸⁹ Usmani, *Historic Trips*, 43. Ironically, their journey ended there as the Turkish authorities had no intention to allow them in: Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 79 (footnote).

bourgeoisie: Lenin held it to be a progressive force destined to vanquish imperialism, which artificially kept feudalism alive, and to bring about a democratic revolution. In contrast, Roy insisted that the bourgeoisie was not sufficiently differentiated economically from the feudal order and hence would not overcome it. Their differences were clear when it came to the issue of Gandhi. Lenin deemed him a revolutionary in his capacity as an inspirer and leader of a nationalist mass movement; to Roy, he was a toothless religious revivalist and social reactionary. In the end, a compromise was reached. It provided for the limitation of communist support to “revolutionary” nationalist movements as opposed to “bourgeois democratic” ones, and emphasized the primacy of working-class agitation.¹⁹⁰

Roy’s rejection of cooperation with the subcontinent’s bourgeoisie does not mean that he didn’t subscribe to anti-imperialism. In fact, he attributed an even more pivotal role to anti-imperialism than Lenin.¹⁹¹ Nor was he an anti-nationalist. Rather, his ardent nationalism could not coexist with rival bourgeois nationalism, and one exhibiting casteist social conservatism coupled with moderate means of struggle at that. In Roy’s eyes, this was far from fulfilling the modernizing tasks communists associated with the bourgeoisie, which consisted of de-feudalization and radical homogenization of the population’s mainstay into expropriated proletarians. Gandhi’s principled opposition to modern industry showcased this lack of commitment to historical progress as understood by the communists. Against this, ‘proper’ nationalism was to achieve liberation from the “absolutism of reaction, embodied in landlordism and all the economic backwardness, social prejudice, intellectual stagnation, religious bigotry etc. that go with it.”¹⁹²

Yet the laws of history as identified by historical materialism were not easily muted. If it didn’t feature in bourgeois nationalism, progressive transformation—inevitably taking place—materialized ‘behind’ the revivalist non-cooperation movement. In order to identify a concrete agent, and hence present an alternative point of intervention, Roy had to substantiate this notion where it was at least not vocally contradicted—in the movement’s

¹⁹⁰ Priestland, *Weltgeschichte des Kommunismus*, 296. The episode and the theoretical conflict are well documented in existing studies. The most in-depth discussion can be found in Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 126–58. See also Ganguly, *Leftism in India*, 10–14, who along with Ghosh, *The Communist Party of India*, 10–11, accuses Roy of ignorance and left-sectarianism; Saiyid, *Exporting Communism*, 30–1, approaches Roy’s position more emphatically; Roy, *Memoirs*, 379, explores the differences on the figure of Gandhi; Sinha, *The Left Wing*, 25–6, traces the conflict back to the socialist Second International. The basic question would often resurface, notably in the major policy shifts of 1928 (leftward) and 1935 (rightward)

¹⁹¹ Roy had originally stipulated that separating the colonies from the motherland was a prerequisite for the revolution’s success even in Europe. See Manabendra Nath Roy, “Original Draft of Supplementary Theses on the National and Colonial Question,” in Ray, *Selected Works of M. N. Roy* 1:165–8. Roy remained deeply skeptical of the Indian bourgeoisie throughout his political career, and in his later days developed a poignant cultural critique of Indian nationalism.

¹⁹² “Our Programme,” *Vanguard*, 15 March 1923.

mass following. If the leaders so blatantly refused to tread their supposed historical path, the ‘masses’ had to take their place.¹⁹³ Roy was not isolated in his views. Many delegates agreed on the necessity and feasibility of reaching out to the quasi-automatically revolutionary ‘masses’—a term that had come to be used more or less interchangeably with ‘working class.’ Lenin himself emphasized the transferability of revolutionary organization: With a little cultural adaptation, peasant and worker Soviets were equally suited to ‘backward’ countries as to capitalist ones and should be set up immediately. Therefore, Zinoviev viewed the most important task of a communist party as maintaining “*closest contact* with the broadest sections of proletarians.”¹⁹⁴

Engineering a sufficiently ‘correct’ mindset among the population was to be attained by a three-pronged approach. First was Amadeo Bordiga’s call for a “simple and clear way of expression” in propaganda work.¹⁹⁵ Second, according to Roy the revolt of the ‘masses’ proceeded “in many cases unconsciously,” which lowered the requirements for suitable manifestations.¹⁹⁶ And third, in view of the resentment bred by foreign occupation and exploitation, the *Resolution on the National and Colonial Question* reasoned that

this requires the class-conscious proletariat of all countries to exercise special care and special attention towards the—in itself outdated—national sentiments in the countries and peoples enslaved for a long time, and obliges it to make concessions to help eliminate distrust and prejudices.¹⁹⁷

Yet these “concessions” allowed for subtle differences in the best tradition of an Eastern revolution: While communists were to struggle against the “reactionary and medieval” influence of Christian missionaries, pan-Islamism was considered problematic only insofar as it strengthened rival imperialisms and the position of the upper strata in Muslim societies.¹⁹⁸ In contrast to Christianity, which was ideologically dangerous because of its cultural link to imperialist countries, ‘grass-roots’ Islamism evaded the communist ban. Quite the opposite: Delegate Kohn emphasized connective “primitive communist” elements in Muslim law proper.¹⁹⁹ And Dutch-Indonesian delegate Henk Sneevliet, referring to those Muslim delegates who had made it to Moscow as “our communist hajis,” called for

¹⁹³ Roy acknowledged as much later; see Roy, *Memoirs*, 413.

¹⁹⁴ *Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunistischen Internationale: Protokoll der Verhandlungen vom 19. Juli in Petrograd und vom 23. Juli bis 7. August 1920 in Moskau* (Hamburg: Hoym 1921), 118–19, 141–2.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 424.

¹⁹⁶ Roy, “Original Draft of Supplementary Theses,” 168.

¹⁹⁷ *Der Zweite Kongress*, 230.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

alignment with a broad Javanese movement of civil unrest under the auspices of the Sarekat Islam, which fought against “sinful capitalism.”²⁰⁰

The revolutionary gear of the early 1920s included rather than sidelined pan-Islamism. Although the colonial question was largely sidelined at the 1921 third congress, the Comintern emblemized its approach to revolution in the East by allotting scarce speaking time to the “Committee of Revolutionary Muslimhood” campaigning against the “subjugation of the Muslims.” Committee leader Machul Bey called on the Soviet state to guarantee the “rights and liberties” of the Soviet Muslims, who had suffered an unspeakable plight under the Czarist—that is, infidel—government. On his part, Zinoviev was certain he was dealing with a “truly revolutionary movement of oppressed peoples” worthy of the support of the world’s proletariat.²⁰¹

At the fourth congress in 1922, delegate van Ravesteijn worked himself into an outright pan-Islamic mania:

The revolution that has gripped the entire orient and will lead it to utter political independence is irresistible [...] This is the pan-Islamic movement. [...] Islam is the bond uniting all Islamites against the capitalist world. Islam is more than a creed; it is a complete social system, it is a civilization with a philosophy, culture, art of its own, and [...] it has become an organic whole conscious of itself. [...] In this momentous fight, it is the duty of the revolutionary proletariat [...] to grant moral and political support.²⁰²

Indonesian delegate Tan Malaka similarly promoted the inclusion of pan-Islamism. A united anti-imperialist front had to entail support for the war of liberation waged by hundreds of millions of aggressive, active Muslims. Neither Radek nor Zinoviev indicated dissent. Despite occasional cautions, the Comintern proved faithful to the slogan given by Karl Radek back at the third congress: “*To the Masses*. Each day that this does not happen is a lost day for communism.”²⁰³

Evidently, these statements have to be viewed in the context of contemporary revolutionary enthusiasm. World revolution still seemed both imminent and inevitable. There was little need felt for careful differentiation between revolutionary currents, as all of them (including religious ones) would eventually converge in the great socialist transformation. Direct mass

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 192, 196.

²⁰¹ *Protokoll des III. Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale: Moskau, 22. Juni bis 12. Juli 1921* (Hamburg: Hoym 1921), 1003–10. See also Ganguly, *Leftism in India*, 38.

²⁰² *Bericht über den IV. Kongress der Kommunistischen Internationale: Petrograd-Moskau vom 5. November bis 5. Dezember 1922* (Hamburg: Hoym 1923), 131–2.

²⁰³ *Protokoll des III. Kongresses*, 448; Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* 1:480–2. The approximation to grass-roots Islamism was a lasting affair. See the emphatic defense of the Sarekat Islam and “Muslim communism” in Dingley, *The Peasants’ Movement in Indonesia* (Berlin: R- L. Prager 1927).

action rather than accurate criticism was the order of the day. Therefore, simplified propaganda was to achieve what little politicization was regarded necessary to initiate a revolutionary process. In a typically Marxist disdain of appearance, communists regarded this process as developing largely ‘unconsciously’—or even chose, in an Eastern vein, to embrace movements precisely *because* of their religious militancy, as Roy would himself do with regard to the Akalis. Conversely, Lenin’s consistent exhortations to adapt the revolutionary instruments to conditions on the ground acknowledged the limits of revolutionary universalism, and prepared the stage for the creative and culturally situated intervention of communists on the spot.

In this spirit, Roy proceeded with the setting up of a provisional Central Indian Revolutionary Committee headed by himself. Upon receiving news of the arrival of militant emigrants from the subcontinent, he journeyed to Tashkent with two trainloads of military supplies intended for the training of the muhajirin.²⁰⁴

II.1.4 The Tashkent Party Forge

After arriving on 1 October 1920, Roy entered into a fierce competition with the Indian Revolutionary Association around Abdur Rab and Tirumal Acharya for the allegiance of the emigrants.²⁰⁵ After all, the muhajirin presented potentially valuable material and hence credibility to any revolutionary. Roy, the ‘new man’ replete with arms and the Comintern’s back-up, was the best-placed contender, determined to channel the emigrants’ anti-British passions into communist corridors. A special school—the “Induskii Kurs”—providing extensive military training was set up, yet it soon became clear that this would not suffice.²⁰⁶ As Roy wondered retrospectively, “what would most of them do with their guns, and whom would they fight, and for what ideal?” Most of the emigrants were “not even nationalists.”

²⁰⁴ CPI(M): *History of the Communist Movement in India*, vol. 1, *The Formative Years, 1920–1933* (Delhi: CPI[M] Publications 2005), 33–4; Kaye, *Communism in India*, 4.

²⁰⁵ Usmani, *Historic Trips*, 47. On the inter-factional recriminations, see Roy, *Memoirs*, 465; for a refutation of Roy see Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 54; and for a detailed account of the episode see Dmitriev, *Indian Revolutionaries*, 116–20.

²⁰⁶ *Judgement of the Sessions Judge, Peshawar Division*, Home/Poll/1923 Nr. 62, 2–3. See also Roy: *Memoirs*, 419–20; Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 34; Ansari, *Pan-Islam and the Making*, 528; Harkishan Singh Surjeet, *March of the Communist Movement in India: An Introduction to the Documents of the Communist Movement in India* (Calcutta: National Book Agency 1998), 23.

Upon seeing his new wards for the first time, the school's drillmaster remarked: "We are going to train not an army of revolution, but an army of God."²⁰⁷

It didn't take much to arrive at this conclusion. For once, the emigrants had soon established a habit of complaining about the ritual purity of the food. Also, a paper, *Zamindar*, was edited "on the Islamic grounds" with the involvement of the future first secretary of the CPI, Mohammed Shafiq.²⁰⁸ Further illustration is provided by the case of one of the emigrants, Maula Baksh (1901–1978), alias Shaukat Usmani, from Bikaner. He would be a leading light in subcontinental communism's first years while never changing his nom de guerre, which translates into "glory of Osmania."²⁰⁹ In much the same vein as Barakatullah, he emphasized the congeniality of communism and religion. Even long after joining the CPI, Usmani wrote to Roy that "Islam preaches equality, so does Communism. That is why I am a Communist."²¹⁰ To be more precise, he was both—moving in the murky overlap of the two currents constitutive for revolution in the East.

These circumstances didn't deter Roy from carrying on with the education of his wards—after all, they were all he had, and the contemporary mood in the young Soviet state was all for the inclusive mobilization of Muslims. What happened then is a matter of contention. According to Roy's self-apologetic version, which unfortunately is the only available 'thick' first-hand description, the lessons at the school had not been geared towards changing the emigrants' established modes of thought. Rather, they had aimed at incorporating the émigrés' revolutionary fervor in its contemporary state: courses were "delivered by several of their own fellow-religionists, did not mention the word 'Communism' nor made any disrespectful reference to religion, which pacified the recalcitrant lot." Instead, the classes aimed at providing the muhajirin with the minimum consciousness for a "national democratic revolution."²¹¹

Moisej Persits, on the other hand, alleges that this was the very objective that Roy failed to accomplish. A disappointed Roy had found that the muhajirin were "lacking in even the

²⁰⁷ All quotes in Roy, *Memoirs*, 467. For a detailed account of the military training received by the arrivals see Dmitriev, *Indian Revolutionaries*, 122–4.

²⁰⁸ Both accounts are given in *Judgement in the Case of Crown vs. Mohammed Shafique*, in PCJ 1924/341, 4469–70, 4473 (quote). For the food episode, see also Usmani, *Historic Trips*, 48.

²⁰⁹ Roy concurs that Usmani's reputation among his fellow émigrés had been one of a staunch Muslim: Roy, *Memoirs*, 465. On his mid- and long-term impact on South Asian communism see Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 35, and Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought among North Indian Muslims (1917–1947)* (Lahore: Book Traders 1990), 73.

²¹⁰ Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 119. Sarkisyanz referred to an unnamed Indian communist of Islamic background, for whom communism's allure was linked to the feeling of "dissolving the personality in a great light," reminding him of Sufism: Sarkisyanz, *Russland und der Messianismus*, 280.

²¹¹ Roy, *Memoirs*, 461, 466.

most elementary political consciousness [...] they came to fight for Islam, not for India.”²¹² Roy’s propaganda work accordingly “affronted [the] ideals” of the ‘national revolutionaries,’ “which was quite inadmissible [!].”²¹³ Consequently, Persits labels the nascent party as notoriously unpopular among the émigrés. However, irrespective of who is right, both Roy and Persits agree that a ‘correct’ Leninist indoctrination consisted of “political education compatible with [the émigrés’] mode of thinking, with their mentality, [...] traditions and religion.”²¹⁴ At a time when Stalin declared his tolerance of the Dagestani sharia, this was a compelling testimony of revolutionary aspirations.

Roy later justified his decision to work with the muhajirin by a more ‘rational’ commitment to Islam on their part. Despite a deep emotional attachment to Islam, they seemed to respond better to his injunctions than he had “expected and wanted. Most of them transferred their fanatical allegiance from Islam to Communism.” Having experienced a similar “sudden jump” himself just recently, he was far from problematizing such “instinctive idealism” among his flock. Nor did he care to scrutinize the particular mixture of communist and religious elements that had enabled them to suddenly agree on the necessity of a “Communist revolution. I was surprised when some of them approached me with the proposal that they wanted to join the Communist Party,” or set it up right away.²¹⁵ Being a reluctant “father of Indian communism” propelled by the urges of his fanatical students, the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary expansionism, and the competition of Acharya’s and Rab’s Indian Revolutionary Association alike, little choice apparently remained to Roy but to proceed with the foundation of the CPI.²¹⁶

In contrast, Persits reproaches Roy for having decided on founding the party even before having reached Tashkent. This seems plausible: Having passed through Berlin on his way to Moscow in 1920, Roy was aware of the group of veteran Indian revolutionaries around Virendranath Chattopadhyaya and Bhupendranath Datta. These renowned and well-connected revolutionary nationalists were just about to try and gain Bolshevik support. Hence it seems likely that Roy was eager to create hard facts, however embarrassing the muhajirin episode might appear to the post-Marxist stance permeating his *Memoirs*.²¹⁷

²¹² *Report of the Revolutionary Committee*, quoted in *ibid.*, 193.

²¹³ Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 194. See also Roy, *Memoirs*, 464.

²¹⁴ *Report by A. Schulman*, quoted in Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 195–6.

²¹⁵ All quotes in Roy, *Memoirs*, 464.

²¹⁶ Pankaj Kumar, *Communist Movement in India* (Delhi: Criterion Publ. 1989), 8.

²¹⁷ Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 192. See Barooah, *Chatto: The Life and Times*, 160–70, and also Kaye, *Communism in India*, 4–5, 11, and 56–8, on the rivalries between the émigré revolutionaries. Despite his initial surge of prestige, it took Roy until 1922 to become a candidate member for the Comintern’s executive committee and until 1924 to become a full voting member: Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 44.

Other factors also favor an active role for Roy. The only biographical account of the episode apart from Roy's—a short passage in Usmani's recollections—emphasizes his decisive role.²¹⁸ Equally critically, Roy was eager to substantiate the vision he had expounded at the 2nd Comintern congress: the vision of instant mass revolution as a united front with the nationalist bourgeoisie. In these circumstances, the muhajirin at Tashkent were a godsend. On the ideological side of things, Roy himself had only recently worked actively for 'Muslim liberation' after the conquest of Bokhara. There is little reason to suggest that the radicalism of fanatical, anti-British Muslims should have discouraged him now when he had unhesitatingly undertaken to harmonize Islamic culture and Bolshevik revolution just weeks before.

The new party was a manageable organization. M. N. and Evelyn Roy, Mukherjee and his wife Rosa Fitingov, Acharya, Shafiq (the first party secretary), and Khushi Mohammad (aliases Mohamed Ali and Sepassi) were the founding members. The latter two had unquestionable credentials as 'revolutionaries'—Shafiq had edited *Zamindar* and worked closely with Barakatullah, Mohammad had occupied a senior rank in Sindhi's "army of god" back in Kabul. Along with the rest of the 'second-generation' muhajirin, Usmani remained outside the party for lack of "knowledge of Marxism" and for being at odds with communist imperatives of liberation.²¹⁹

However, both were soon to be imparted to him. When the Comintern realized in spring 1921 that the would-be communists in Tashkent spent undue amounts of time on factional rivalries, while political indoctrination made only lackluster progress, it was determined to shift the operation to more professional surroundings. This introduced the final chapter of the muhajirin episode: The completion of their ideological training at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East.²²⁰

²¹⁸ Usmani, *Historic Trips*, 47–8.

²¹⁹ Kaye, *Communism in India*, 340; Usmani, *Historic Trips*, 46–7. Shafiq's association with the CPI seems to have been a short-lived one: After having been arrested on his way back to the subcontinent, he was convicted in the Peshawar Conspiracy Case and migrated to Afghanistan after his release, where his traces vanish: Home/Poll/1924 Nr. 261, 51.

²²⁰ Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 207.

II.1.5 Imparting Revolution

Reflecting the eastward shift of Soviet attention, the KUTV (Communist University of the Toilers of the East) had been established in 1921. Its curriculum was tailored to Bolshevik notions of revolution “adapted to Eastern conditions.” Students hailed from all parts of Asia and the traditional dresses they wore made for a colorful mixture. A year after its inauguration, the university had over 700 students from 57 nationalities, who had come to learn the “rudiments of communism.”²²¹

The institution’s main goal was to “train the future [...] leaders of the more primitive sections of the [Soviet] Republic.” Ongoing Basmachi resistance in Central Asia had awoken the Bolsheviks to the adverse effects of excessive religious encouragement outside of Soviet tutelage, and hence pan-Islamism was not endorsed. A leading official stated that the “fight [against imperialism] must be carried on in the name of international communism and the right of every people to self-determination, not through appeals to racial and religious prejudice and fanaticism.” Professedly unaware of the close conceptual proximity of the two, the university aimed at endowing its students with the necessary skills to become “leaders in their communities.”²²²

However, this did not mean that metaphysics were categorically rejected within the KUTV’s framework. Ernestine Evans, a journalist who wrote down her experiences in the young Soviet state in the travelogue *Looking East from Moscow*, described the KUTV as an undertaking to reconcile the nationalism of the (former) colonies with the internationalist outlook of the ‘Workers’ Country.’²²³ In Soviet practice, this entailed bestowing the blessing of revolutionary universalism upon national and cultural particularisms. For example, Zinoviev castigated the double oppression national communities had suffered at the hands of the nobility and the bourgeoisie in Czarist Russia. Yet there was hope, as he claimed that the victorious Bolsheviks had in a couple of months restored what both groups had been destroying for centuries.²²⁴

²²¹ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* 1:269; Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 37. The institution’s full name was “Kommunistitscheskii Universitet Trudiaschchikhsia Vostoka”; it is also known as Stalin university: Kaye, *Communism in India*, 5.

²²² All quotes in A. C. Freeman, “Russia’s University of Oriental Communism,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, April 1923, 74–5.

²²³ P. C. Joshi’s excerpts from the book are with the P. C. Joshi Archive of Contemporary History, Delhi: PCJ 1920/9, 2. See also Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism*, 110.

²²⁴ PCJ 1920/9, 6.

The long-term merits of this avowal may be doubted, especially in view of later, more gruffly nationalist policies. However, Zinoviev's revivalist thrust also has a claim to communist legitimacy, and informed the three basic principles guiding university life: because of the collective-cultural notions connected to the first two—equality and companionship—they were necessarily complemented by the third: religious tolerance.²²⁵

In this light, Kaye's supposition that most muhajirin "seem to have accepted Roy's proposals [to join courses at the KUTV] as the only means" to obtain food rations seems misplaced.²²⁶ Similarly, Ansari's claim that the "experiments" with the muhajirin had ended in failure may be doubted. Even allowing for the fact that many among them "clung to Islam and stubbornly resisted socialist ideas," his finding assumes a fundamental irreconcilability of the two.²²⁷ However, their juxtaposition finds little substance in the contemporary circumstances. Soviet self-determination, that is, emancipation of collectives and their cultures from the foreign-dominated past and present had superseded the emancipation of classes and individuals from these very collectives and cultures.

Therefore, Ansari's verdict misses the contemporary horizons of revolution. If anything, the remarkable fact is not that one portion of the muhajirin refused to be drawn into the socialist orbit, but that another did not. Given the émigrés' background, it is indeed highly probable that not all of them were intrigued by socialist tenets and Soviet advances. However, this is at least as likely to have been a question of class (most were from the middle class) as of religion: As long as it was part of a diffuse conglomerate of national and cultural sentiments of the 'masses,' religion tended to be accommodated by the Bolsheviks—in contrast to explicit bourgeois-ness, which entailed social aloofness. It was perfectly feasible for the muhajirin to cling to the Islam of the 'masses' and embrace the brand of anti-imperialist revolution the Bolsheviks had designed for the East.

This is also the best approximation to an answer to the question of the kind of 'communism' that had led the khilafat radicals to transfer "their fanatical allegiance from Islam to Communism," as Roy had observed. As he was involved in the running of the KUTV and held classes, he took an active part in the transition process. It was further aided and influenced by a prominent faction among the institution's staff: Sultangaliev's Muslim national communists. They left their imprint on the South Asian students, not least among

²²⁵ Ansari, *Pan-Islam and the Making*, 535.

²²⁶ Kaye, *Communism in India*, 8.

²²⁷ Ansari, *Pan-Islam and the Making*, 536. M. Naeem Qureshi concurs that most emigrants had found Bolshevism "unpalatable": *Pan-Islam in British Indian politics: A Study of the Khilafat Movement, 1918–24* (Leiden: Brill 1999), 226.

them Roy who, by virtue of his connections to South and East Asia, became the “main channel through which Soviet Muslim national communist ideas were spread to the Third World.”²²⁸

A number of the muhajirin joined the CPI after having received instruction at the KUTV. Shaukat Usmani would become a key figure in the first decade of South Asia’s communism. Abdul Majid, besides doing lackluster party work, was later one of the co-founders of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (Indian Youth League), which he set up together with Bhagat Singh.²²⁹ Fazl Elahi Malik, aliases Krishnamurti and Qurban, worked closely with Roy and became an “important communist agent.”²³⁰ Along with Feroz al-din Mansur, another future member of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, he was active in the Communist Party of Pakistan in the 1950s, even becoming its general secretary.²³¹ Rahmat Ali, alias Zakaria, like Khushi Mohammad an erstwhile member of the Indian Provisional Government and the “army of god,” obtained a PhD from the Sorbonne with a study on the subcontinent’s ‘communal problem’ (see chapter IV.2.2). Khushi Muhammad worked as a communist organizer in Europe, became managing director of the *Masses of India*, the CPI’s organ in the mid-1920s, and was convicted in the Meerut conspiracy case following his return to India. Both hailed from the “radically-inclined circles of Indo-Muslims intelligentsia” and sported a remarkable track record of Muslim extremism.²³²

The KUTV remained popular. A 1937 British report estimated that a total of sixty students from the subcontinent had been educated at the institution; the actual number is probably considerably higher. Disappointed radical nationalists, members of the erstwhile Indian Provisional Government, and Ghadr militants from North America enrolled at the KUTV in search of a new revolutionary path. In this manner, Santokh Singh and Ratan Singh, two Ghadrites and future originators of the Punjab communist movement, found their way from the USA to Moscow.²³³

²²⁸ Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism*, 111. Innaiah, *Evelyn Trent*, 21, 113, corroborates Roy’s claim to have played an important role in the institution (*Memoirs*, 553) as a co-founder and director.

²²⁹ Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought*, 80–2; for his further activities see Philip Spratt, *Blowing up India: Reminiscences and Reflections of a Former Comintern Emissary* (Calcutta: Prachi Prakashan 1955), 37–8.

²³⁰ Foreign/Poll/1927 Nr.668, quoted in Subodh Roy, ed., *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents*, vol. 1, 1925–1934 (Calcutta: National Book Agency 1972), 18.

²³¹ Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought*, 81; Spratt, *Blowing up India*, 34.

²³² Dmitriev, *Indian Revolutionaries*, 36 (quote); Roy, *Communism in India* 1:7–8; Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 53. Khushi Mohammad returned to Europe after the Meerut Conspiracy Case and was executed during the great purges in the Soviet Union: Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny*, 274.

²³³ Persits, *Revolutionaries of India*, 209. For the report see Home/Poll/1937 Nr.7/7.

Apart from a crew to man the ranks, the Soviet episode had assisted in the establishment of a *modus operandi* under subcontinental conditions. Clearly committed to adapting to “conditions in the East,” the new party moved in the muddy waters of elements of communism and anti-imperialist religious ideologemes, which converged into the commitment to work for revolution on the subcontinent under anti-British, but not necessarily secular—let alone atheist—axioms.

From spring 1921, the ex-muhajirin returned to India in groups. Most were intercepted at Peshawar and jailed as Bolshevik agents, effectively preventing them from participating in the fledgling communist movement.²³⁴ Together with the lukewarm commitment to party work many exhibited afterwards, this prompted Philip Spratt, a British communist and emissary of the CPGB to the subcontinent, to comment that the muhajirin “were, altogether, a disappointment.”²³⁵ This does not hold on two counts. First, some of them did indeed become important actors in the development of South Asian communism. Second, despite the unsatisfying ratio between hopes and investments on the one hand and concrete political returns on the other, the muhajirin episode was seminal as a testing ground for the integration of radical left-wing and religious outlooks.²³⁶

II. 2 Indigenous Communism?

II.2.1 Subcontinental Socialisms

For quite some time before the appearance of communism, the subcontinent’s political scene had been embroiled in a state of political turmoil. This had come about as the result of (a) the tense economic situation, (b) widespread discontent over inadequate political gains as a reward for the subcontinent’s loyalty during and contribution to the war (the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919), (c) anti-liberal British post-war laws (notably the Rowlatt Act), (d) Muslim khilafat woes, and (e) the excesses of British repression, culminating in the

²³⁴ There were five Peshawar Conspiracy Cases between 1922 and 1927, in which a total of 17 accused were tried, and 13 sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. See *Judgment of the Sessions Judge, Peshawar Division*, Home/Poll/1923 Nr. 62, 2–3; Home/Poll/1921 Nr. 287 June 1921, 9; Foreign/Poll/1927, Nr. 668f.

²³⁵ Spratt, *Blowing up India*, 37.

²³⁶ Other party stalwarts acknowledged as much. According to Surjeet, the muhajirin contributed substantially to the development of the communist movement: *Documents* 1:ix. See also E. M. S. Namboodiripad, “The Communists’ Contribution to the Theory and Practice of Indian Politics,” *Documents* 1:1.

1919 Jalianwalla Bagh massacre. When Gandhi assumed leadership of the protest movement in 1920, it underwent a pronounced change towards mass action and religious revivalism. Two non-domestic influences compounded the situation: The mass return of demobilized, and to an extent politicized, soldiers and a spirit of revolutionary hope fostered by the October Revolution.²³⁷

Given this turbulent background, it is little wonder that the revolutionaries-turned-communists were not the only ones to respond to the sudden acuteness of socialism. Even though there had been no prior socialist movement, let alone a Marxist one, developments in Russia had been carefully registered. Revolutionary socialism, and notably Lenin himself, enjoyed a broad and often benevolent reception in nationalist and national revolutionary circles, where both were connected to (and resonated in) religious idioms and notions. Already before the war, Lala Har Dayal's 1912 biography of Karl Marx had portrayed him as a modern-day rishi, a religious scholar or wise man. Fittingly, the book opened with a citation from the gospel of Matthew.²³⁸

More prominent, however, were references to reformist Hinduism's egalitarian and utopian socialist strand from the mid-19th century, which had been actualized by the swadeshi movement: In 1907, Aurobindo Ghosh had declared that the future belonged to socialism—a socialism rooted in the rejection of materialism and an embrace of 'Eastern' spiritualism. Of all things, he envisioned the Hindu concept of caste as the means to purify socialism of its obnoxious fixation on economic categories. Vivekananda similarly deemed 'caste' the original abode of socialism.²³⁹

The later reception of Bolshevism went down a similar path. Tilak considered its principles to be rooted in the Gitas and Shastras. In a 1920 speech, he opined that in Bolshevism labor ruled over capital, just as in Hinduism and Islam, and advocated for Bolshevism on this basis. Bipin Chandra Pal, addressing a Vaishnavite rally in Sylhet in September 1920, emphasized that universal brotherhood and self-sacrifice were the unifying traits of Vaishnavism and Bolshevism. Annie Besant, whose anthroposophically inclined Home Rule League had been an important nationalist nucleus in the 1910s, similarly held

²³⁷ Chowduri, *Leftism in India*, 9–14. On the provisions of the Rowlatt Bill, see Home/Poll/1919 Nr. 45-72 January.

²³⁸ Lala Har Dayal, "Karl Marx: A Modern Rishi," *The Modern Review*, March 1912, 273, P. C. Joshi Archive of Contemporary History, Delhi, (hereafter: PCJ) CPI 1. Benjamin Zachariah even deems the entire text "biblical" and "written in a religious-spiritual mode": Benjamin Zachariah, "A Long, Strange Trip: The Lives in Exile of Har Dayal," *South Asian History and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2013): 577.

²³⁹ Krüger, *Die Internationale Arbeiterbewegung* 2:201, 355–78, 391–6, 403. On 19th-century 'Hindu socialism' see *ibid.*, 155–83.

that a socialist spirit had been ingrained in the subcontinent's culture since ancient times. It had to be resuscitated by harking back to traditional values and returning to the system of quasi-independent village republics.²⁴⁰

This thrust could connect to leftists. British left-wing activist Sylvia Pankhurst envisioned the resurrection of the village system and the transfer of comprehensive responsibilities to the traditional system of panchayats (village councils). More generally, the contemporary “official and ‘correct’” position on the communist cultural front was to emphasize “independent origination”—which chimed well with subcontinental radicals: *Atmashakti*, a paper closely connected to the Jugantar terrorists and given to publishing contributions from Roy, opined in its 22 November 1922 issue that communism was rooted in the subcontinent's “essence.”²⁴¹

Egalitarian Non-Egalitarianism

The restoration of a simple and just society of bygone days was also on the agenda of the most prominent contemporary exponent of ‘socialist’ thought in South Asia. Due to his immense influence on the national movement, his moral and spiritual articulation of socialism deserves a closer look. Having risen to fame through his satyagrahas in South Africa, the Gujarati lawyer Mohandas Karamchand “Mahatma” Gandhi (1869–1948) became an iconic figure in the INC, which he transformed into a mass movement.

It is not self-evident that Gandhi should be viewed through a socialist lens. In his *History of the International*, Julius Braunthal introduced his chapter on South Asian socialism with the assessment that “the concepts of Socialism are obviously in sharp contrast to the fundamentals of Hindu philosophy.” Yet he did not maintain this initial juxtaposition, but ended up referring at length to Gandhi as the most prominent figure in the approximation of Hinduism to socialism.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ *Reports of the Director, Central Intelligence* 5 April 1920, Home/Poll/1920 Nr. 103 April, 6–7; *Fortnightly Reports*, Home/Poll/1920 Nr. 84 December, 20. Characteristically, veteran communist Srinivas Ganesh Sardesai referred to this episode in trying to prove Bolshevism's formative influence on Tilak: S. G. Sardesai, *India and the Russian Revolution* (Delhi: Sinha 1967). On Annie Besant, see Sinha, *The Left-Wing*, 27.

²⁴¹ Philip Spratt, *Blowing up India*, 66 (quote). On Pankhurst, see *The Times of India*, 12 August 1927, in PCJ CPI 1926/73A. On *Atmashakti*, see Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal's Freedom*, 52, and Kaye, *Communism in India*, 342.

²⁴² Julius Braunthal, *History of the International*, vol. 3, 1943–1968 (Boulder: Westview Press 1992), 242. Priestland chimes with terming Gandhi a socialist, but otherwise opts for a more cautious description of his outlook, a mixture of “discreetly progressive, but anti-modern socialism and Hindu tradition”: Priestland, *Weltgeschichte des Kommunismus*, 302.

Gandhi based his political demands, notably earlier ones, on the ideal vision of a restoration of ancient subcontinental society. In order to attain this goal, the foreign masters and the evils of modernity concomitant with their rule—foremost machinery, modern industry, and the railways—had to disappear. Gandhi envisioned a society of village republics autonomously governed by the panchayats. A prominent feature of these entities was to be religion (not in the sense of a specific religion, but of religiosity), a supposed core principle of human existence. This conviction also governed his stance on the less sympathetic aspects of empirical religiosity, such as caste issues, whose solution he envisaged in a kind of egalitarian non-egalitarianism: While retaining the fourfold varna as the “natural order” of society, Gandhi opposed the strata’s hierarchical ranking. Also, he held that social distance arose only as a consequence of jati, the innumerable stratified sub-castes.²⁴³

The same egalitarian non-egalitarianism characterized his economic concepts. Inspired by John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, Gandhi’s economic approach was “essentially moral” and phrased in terms of religion and spirituality.²⁴⁴ To him, economic equality meant that everybody was to receive according to his or her need. “This is socialism. In it the prince and the peasant, the wealthy and the poor, the employer and the employee are all on the same level.”²⁴⁵ However, they were to remain princes and peasants, wealthy and poor. Gandhi was reluctant to uproot the social order, and instead delivered sermons on the “dignity of poverty,” preaching that dearth of material goods was compensated for by largesse of spirit.²⁴⁶

Gandhi’s vision profoundly affected the national movement’s trajectory, character, and appearance. Fusing moral-economic and religious ideologemes of the swadeshi campaign with a specific brand of spiritual, non-violent mass militancy, Gandhi’s revolutionary techniques—satyagraha and ahimsa—turned the national movement into “a strange mixture of nationalism and religion and ethics and mysticism and fanaticism.”²⁴⁷ Therein lay the key to his immense success: “His method [...] was one which the peasant could readily

²⁴³ Buddhadev Bhattacharyya, *Evolution of the Political Philosophy of Gandhi* (Calcutta: Calcutta Book House 1969), 189–91; K. N. Singh, *Gandhi & Marx. An Ethico-Philosophical Study* (Patna: Assoc. Book Agency 1979), 77–9.

²⁴⁴ Bhattacharyya, *Evolution of the Political*, 201.

²⁴⁵ *Harijan*, 31 March 1946 and 13 July 1947, in *ibid.*, 10 (quote), 25–6.

²⁴⁶ *Harijan*, 21 July 1946, 3 August 1946, and 15 April 1946, in *Towards Non-Violent Socialism*, ed. Bharatan Kumarappa (Ahmedabad: Navajivan 1962), 171–2, 127, and 120.

²⁴⁷ Chowduri, *Leftism in India*, 13.

understand. He lived the simple life of the Indian peasant, dressed like him, and talked in the language and through the idioms [of] the peasant.”²⁴⁸

Gandhian socialism thus had affected communist hunting grounds. As a consequence the conceptual abyss separating it from communism narrowed considerably in practical politics. The political landscape that resonated so well with the idioms and notions of Gandhi’s campaigns necessarily determined the imprint the communists were trying to make. When their mission began in earnest, notions of social progress had already been connected to—and, to an extent, proved viable in the context of—spiritualist politics, not materialist ones. All the CPI could, and would, do was to adorn the preconfigured peasant mindset with a communist gloss.

II.2.2 The Quest for the ‘Masses’

It was only after Gandhi’s suspension of non-cooperation following the killing of a number of policemen at Chauri Chaura in 1922 that Roy’s criticism of the movement really came into its own. The abrogation nourished Roy’s disdain towards the INC in general and Gandhi (the last of a “long line of ghostly ancestors”²⁴⁹) in particular. To him, the factions emerging in the aftermath of non-cooperation—the Swaraj Party headed by Motilal Nehru advocating entry into the representative organs created by the 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford reforms in order to blockade them from inside, the “responsivists” or Independents around Mohammed Ali Jinnah who took a more constructive stance towards council entry, and those who altogether rejected participation in British institutions and opted for the implementation of Gandhi’s “constructive programme” of spinning in the villages—were more or less interchangeable: None represented the interests of the ‘masses,’ and Dominion Status, as demanded by the Swarajists, would only perpetuate the subcontinent’s slavery.²⁵⁰

Accordingly, Roy’s turn towards the broad population as the only remaining agent and addressee of his progressive ambitions was all the more determined. This was borne out by the CPI’s first theoretical intervention, the *Manifesto to the 36th Indian National Congress*. Giving shape to Roy’s endeavor to set up counterweights against colonial, bourgeois, or

²⁴⁸ Sinha, *The Left-Wing*, 36.

²⁴⁹ Shanti Devi, “How to Organize a Working Class Party?,” *Vanguard*, 15 May 1922. Although written by Evelyn Roy, it is representative of Roy’s stance as well.

²⁵⁰ See *Documents* 1:326–30.

colonial bourgeois ‘reactionaries,’ it undertook to identify resistance among the ‘masses’ apart from nationalism in general and the Gandhian leadership’s spiritualized brand of mobilization in particular. The manifesto counselled “fellow countrymen” that the “mass revolt is directed against the propertied class, irrespective of nationality.”²⁵¹ Only if the “immediate grievances” of the people were addressed would they continue to lend their support. Despite contradicting evidence, Roy deemed it impossible for the striking workers and protesting peasants to be moved by the “redemption of the Khilafat” instead of the “petty, but imperative necessities of everyday life” in their “sober moments.”²⁵² Notwithstanding the conservatism of its guiding ideals, to him the movement highlighted that “the masses are showing unmistakably their desire for material betterment.”²⁵³

Indeed, the non-cooperation movement’s appeal seemed to have convinced Roy that conditions on the subcontinent were ripe for revolution. His *India in Transition* (1922), the first major Marxist work on South Asia, abounded with revolutionary optimism. It was to expose the mobilization’s “deep-rooted social character” and unveil the “revolutionary trend of the growing mass movement.”²⁵⁴ This diagnosis was holistic in scope: India was not merely liberating itself from foreign domination, but was treading the path of comprehensive human emancipation, on which religious tradition barred the way. In consequent disregard of the slogans so effectively mobilizing the “growing mass movement,” Roy declared the country’s “entire store of popular energy” to be revolting against all “which has so far kept it backward and still conspires to do so,” even deeming the upheaval the “essence of the present transition.”²⁵⁵ To Roy, it was clear that “like all other political movements in history,” Gandhi’s popular campaign for the restoration of ram rajya was an “expression of the urge of social progress.”²⁵⁶

In his zeal, he dug ever deeper into the mass protest’s layers of meaning, eventually concluding that its core was secular. His own mechanisms of selective perception developed during the muhajirin episode at Tashkent greatly assisted him during the process: to him, for example, Muslims’ susceptibility to the khilafat propaganda merely indicated the degree of economic discontent.²⁵⁷ Consequently, he opined that “politically speaking there is no

²⁵¹ Roy, “Manifesto to the 36th Indian National Congress, Ahmedabad, 1921,” in *Documents* 1:132.

²⁵² Roy, “Manifesto to the 36th,” quoted in Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 148.

²⁵³ “Our Immediate Task,” *Vanguard*, 1 July 1922.

²⁵⁴ Roy, *India in Transition* (Bombay: Nachiketa [1922] 1971), 16. The book was a considerable success and immensely influenced many of South Asia’s communist and socialist pioneers: Kumar, *Communist Movement in India*, 9. For a more critical assessment, see Lieten, *Colonialism, Class and Nation*, 107.

²⁵⁵ All quotes in Roy, *India in Transition*, 18; see also *ibid.*, 206.

²⁵⁶ “Constructive Programme,” *Vanguard*, 15 May 1922.

²⁵⁷ Roy, *India in Transition*, 235–8.

question of sects in India's liberation struggle," and reasoned that there remained little justification for *not* establishing links with religious revolutionaries.²⁵⁸ In a direct inversion of the various protest movements' distinct metaphysical tinges, and in vivid contrast to the slogans that brought people into the streets, Roy fashioned them into "a reaction against the age-long resignation, created by religious teachings and the tenets of spiritual culture."²⁵⁹

This stance granted no role to the religio-cultural complex other than that of an ephemeral nuisance. Subsequent publications would treat it as such: Roy's first *Program for the Indian National Congress*, written for the 1922 Gaya session, contained only a single reference to religion. It curtly demanded freedom of conscience and the separation of religion and state. A contemporary phrase of his captured the unshakable conviction underneath his approach by congratulating himself to have found, at last, a philosophy that "enables us to untangle so easily every complicated social and historical phenomenon."²⁶⁰ However, by untangling the "complicated social and historical" phenomena in this manner, Roy set about entangling the nascent communist party in what he would himself much later assess more lucidly as unfavorable terrain. His autobiography conceded that the "religious appeal certainly moved the masses, and it was indeed the motive force of the non-co-operation and Khilafat movements. [...] The socio-cultural atmosphere, therefore, inhibited the growth of a democratic revolutionary spirit."²⁶¹

And yet, Roy's zeal to conjure up a situation amenable to his revolutionary tastes did not solely derive from wishful thinking. His reports on the "powerful mass revolutionary movement" widely read in communist papers all over the world had been manufactured on the basis of unreliable evidence. For example, Usmani wrote in spring 1923 that the 'masses' were ready for immediate revolution, with the army standing by for a sign from the INC. Only much later he admitted that even from a contemporary perspective armed rebellion would not have been possible without foreign intervention.²⁶² The upheaval on the subcontinent and its representation in the communist mind drifted ever further apart. However, there was a more realist string, too. Activists on the spot soon demonstrated that

²⁵⁸ "The Political Crisis in India," *Inprecorr*, NMML, Roll No. 1921/3-B, 29.

²⁵⁹ Roy, *India in Transition*, 205; see also Engels, "The Condition of the Working," 352–3.

²⁶⁰ "A Program for the Indian National Congress," *Vanguard*, 1 December 1922; "On Gaya Congress," in Roy, *Political Letters* (Zürich: Vanguard Bookshop 1924), 9.

²⁶¹ Roy, *Memoirs*, 412.

²⁶² Ganguly, *Leftism in India*, 63. Roy himself conceded as much later: Roy, *Memoirs*, 541. On Usmani, see Shaikat Usmani (interviewee), recorded by Hari Dev Sharma (interviewer), 20 December 1976, NMML-OHP, AccNo 307, 23–4, 28.

theoretical shenanigans were not even required to appropriate a revolutionary movement for communism.

II.2.3 Transmission Belts

The failure of most muhajirin to return to British India undetected didn't deter Roy. He also relied on agents undertaking undercover trips to the subcontinent. The first of these emissaries was Nalini Gupta. He had come to Moscow early in 1921 with the Berlin group of revolutionaries in their attempt to dislodge Roy from the Bolsheviks' favor, but soon changed sides. During his stay on the subcontinent from November 1921 to March 1922, he managed to contact Roy's former associates among the Hindu revolutionary terrorists in Bengal and enlisted a promising activist in Calcutta—Muzaffar Ahmad.²⁶³ Encouraged by the success of his envoy, Roy proceeded to mobilize substantial resources from the Comintern for the task of building a communist movement. Thanks to his extended network of contacts, he went about posting huge quantities of communist literature to the subcontinent, complemented by considerable amounts of funds.²⁶⁴

Having joined the CPI in the meantime, Usmani returned to British India in September 1922 and set up communist groups in Benares and Kanpur. By late autumn, there existed a handful of cells aligning themselves with communism through a mixture of outside encouragement and domestic initiative. These were the Calcutta activists around Ahmad, Madras-based leftist trade unionists led by Singaravelu, and Sripad Amrit Dange and the *Socialist* in Bombay. Besides these, there were the group in Lahore around Ghulam Hussein (whose paper *Inquilab* was run almost entirely on subsidies from Roy), and the cells in the UP formed by Usmani.²⁶⁵ The following sections discuss the handling of religion in an early communist context using the examples of the groups in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay.

²⁶³ Kaye, *Communism in India*, 6–7; Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal's Freedom*, 162; Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, 105.

²⁶⁴ Home/Poll/1924 Nr. 120; Home/Poll/1924 Nr. 261, 41; Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought*, 59. Quite a number of newspapers in the early 1920s published articles by Roy: See Kaye, *Communism in India*, 52–3, 67, and 235–6.

²⁶⁵ Kaye, *Communism in India*, 20; Ganguly, *Leftism in India*, 42.

Calcutta

Ubiquitous religious motives in society and politics alike left a lasting imprint on the nascent movement. Muzaffar Ahmad (1889–1973), the “pivot around which the communist group in Bengal was built,”²⁶⁶ who in time would become the young movement’s “best organizer [...] in Northern India”, had had his fill of Muslim identity politics.²⁶⁷ Frustrated by both mainstream nationalism’s bourgeois Hindu attitude and the exclusivist communal politics pursued by Muslim leaders, he and his associates sought to articulate an independent position. However, as the basic categories of contemporary politics—specifically the distinct communal tinge to the articulation of all sorts political demands—continued to operate even among those seeking to escape them, their Muslim background remained heavily influential in the formulation of their premises.

In Ahmad’s case, his political socialization in a cultural association for the promotion of Muslim literature, the Bangiya Musulman Sahitya Samiti (Bengali Muslim Literary Society) from 1913 onwards expressed and simultaneously preconfigured his sympathy for Muslim concerns. Even though the association, a forum for the minuscule liberal Muslim intelligentsia, was of a non-sectarian character, it concerned itself mainly with the spreading of Muslim culture—notably among Hindus. As it was through the Samiti that Ahmad recruited many of the early members of the Calcutta communist cell (among them Abdur Rezzak Khan and Abdul Halim), the latter unsurprisingly developed an affinity with radical, in the sense of anti-imperialist, Muslim politics.²⁶⁸

Ahmad’s involvement in the Bengali poet Nazrul Islam’s paper *Dhumketu* (Comet) from 1922 onwards was similarly literary-political. The journal exhibited the same distinct tinge of radicalism that had already marked Ahmad’s 1920–1 stint in Fazlul Haq’s daily *Navayug*. Besides deriding the INC for its lack of resolve and calling for mass action against domestic and British oppression, the paper also denigrated organized religion. However, in the case of Muslims this referred only to the conservative establishment. More popular and radical forms of communal political mobilization such as the khilafat movement were afforded considerably more benevolent treatment. Although Ahmad had “no clear-cut position at the time, except for anti-imperialism and an interest in mass struggles,” the type

²⁶⁶ Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought*, 62.

²⁶⁷ Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 61 (quote).

²⁶⁸ WBIB File 168/22(i) SL 121/1922, 8 (K. W.); Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 23–6; Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, 29–30. For background information on Abdul Halim see *ibid.*, 102–4, and Promode Dasgupta, “Foreword,” in *On Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad: A Birth Centenary Publication* (Calcutta: National Book Agency 1989), 59 a–b.

of anti-imperialist mass struggles he turned to had a clear religious leaning.²⁶⁹ In January 1921, Ahmad and Islam participated in deliberations on how Muslims could be mobilized for the preservation of the Ottoman caliphate. At around the same time, he wrote a series of short essays in which he praised “Islamic glory and culture.”²⁷⁰ Fittingly, Chattopadhyay identifies Ahmad’s drift towards communism as taking place in this period, when he was about to set up another newspaper together with Qutb-ud-din Ahmad, a “pan-Islamist and nationalist labour leader.”²⁷¹

In the following year, the Calcutta group was joined by one Hafiz Masood Ahmad, who had been educated in a renowned Deoband madrasa. Founded in 1867 during the communal “education rush,” the religious school located in Deoband, UP, represented an influential strand in subcontinental Islam that was as fiercely anti-imperialist as strictly conservative. It regarded British India as dar-ul-harb, enemy soil ruled by infidels, and was an exponent of a pronouncedly rigid interpretation of Islam and Islamic law. This pronounced Islamic component in his biography did not discredit Hafiz Masood Ahmad. On the contrary, Muzaffar Ahmad averred that his background “was one of the reasons why we had admitted Hafiz Masood Ahmad to our company.”²⁷²

Ahmad was similarly inclined towards Khwaja Abdul Hai, a professor at the Aligarh Muslim College, whom he had met in 1923. “Mr Hai had been a student of Deoband Madrasa [...] He was also a revolutionary,” for he had been a driving force behind the exodus of the first batch of muhajirin in 1915.²⁷³ In addition, Hai had distinguished himself by leading the boycott of the Aligarh College’s staff and students during the khilafat movement’s heyday in favor of an independent “Muslim National University.” This short-lived institution, founded upon indignation over the British “sacrilege committed against the Khilafat,” had sworn in its students on the Quran and emphasized the sacrifices its staff had made for the cause of Islam.²⁷⁴ So when Ahmad met Usmani in 1923, he sent him to Aligarh, which he considered “a very good place for Usmani to make acquaintances.” On his part, Usmani harmonized with the environment at the Muslim college. By the time he

²⁶⁹ Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, 69.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 29–30, 33–4 (quote); see also Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought*, 56, 63–4.

²⁷¹ Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, 74, 105.

²⁷² Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 299 (quote); Ziya-ul-Hasan Faruqi, *The Deoband School and the Demand for Pakistan* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House 1963), 28, 33, 46, 79–80. On the Deoband school’s lasting positive image among Muslims, see David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1988), 54–5.

²⁷³ Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 300.

²⁷⁴ See the report on the inauguration ceremony in H. N. Mitra, ed., *The Indian Annual Register: Being an Annual Chronicle, a Digest of Public Affairs of India in Matters Political Educational, Economic, etc.*, vol. 3, 1921 (Sibpur: Annual Register Office 1921), 131–4.

was arrested for the Kanpur Conspiracy Case late in 1923, he had risen to the post of deputy head of the anti-British Muslim National University.²⁷⁵

The maintenance of extensive connections to the current of Muslim anti-colonialism was not limited to Ahmad. Abdur Rezzak Khan (1900–1984), son-in-law and follower of the “notorious Wahabi + Pan-Islamist” Akram Khan, was an “intimate associate” of his and other core members of the Calcutta communist group. Together with khilafat firebrand and future INC president Abul Kalam Azad, Akram Khan was a member of the fundamentalist Mohamedan Secret Society. In a later interview, Abdur Rezzak Khan recounted having heard numerous stories of the glory of the Wahhabi movement during his childhood, and that therefore “anti-imperialism came naturally to me.” Moreover, Khan and Ahmad had already met before 1921, when Ahmad had asked him to do a Bengali translation of the Quran.²⁷⁶

All this points to the continuation of political traditions that had impressed themselves upon the future communists in the course of their socialization in a sub-unit of the Calcutta microcosm, where “anti-colonial political Islam dominated the world of the urban Muslim intelligentsia.” The early communists were hardly differentiated from this environment, and there was little reason to be, as it had many links to contemporary left-wing politics. Fittingly, the only ascertained recipient of the British left-wing communist Sylvia Pankhurst’s *Workers’ Dreadnought* on the subcontinent was the Wahhabite and khilafat organizer Mohamed Yusha Khan of Calcutta. Of the other two suspected recipients, one was a member of the Bengal Muslim League.²⁷⁷ Even though Ahmad, Halim, Khan, and others never made the transition towards identity politics, partaking in the life of this milieu had made the existence of a consciously Muslim element in the phalanx of communist progress appear quite natural.

Tellingly, Ahmad reserved his skepticism for Roy’s plans to involve his former associates from the Anushila Samiti and Jugantar underground terrorist movements in the building of a communist movement in Bengal. In several letters to Roy, Ahmad expressed his aversion to and later his dismay concerning this move, as the elitist and revivalist high-caste Hinduism at the heart of these groups alarmed him and others of Muslim background.

²⁷⁵ Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 301 (quote); on Usmani’s career, see National Archives of India, Kanpur Conspiracy Case Papers of Sessions Trial No. 20 of 1924, AccNo 277 (hereafter: NAI-KCC), File I, 31.

²⁷⁶ Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal’s Freedom*, 152 (quote), 154. See also WBIB File 109/23 SL 131/1923, 15–18.

²⁷⁷ Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, 23 (quote); *Reports of the Director, Central Intelligence*, 6 September 1920, Home/Poll/1920 Nr. 71 September, 6.

Ahmad assiduously (and justifiably) portrayed them as proponents of traditional middle-class radicalism who shunned mass work and as religious extremists harmful to the cause of an integrative movement—an assessment unthinkable with respect to Ahmad’s own, similarly radically-minded co-religionists. Roy expressed agreement with his aversion to the political culture of the extremists, but having himself been socialized in their milieu he saw no need for their principled exclusion. Hence he encouraged Ahmad to try and keep up contact with them, and maintained that their organs, notably *Atmashakti*, occasionally published “good articles.”²⁷⁸

Madras

Another communist nucleus emerged in the South around the Madras-based lawyer and trade union activist Malayapuram Singaravelu (1860–1946). Already untypical for an early communist because of his age and his socialization in a 19th century environment, he was also the scion of a wealthy family of traders and temple guardians. He himself held the position of “Trustee of Sri Payandi Amman Temple” in Madras.²⁷⁹ Contact with the CPI had been established when Singaravelu wrote to Roy after reading *India in Transition*. He was attracted to Roy’s take on emancipation because he saw it as a synthesis of radical transformation inspired by the October Revolution and the necessity to retain a connection to what he considered “Indian.” This included countering the British portrayal of Bolshevism as a foreign ideology and rooting it in subcontinental history and culture. Influenced as much by his own traditional milieu and contemporary Gandhism as by trade union work, to Singaravelu domestic heritage consisted primarily of spiritualism. The *Manifesto* of his Labour and Kishan Party of Hindustan hence stipulated that the approaches of the Bolsheviks and Western Marxists did not cover the “real interests” of the subcontinental workforce.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ WBIB File 67/24 SL 105/1924. The efforts ultimately succeeded in recruiting senior dada Dharani Mohan Goswami for the communists: Shoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *India and Communism: Secret British Documents* (Calcutta: National Book Agency 1997), 198–201.

²⁷⁹ NAI-KCC File IV, 79–80. For (sparse) information on Singaravelu’s early life, see P. Vasanthakumaran, *Godfather of Indian Labour: M. Singaravelar*, transl. by Nandhini Iyengar (Chennai: Poornimaa Publ. 2003), esp. 18–21. More biographical work on him has been done in Tamil; See, for example, K. Murugesan and C. S. Subramanian, *Singaravelu Thennindhiyavin Mudhal Communist* (Chennai: New Century Book House 1991).

²⁸⁰ NAI-KCC File II, 185. For Singaravelu’s attraction to Buddhism see Vasanthakumaran, *Godfather of Indian Labour*, 22–4.

On his part, he had quite definite notions of them. Even though the general goal was common—improvement of the living conditions of the ‘masses’—the subcontinental environment had to be accommodated: Besides the promotion of the rights of untouchables, who were to receive both equal political and religious rights, he demanded special care for the maintenance of the “freedom of religion and worship.”²⁸¹ An early exponent of the peculiar brand of secularism that came to dominate post-independence Indian politics, Singaravelu regarded each community’s religious festivities, customs, and institutions as part of national culture. To him, they were important enough to be entitled to public support and funding. In this, he exhibited the utmost impartiality. In September 1922, he demanded the urgent resumption of civil disobedience in telegrams to the Congress Working Committee and the Central Khilafat Committee, as British intervention in Turkey endangered a “successful solution” of the khilafat question. A “non-violent offensive” had to be initiated by the INC “if the British attacks [sic] Islam.”²⁸²

Although aware of Singaravelu’s views, Roy persisted with his integration into the communist movement. After all, due to his relative popularity and indefatigable endeavors to set up socialist trade unions in Madras, Singaravelu was one of the most promising recruits on the subcontinent. Against this, his “shortcomings in the way of theoretical understanding” and “ideological weaknesses” were of minor importance—qualifications that, unspecified as they were, did not necessarily pertain to Singaravelu’s religious leaning.²⁸³ Even when Roy’s criticism intensified after the Kanpur conference, it targeted Singaravelu’s lack of commitment to radical forms of political action while remaining largely silent on his cultural and religious outlook. At any rate, Roy would defend him publicly not just as a capable lawyer and internationally acknowledged representative of the working class, but also as a versed Marxist.²⁸⁴

Bombay

The Bombay communist movement originated in a group of activists around S. A. Dange (1899–1991). With the help of a moneyed donor, Ranchoddas Bhavan Lotvala, they were able to edit a paper—the *Socialist*—from 1922, to educate themselves in Marxism in his

²⁸¹ NAI-KCC File II, 186, 189, 190 (quote).

²⁸² *Telegram from Singaravelu to the Congress Working Committee and the Central Khilafat Committee*. 22 September 1922, PCJ 1924/357, 21 (quote); NAI-KCC File II, 192.

²⁸³ *Letter from Roy to Dange*, NAI-KCC File IV, 73.

²⁸⁴ “Cawnpore Victims of Labour Imperialism,” *Vanguard*, 15 August 1924.

well-equipped library, and to have a (short-lived) go at establishing a Socialist Labour Party within the INC in 1923. However, the *Socialist's* circulation never exceeded 500 copies, and Lotvala withdrew his support upon Dange's arrest in the Kanpur Conspiracy Case.²⁸⁵

What the milieu of Muslim anti-colonialism was to Ahmad, Hindu extremist nationalism was to Dange. While steering clear of identity politics in the proper sense, he had derived most of his political inspiration from Tilak, notably from the latter's 1915 book *Gita Rahasva*, and was an adherent of Vedic philosophy. The influences of both were amply present in his first, as yet mildly Marxist, book, *Gandhi vs. Lenin*. While it exhibited a clear preference for Lenin, it was Tilak who figured as a "saviour," whose "fighting Genius" had been raised "to the high pedestal of divinity itself."²⁸⁶ To Dange, communism disposed over similarly metaphysical connections. "Karl Marx's Book the 'Capital' is to the Bolshevik what the Geeta is to the Hindoo, or the Bible to the Christian."²⁸⁷ The "prophecy [sic] of the Guru, Karl Marx" had acquired "a force of religions, and all that inspired unflinching belief, that a religion demands."²⁸⁸

Sachchidanand Vishnu (S. V.) Ghate's (1896–1970) way to communism took a comparably mystical route, as he described in a later interview. Born to a "very orthodox Brahmin family," Ghate read "Indian philosophy, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda, etc." All had an affinity with socialism: "The main thing in all the topics in philosophy is service of people." The difference lay merely in the degree of—remarkably abstract—"activity."²⁸⁹ His responses showcased the typical contradictory pulls of subcontinental communists: On the one hand, they intended to assert an independent communist identity; on the other, they emphasized a sense of rootedness in their own biography—and, indirectly, of communism in the native religio-cultural environment.

When asked later whether he had been religious, Dange replied nebulously that "religiousness was there in me in the sense that you believe in worship."²⁹⁰ In his case, however, an ostensibly abstract sense of "worship" did allow for certain distinctions in religious matters, such as during the 1917 "anti-Bible agitation" at Wilson College, which

²⁸⁵ Dange (interviewee), 54. Typically for the time, Lotvala's own route to socialism went via the Arya Samaj. On his involvement in and eventual estrangement from the organization, see chapters 3 and 4 in Indudlal Yajnik, *Life of Ranchoddas Bhavan Lotvala* (Bombay: Writers' Emporium 1952).

²⁸⁶ Dange, *Gandhi vs. Lenin*, PCJ CPI 2, 9.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 24.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 24, 48.

²⁸⁹ All quotes in Sachchidanand Vishnu Ghate (interviewee), recorded by A. K. Gupta and Hari Dev Sharma (interviewers), 9 July 1970, NMML-OHP, AccNo 326, 11.

²⁹⁰ Dange (interviewee), 5. Georges Lieten arrives at a less eulogizing appraisal: Both Dange's political and religious "idiom was embedded in religious premises and owed its heritage to Tilak and the Marathi nationalist movement symbolized by Shivaji": Lieten, *Colonialism, Class and Nation*, 115.

Dange had been attending. The object of resentment was the forced common prayer before class, when “the Professor used to come, stand up, close his eyes and do prayer, and we had to stand also.” Dange’s refusal to join in (“It is not my prayer. Why should I?”) led to his voluntary disassociation from the college. Retrospectively, Dange fashioned the “boycott” of the institution into a “political strike”: “There was nothing of Christian or the *Bible* or Hindu or anything about it, it was just against imperialism.” Nevertheless, “there could not [have been] any other issue.”²⁹¹

Even granted that the young Dange had been driven by pristine anti-imperialist motives, it seems likely that his aversion to mandatory *Hindu* prayer before class would have been less pronounced. Just as Lenin had laid down the future Marxist practice of judging religion by its social location, Dange struggled against the Bible’s perceived imperialist connotation, not its religious quality. The subordination of religious considerations to political ones fostered a readiness to embrace indigenous creeds under the auspices of culturally conscious anti-imperialism. Native religion thus acquired a hue of resistance via the possibility of its inclusion in ‘revolutionary,’ or only anti-imperialist, mobilization. Conversely, it was the religious ‘other’ that made Dange discover his secular streak. Other than Christian prayer at Wilson College, Dange also opposed the khilafat movement on the grounds of its religious outlook. While his *Socialist* had remained conspicuously silent on the matter, he later deemed it “so strongly tinged with religion that in many cases its anti-imperialist aspects were entirely obscured by religious frenzy.” Moreover, he asserted that “the moment our generation brought in religion, etc. in this movement, we said: It is gone.”²⁹²

On a general plane, however, Dange’s stance towards an empathic understanding of religion was not in the least dismissive. In the context of the Ottoman caliphate’s eventual abolition by the Turkish national assembly in 1924, he commented that religion was “a bundle of superstitions” when “not understood or misunderstood”—implying that in his view, there was something in religion beyond such wrong understanding. The Turkish leaders, stripping religion of “excrescences and overgrowths,” exhibited a pragmatic stance towards religious traditions; still, there was no need to “condemn them as irreligious or infidels”²⁹³—two qualities that apparently resonated negatively for Dange.

²⁹¹ All quotes in Dange (interviewee), 16–17, 69.

²⁹² Ibid., 31–2.

²⁹³ All quotes in *Socialist*, 12 March 1924, in Sripad Amrit Dange, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, *Gandhi versus Lenin; Editorials from the “Socialist”; Hell Found* (Bombay: Lok Vangmaya Griha 1974), 286–9.

Linking Segments

From the outset, Roy had encouraged the communist cells to overcome their organizational isolation in order to set up a unified underground revolutionary party. It was to operate through a legal front organization, a party with a more moderate nationalist and socialist agenda. A 1923 memorandum suggested “Workers’ and Peasants’ Party of India” as its name. It was to function as the “conscious vanguard of the working class in its struggle first for national, then for social liberation.”²⁹⁴

As a matter of fact, steps in this direction had already been taken on the subcontinent, mainly in the shape of endeavors to hold an all-India communist conference of the different groups. However, due to the difficulties of communication over long distances, British surveillance, and a lack of resources, they had proved abortive. Attempts by Dange (the Socialist Labour Party), Ghulam Hussein (the so-called Manifesto Party), and Singaravelu (the Labour and Swaraj Party) to form parties similarly failed. The foundation of the last of these on 1 May 1923 at least introduced May Day celebrations to the subcontinent. Yet Singaravelu’s proposition that the other groups become provincial units of his Madras-based party met with little enthusiasm, indicating the early segmentalization of the party.²⁹⁵ Rivalling ambitions played into this, too. Roy had to push Dange repeatedly to establish contact with Singaravelu. The regional units acknowledged Roy’s and the Comintern’s distant overlordship and by and large adhered to their injunctions, while each was wary of the others and anxious to preserve organizational independence, leading to the wielding of effective power by ‘little secretaries.’ Accordingly, the segments could fashion communism according to their own localized cultural preferences—with a Muslim, a Hindu, or a pan-religious tinge.²⁹⁶

Roy’s efforts to build a centralized movement from the outside were similarly curtailed by British surveillance agencies ever vigilant to intercept his communications and shipments of money. British pressure on his European host countries repeatedly forced Roy to relocate his headquarters. Simultaneously, colonial authorities moved against his comrades on the subcontinent: In 1924 many of the early communists were rounded up and put on trial in the Kanpur Conspiracy Case. Accused of conspiring “to bring about a violent revolution of the labouring classes in India in order to deprive the King Emperor of his sovereignty of India,”

²⁹⁴ NAI-KCC File I, 77–8; File IV, 45.

²⁹⁵ See Stein, *Vijayanagara*, esp. 61–7.

²⁹⁶ PCJ 1924/357, 43–4; Kumar, *Communist Movement*, 32; CPI(M), *History of the Communist Movement* 1:81. See also Ray, *In Freedom’s Quest*, vol. 2, *The Comintern Years (1922–27)*, 28–9; and on the shenanigans and squabbles around the formation of a legal front organization see Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 90–3.

Roy (in absentiam), Ahmad, Dange, Usmani, and the former emissary Gupta were sentenced to various terms of rigorous imprisonment.²⁹⁷

The impact on some of the convicts' future careers was tangible. Roy had to serve his six-year term after returning to the subcontinent in 1930. Dange and Usmani each spent four years behind bars. Singaravelu was exempted from the trial, either due to his poor health or because the security agencies didn't consider him dangerous enough. Gupta and Ahmad were released early due to illness. The former cooperated with the prosecution, made a comprehensive deposition, and abandoned communism. Similarly, Ghulam Hussein turned informer upon his arrest in 1923 and was let off the hook. After his release, he demonstrated the fluid interplay of communism and religion by immediately joining the Lahore-based *Muslim Outlook*, "a purely communal newspaper."²⁹⁸

II.2.4 The Kanpur Communion

As if mocking British efforts to root out communism, a journalist from the Central Provinces called Satyabhakta announced the foundation of the ICP (Indian Communist Party) in Kanpur just a few months after the judgments in the conspiracy case had been delivered. However, bearing testimony to the lessons of British repression, the impact of Gandhism, and the necessity of a situated subcontinental approach, he envisaged the party as a domestic affair without affiliation with the Comintern, and dismissed violent revolution. In September 1924, Satyabhakta issued a call for a conference of all subcontinental communists. Attended by most contemporary activists at large (who successively transformed the new organization into the subcontinental CPI), it convened in Kanpur in December 1925.²⁹⁹

A paradigmatic example of the political and ideological scope of early subcontinental communism, Fazl-ul Hasan (1877–1951), alias Hasrat Mohani, had been a prominent member of the party since its inception and was chairman of the conference's reception

²⁹⁷ NAI-KCC File I, 71 (quote); Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal's Freedom*, 159–61; Ray, *In Freedom's Quest* 2:60–6.

²⁹⁸ Petrie, *Communism in India*, 151 (quote); Home/Poll/1924 Nr. 261, 138; Home/Poll/1925 Nr. 272; on Hussein see Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 349.

²⁹⁹ On the organization of the conference, see Petrie, *Communism in India*, 157–68, and CPI(M), *History of the Communist Movement* 1:90. For (sparse) information on Satyabhakta see Ray, *In Freedom's Quest* 2:115, 183, and Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 115–16.

committee. Mohani was a celebrated Urdu poet from the UP and an “extremist nationalist leader.”³⁰⁰ He earned lasting fame by being the first within the INC’s fold to publicly call for complete independence at the 1921 Ahmedabad session. The *Documents of the History of the Communist Movement* describe him as a “left Congressman who was undoubtedly influenced by the October Revolution.”³⁰¹

Mohani’s other influences were discreetly glossed over: He had been an eminent khilafat activist and, at the time of his Ahmedabad speech, was president of the All-India Muslim League. At a khilafat conference in May 1920, he had exhorted Muslims to take direct action for the preservation of the caliphate’s territorial integrity. If this were not secured, it would be the religious duty of Muslims to rid the subcontinent of British rule. In 1921, he had endorsed the fundamentalist Moplah rebellion because of the insurgents’ sincere commitment to their faith, notwithstanding outrages against the Hindu population (see chapter III.1.1).³⁰² Right before his appearance at the communist conference, Mohani had presided over the All-India Khilafat Committee’s 1925 session, in which he had reiterated that the (already abolished) caliphate was essential to Islam.³⁰³

Opening the communist conference, Mohani called for the attainment of independence “by all fair means” and the establishment of a system of Soviets. In his view, communism had unjustly been described as an anti-religious movement. Mohani’s vision allowed for “the largest possible latitude and toleration” in matters of religion. Not only was the party open to adherents of all creeds; atheism itself was to be regarded as a religion. However, his ostensibly rigorous ‘secularism’ was thwarted by his emphatic invocation of Islam, whose alleged inherent resistance to capitalism surpassed even “the Communistic conception.” For example, Zakat, the duty of charity in Islam, was opposed to capitalist economics, and already the first caliph had called for jihad against the uncharitable. Also, he likened the ban on interest in Islam to communism: “The usurer profits by his capital alone without doing any actual labour and this is against the principles of Islam just as it is against Communism.”³⁰⁴ This was no opportunist assessment tailored to the occasion. Already in

³⁰⁰ Kaye, *Communism in India*, 369.

³⁰¹ Surjeet, *March of the Communist*, 27 (quote); CPI(M), *History of the Communist Movement* 1:88–9. See also NAI-KCC File II, 356–7.

³⁰² This had prompted Gandhi to comment that Mohani had “amazingly crude views about religion”: *Young India*, 26 January 1922, PCJ 1922/151; see also *Navjivan*, 16 January 1922, *ibid.*; and *Fortnightly Reports*, Home/Poll/1920 Nr. 94 July, 37. Mohani’s khilafat radicalism was limited in that he opposed the hijrat: Qureshi, “The Ulama,” 53.

³⁰³ *Indian Annual Register* 1925/2:342.

³⁰⁴ All quotes *ibid.*, 367–8.

1920, Mohani had likened Islam and Bolshevism to each other on the grounds of their common “great principles” of freedom and equality.³⁰⁵

Communism appealed to Mohani most as a variety of Islam, which was the true anti-capitalist force. Striving for a “firm foundation [...] and a new synthesis of political culture,” as S. M. Habibuddin put it, national independence and the application of Islam’s economic tenets were the two pillars of Mohani’s communism.³⁰⁶ Commenting on the lack of dissent among the delegates at the conference, Ansari noted that the “close identity of views between the communists and radical Pan-Islamists [...] was very much in evidence.”³⁰⁷ Yet it would be just as unfair to reduce contemporary communism and pan-Islamism to a common denominator as it would to pigeon-hole Mohani as a sectarian Muslim. After all, he invoked Tilak’s swadeshi campaign as the most important influence on his political socialization. His grounding of communism in Islam was not exclusive or fundamentalist, but reflected the religious complexity of politics extending to the communist sphere.

Singaravelu, the conference president, integrated communism into religious eschatology in an overarching sense. His speech opened with a reference to Tilak as a “beacon of light for all true lovers of freedom,” but soon transcended the framework of religious nationalism. The communists were told to persevere: Just as kalachakra, the wheel of time, kept on turning eternally, the suffering undergone by the “world reformers” would inspire others to take the burden upon themselves until they became objects of the world’s admiration. Such had been the history of mankind since its inception. In this spiritualist rephrasing of historical materialist determinism, communism would inevitably heal mankind “of almost all the ills of life.”³⁰⁸

According to Singaravelu, Marx had been the first to systematize communist thought and to cast it in a scientific, practically applicable form. Yet Plato, Buddha, and Christ were its true ancestors and originators. At the same time, he was skeptical of the implications of Bolshevism. Although he was convinced that “in the course of ages, there can be no doubt that the work begun by this man in Russia [Lenin], will ultimately [...] shower happiness and contentment upon the human race,” he questioned the suitability of Bolshevism for the

³⁰⁵ *Fortnightly Reports*, Home/Poll/1920 Nr. 94 July, 37.

³⁰⁶ S. M. Habibuddin, “Radical Nationalism of Hasrat Mohani and India’s Quest for Freedom,” *Quarterly Review of Historical Studies* 4 (1988): 61.

³⁰⁷ Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought*, 70.

³⁰⁸ All quotes in Mitra, *Indian Annual Register*, vol. 7/2, 1925 (Sibpur: Annual Register Office 1925), 368.

subcontinent. This was because it constituted the “doctrine of the majority.”³⁰⁹ Evidently, Singaravelu was aware of the charged ground on which questions of majority and minority in the subcontinent’s tense communal set-up trod, and preferred to define communism separate from their implications. While doubtful in terms of communist doctrine, Singaravelu’s speech was also an impassioned response to the deterioration of communal relations. It consisted of an attempt to liken communism directly to its environment by framing it in religious, but non-sectarian, idioms, just as Gandhi had undertaken earlier on a nationalist plane.

In line with this, he also displayed a sense of the problematic dimensions of empirical religiosity for an enlightened conception of society. Castes and creeds in their current statures had become “nightmares”:

The communal and religious differences which seem to destroy the harmony which once obtained among all political parties in the country during the hay day [sic] of [the non-cooperation movement] may overtake us also, for [...] we Indians are so religiously minded and caste ridden [...] Religion and caste have been the demons which have been swallowing our political unity from historic times. [...] The leaders who flaunt these fripperies before us are traitors to our country and to our cause. The Hindu Sabhas, Sangathams Shuddees are mere bourgeois tactics of the leisured class. Let us therefore leave religion, caste, and creed to each individual tastes and fancies, and let us pursue our peaceful course towards Swaraj, free from these nightmares.³¹⁰

Turning away from the Eastern accommodation of religious anti-imperialism, this passage exhibits the central features of the Western communist understanding of communalism as expounded by Roy (see chapter III.2). They aimed at limiting and ultimately isolating the problematic dimensions of religious ideology, the virulence of which among the ‘masses’ could not be ignored. This, along with the religious fabric of Singaravelu’s own communist vision, necessitated a peculiar conditioning of religion to retain it in the revolutionary fold. The most important step was to outsource its divisiveness: Those who spread vile disruption on religious grounds formed a clearly identifiable stratum. Consequently, only the “leaders” who propagated communalism or advocated ‘hostile proselytization’ were dubbed “traitors,” not their mass following.³¹¹

Communist echoes on the conference were mixed. Today’s CPI acknowledges the conference as its founding point; to the CPI(M), it was an important organizational step and the first assertion of an independent domestic brand of communism. In contrast, most contemporaries were less sympathetic. Roy soon chastised the ICP both for its “national

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 368–70.

³¹⁰ National Archives of India, Satyabhakta Papers, AccNo 287 (hereafter: NAI-Satyabhakta), A/17, 10.

³¹¹ Ibid.

communism” and its commitment to non-violence. He considered affiliation with the Comintern essential to any serious communist undertaking. Also, Mohani’s speech had been of “a rather dubious nature” because the way to achieve a Soviet republic remained unclear. Both he and Singaravelu had distinguished themselves by “well-meaning but utopian phrases.”³¹² Two months later, when Roy’s attitude towards Satyabhakta had deteriorated sharply, he attacked both Mohani (“Islamic communism”) and Singaravelu (“the Biblical variety”) for their “extremely confused [and] childish” notions of communism.³¹³

Yet this remained the only instance of criticism of religious motives from communist quarters. Ahmad attacked the envisioned struggle and affiliation to the Comintern in his castigation of the “farce staged by Satyabhakta.” However, this didn’t deter him from taking over the new party’s Bengal section.³¹⁴ Significantly, the passages in Mohani’s and Singaravelu’s addresses on the relationship of the party’s agenda to Islamic welfare concepts and universal religiosity respectively, figure neither in Ahmad’s nor in other retrospectives. More benevolent references at best emphasize the party’s anti-communalism. In this, the party application form rather than Singaravelu’s criticism of communalism serves as the most important exhibit. It states—twice—the basic incompatibility of party membership and membership of any “communal organisation.” This provision is enough to convince Irfan Habib of the communists’ uncompromising anti-communalism. Mohani’s expulsion in 1927 on the grounds of his membership in the Muslim League underscores this interpretation.³¹⁵

Indeed, the provision’s vanguard status is aptly illustrated by the fact that the anti-communalist standard set by it was attained by the INC only in 1938. Nevertheless, a closer look qualifies its seemingly principled stance. The passage on the form read “I belong to *no such* communal organisation *which can debar me from joining this party*”³¹⁶ (emphasis added). This was a clearly political phrasing. It indicated that the pariah status of communal bodies was neither guaranteed nor irrevocable. If certain factors sufficiently contradicted apparent communalism in communist eyes, the assessment could well be otherwise.

³¹² “What is a Communist Party?,” *Masses of India*, January 1926. See also CPI(M), *History of the Communist Movement* 1:96.

³¹³ “The Indian Communists and the Communist International,” *Masses of India*, March 1926.

³¹⁴ Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party*, 407–9 (quote), 413; WBIB File 320/26 SL 310/1926.

³¹⁵ Om Prakash Ralhan, *Encyclopaedia of Political Parties: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh; National, Regional, Local*, vol. 14, *Communist Party of India* (Delhi: Anmol Publ. 1997), 3 (quote); Irfan Habib, “The Left and the National,” 10; see also CPI(M), *History of the Communist Movement* 1:108.

³¹⁶ Ralhan, *Encyclopedia of Political Parties* 14:3. In December 1938, the Congress Working Committee declared against simultaneous membership in the INC and the Hindu Mahasabha: Sarkar, *Modern India*, 356.

Mohani's case, however, appears to follow a different logic. When asked about Mohani's presence at Kanpur despite him being a member of the Muslim League, Ghate later portrayed the issue as an accident: "At that time not much distinction was made as to who was coming and who was not coming [...] it was just making a beginning and anybody could come."³¹⁷ Still, it is hard to believe that just "anybody" could have attained the degree of eminence in the new party that Mohani did. It seems more likely that in the murky contemporary cultural-communist context, it simply hadn't yet dawned on anyone that his roots in Muslim politics could actually be deserving of communal stigma, and concomitant communist criticism. Similarly, his expulsion two years later responded to a heightened sense of communist identity on the one hand and an increased awareness of the communal problem on the other. Nevertheless, cooperation between Mohani and the communists was resumed in the late 1930s.

Disagreements at the founding conference, mainly over international affiliation, soon led to the demise of the ICP. Outvoted on the question, Satyabhakta, Singaravelu, and most of the members from the UP soon left the ICP. In addition, a majority vote had renamed it as the CPI and set it on a course of international affiliation. Despite continuing in politics, more specifically in his follow-up National Communist Party, Satyabhakta henceforth remained outside the spotlight. Incidentally, judging by a 1926 letter to Radha Mohan Gokul of the Widow Marriage Association, his own stance on religious matters was characterized by a remarkable lack of aversion to communal identity formation. Announcing his resignation from the ICP, he expressed his hope to meet Gokul soon at a conference of the Hindu Mahasabha, participation in which he recommended.³¹⁸

Together with Satyabhakta, Singaravelu disappeared from the stage of South Asian communism. Despite continuing in trade union work, he never again rose to an eminent role in left national politics, which is probably the reason why his presidential address at the conference has more or less sunk into oblivion. At any rate, his own metaphysical frame of mind remained unshaken: An indignant Singaravelu countered Roy's post-Kanpur doubts about the sincerity of his communist commitment by referring to Buddhism, which counts doubt (*vichikitsa*) among the most heinous crimes. Later in the 1920s, a police report mentioned that he had "as usual" referred to revolutionary Russia as the "land of the

³¹⁷ Ghate (interviewee), 32–4; Petrie, *Communism in India*, 64. For a discussion of Mohani's activities in the Muslim League see Shafwat Razvi, "Mawlana Hasrat Mohani's Membership of the All-India Muslim League," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 14 (1996).

³¹⁸ *Letter from Satya Bhakta to Radha Mohan Gokul*, 5 March 1926, WBIB File 35/26 SL 2/1926, 47–8; Petrie, *Communism in India*, 166–8.

blessed.”³¹⁹ Shortly before his death, he regretted that neither democracy nor “even religion” had proven capable of ameliorating the living conditions of the broad population.³²⁰

Synopsis of Chapter II

This chapter traces the spirit of the émigré formation of the CPI and the party’s first steps in a subcontinental environment. A conflation of religious and political ideologies characterized the main strands converging in the early CPI—extremist nationalists in the process of overcoming their deeply Hindu notions of India, Muslim militants having left British India to fight infidel rule and preserve the Ottoman caliphate, and Ghadrmites ready to countenance a fusion of religion and revolutionary nationalism in their mobilization efforts.

This constellation by and large also characterized the programmatic stances and political links forged by the early communists ‘on the spot.’ As yet, they were largely ignorant of Marxist analysis and its rationalizing view on religious phenomena. Their first steps illustrate early subcontinental communism’s situatedness in the conditions on the ground, but also, albeit unconsciously, in the Eastern revolutionary paradigm.

Early communists were critical of the prevalent modes of agitation—bourgeois nationalism and identity politics. Nevertheless, they orientated themselves instinctively within the limits of their political socialization. It was as logical for Muzaffar Ahmad to work with anti-British Muslim extremists as it was for Dange to revere Tilak’s Hindu-revivalist nationalism. This entailed the reproduction of prejudices implicit in religious partiality, contributing to an early segmentalization of subcontinental party communism. The 1925 communist conference in Kanpur epitomized the Eastern practice of understanding and articulating communism in cultural terms. Two leading figures, M. Singaravelu Chettiar and Hasrat Mohani, even invoked an outright religious framework. Therefore, early communism was not an alien system removed from subcontinental

³¹⁹ Home/Poll/1928 Nr. 1/28 May (quote); NAI-KCC File IV, 66. Singaravelu’s position was difficult. As a lone radical in a trade union environment bent on constitutional politics, his “sincere and passionate appeals to workers” did not meet with much success, and the police derided him as a “ridiculous visionary.” His attempts to radicalize labor single-handedly met with sparse success: *Fortnightly Reports* April 1927, second half. Nevertheless, he continued as a militant trade union leader (see PCJ 1934/36A, and Sarkar, *Modern India*, 270), only to become a “genius whose achievements have been ignored”: Vasanthakumaran, *Godfather of Indian Labour*, 13.

³²⁰ Quoted in Vasanthakumaran, *Godfather of Indian Labour*, 11.

“Lebenswelten” (Alfred Schütz). Its marginality was not a consequence of cultural aloofness or of a pronounced anti-religious agenda. Rather, it was the numerical and organizational weakness of the nascent movement, its suppression by the colonial state, and the incomparably greater pull of Gandhi’s full-blooded saintly vision of a simple and just society that rendered the aspiring party a largely invisible factor.

Yet unmediated susceptibilities to local context soon receded into the background. Roy and the CPGB, which assisted in building the subcontinental movement from the mid-1920s onwards, spearheaded the CPI’s theoretical turn. As will be shown, this didn’t preclude the adaptation of culture and religion. It did, however, fundamentally alter the modalities of their articulation in a communist framework when the CPI again turned to them in the 1930s.

III Revolutionary Subjectivity

III.1 From Religiousness to Resistancy

Much to their chagrin, the communists faced substantial difficulties in the articulation of a consistent criticism of communalism and in the sustainable identification of revolutionary subjectivity. In order to understand these difficulties, it is expedient to assess the first pinnacles of communist revolutionary hopes on the subcontinent. Both the early Akali movement in the Punjab and the great 1921 Moplah uprising in Malabar constituted manifestations of grass-roots militancy imbued with, and resting on notions of, perceived religious grievances. The paradigms of (Western) externalization and (Eastern) accommodation rival in their assessment of the religious component notably in case of the Moplah rebellion.

III.1.1 The Moplah Rebellion

Origins

Religiously inspired unrest among the south Malabar coastal region's Muslim population, to whom the terms "Mappillas" or "Moplahs" refer, sports a long tradition. According to Stephen Dale, "suicidal *jihads*," as he calls them, date back hundreds of years, when they had been an often called-to way to combat foreign, that is, European usurpers of the spice trade monopoly.³²¹ However, right from the beginning the grievances of Muslim traders and clerics included real and perceived religious degradation: The obstruction of the haj, the destruction of mosques, and notably the forced conversions of Muslims to Christianity. Together, these factors seemed to indicate a comprehensive danger to Islam.³²²

After the reinstitution of the upper-caste Hindu landlord elite (driven away under Tipu Sultan) by the British, the Moplahs, divested of their stakes in the spice trade, underwent a sustained social decline. Concomitantly, the commercial dimension of unrest came to be eclipsed by religious glorification of the shahid (martyr) and corresponding means of struggle. In the course of the ongoing low-intensity war, the "closely related ideals of

³²¹ Stephen Dale, "The Islamic Frontier in Southwest India: The Shahid as a Cultural Ideal among the Mappillas of Malabar," *Modern Asian Studies* 11 (1977): 41–2.

³²² *Ibid.*, 43–5.

mujahid [warrior of god] and *shahid* became enshrined as heroic ideals among the Mappillas.”³²³ Hence, the possibility of such militancy turning ‘inward,’ that is, against infidel (*and* more prosperous) members of domestic society increased—even more so in the context of the rapid ascendancy of communal idioms and the strengthening of intra-communal solidarity under the conditions of 19th-century colonial modernity: “Revolt became practically endemic” in the Moplah hotspots of the Ernad and Walluvanad districts. Initially, most victims were Hindu landlords from the Namboodiri and Nair castes. Although the overwhelming majority of Hindus, tenant farmers living as miserably as the Moplahs, were left alone, the frequent desecrations of temples illustrate the virulence of a certain religious fanaticism. They fused religious and agrarian issues into a volatile cauldron of highly militant millenarianism.³²⁴ M. Menon, author of the most comprehensive study on the rebellion to date, concurs that a combination of agrarian grievances of the rural poor and the tradition of religious militancy lay at the root of the recurring outbreaks in Malabar during the 19th and early 20th century. Accordingly, they testified to a markedly fundamentalist outlook:

The ‘outbreaks’ had the character of religious rituals from the beginning. The intending participants donned white robes, divorced their wives, settled all their accounts, and received the blessings of a *Tangal* [...] for the success of their mission; after death most of them come to be worshipped as *shahids*.³²⁵

Two major and closely connected movements preceded the great rebellion of 1921, each representing a strand of unrest among the Moplahs. Together they defined the space for the looming uprising’s self-assertion: The peasant movement of 1920/21 agitating for a revision of the tenancy laws and the anti-colonial campaigns of the Congress and khilafat Committees. However, the latter two resonated very unevenly among the Moplahs, particularly after the tenant and non-cooperation movements lost momentum following the arrest of its leaders. In March 1921, District Magistrate E. F. Thomas reported that the predominant form of political mobilization had become “religious to the exclusion of everything else, non-co-operation was nothing, Khilafat was everything, the talk of Hindu-

³²³ Ibid., 46–7.

³²⁴ Sarkar, *Modern India*, 49–50; and K. C. Alexander, “Caste Mobilization and Class Consciousness: The Emergence of Agrarian Movements in Kerala and Tamil Nadu,” in *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order*, ed. Francine Frankel and M. Rao, vol. 1 (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1989), 375–6.

³²⁵ M. Ganghadara Menon, *Malabar Rebellion (1921–1922)* (Allahabad: Vohra Publ. & Distr. 1989), 21 (quote), 30; Dale, *The Islamic Frontier*, 54–5.

Muslim unity was nonsense and the main idea was the vision of swaraj and Malabar for the Mapilla and the Mapilla alone.”³²⁶

In mid-August, a report identified “a situation which contains the possibility of an extremely serious Mapilla outbreak”:³²⁷ On 1 August, a crowd had rallied in Pukkottur to protect a laborer from arrest. When tensions ran high upon the arrival of government officials, the crowd set their minds on storming the local Kovilagam palace with the aim of converting it into a mosque, emphasizing Islam’s close proximity to Moplah notions of social justice.³²⁸ However, this was not just a reiteration of ‘classical’ fanaticism. On the contrary, fundamentalism among the Moplahs had exceeded many of its traditional local and customary boundaries. This tendency could be gleaned from innovations such as the participation of women in political rallies, but also from the fact the colonial order itself had become the target of attacks. Contact with the national movement and its advanced methods of organization and mobilization contributed significantly to modernizing the traditional way—Menon terms it the “‘outbreak’ method”—of venting grievances and expressing protest.³²⁹ British suppression of political dissent left few venues to channel the growing unrest:

It was easy to stop all public political meetings, and difficult to combat religious propaganda from the Mosques. This situation led to a dangerous state of affairs in Malabar in which though the Mappilas remained extremely agitated over the Khilafat issue they were denied opportunities of resorting to modern methods of peaceful agitations and demonstrations, and were left with no alternative to falling back upon traditional religious organization and its methods for ventilating their fears and frustrations.³³⁰

Land Reform and Khilafat State

On 20 August, an army detachment sent out to arrest suspects met with overwhelming popular resistance in Tirurangadi and barely managed to withdraw. In the ensuing weeks, the rebellion spread over a vast swath of land in South Malabar, encompassing parts of the Ernad, Walluvanad, Ponnani, and Calicut districts. In mid-September, Thomas reported that

³²⁶ “A Note on Events in Malabar by G. R. F. Tottenham,” in *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921–1922*, ed. G. R. F. Tottenham (Madras: n. p. 1922), 4. On its own, the volume is an unreliable companion to the rebellion, less for what it contains than for what it omits, but nevertheless assembles a useful range of documents. See also Sarkar, *Modern India*, 216.

³²⁷ Tottenham, *The Mappilla Rebellion*, 6; “Fortnightly Reports,” in *ibid.*, 8, 12. See also “From the Special Branch, Criminal Investigation Department,” in *ibid.*, 16.

³²⁸ “Report from M. Narayanan Menon, Acting Inspector,” in *ibid.*, 13–15. A kovilagam palace is a princely mansion in southwest India.

³²⁹ Menon, *Malabar Rebellion*, 92; for a discussion of the modernizing effects of the contemporary political environment see *ibid.*, 162–3.

³³⁰ Menon, *Malabar Rebellion*, 119.

an area of more than 1.5 million inhabitants was up in arms. British control outside of garrisoned strongholds had ceased for months to come.³³¹

The rebels were quick to assert their sovereignty over what they declared khilafat kingdoms. On a meeting of leaders on 21 August, Malabar was partitioned into a number of areas. Each would be ruled by a king, and the “khilafat Code” (the local interpretation of Islamic law) would be the law, including draconian punishments. Weapons were to be handed over to the king; so were money and food, if he demanded so. Variankunnath Kunhamad Haji, a zealous khilafat worker and the most prominent leader of the rebellion, styled himself “Raja of the Hindus, Amir of the Mohammedans and Colonel of the Khilafat Army.”³³² Likewise, soon after the withdrawal of the troops from Tirurangadi Ali Musaliar had proclaimed himself king under cheers on Islam and had taken up office in the local mosque. F. B. Evans wrote in late October that wherever the rebellion spread there were “the usual stories of the declaration of Islam Raj, etc.”³³³

Statements of captured rebel leaders, almost invariably religious dignitaries fervently revered by their followers, vindicate the operation of politicized religiousness. According to Evans, Sithi Koya described that to him that a khilafat state meant “the proper observance of Islamic ritual.” Chembrasser Tangal traced the rebellion’s surprising intensity to a false rumor spread by Ali Musaliar that the Tirurangadi mosque had been attacked by British troops during the operation on 20 August.³³⁴ Even while these statements are mere extracts from the respective enquiries and are mentioned by Evans mainly because they reinforce his own views on the matter, they point to the close proximity of spiritual and temporal motives. Thus, the rebels took care to destroy symbols of government from the very beginning. Public records, currency notes, stamps and public buildings themselves were targets of the insurgents’ wrath. Likewise, they destroyed documents pertaining to ownership of land wherever possible—which points to their determination to rid themselves of not just British supremacy, but also the social hierarchy by revising land tenures. Equally typical for contemporary protest movements and Islamic rigidity alike, the rebellious

³³¹ “Report No. 367,” in Tottenham, *The Mapilla Rebellion*, 219–20.

³³² E. M. S. Namboodiripad, “A Short History of the Peasant Movement in Malabar,” in *History, Society and Land Relations: Selected Essays* (Delhi: LeftWord Books 2010), 181; and Home/Poll/1922 Nr. 241/1b K.W., 41.

³³³ “Note on the Rebellion by Mr. F. B. Evans,” in Tottenham, *The Mapilla Rebellion*, 45, 48; “Reports from Mr. F. B. Evans lii,” in *ibid.*, 256.

³³⁴ “Reports from Mr. F. B. Evans C,” in *ibid.*, 279.

Moplahs attacked and closed down liquor shops throughout the affected districts. Cognizant of his new subjects' grievances, Haji exempted them from taxation for a full year.³³⁵

However, besides striking out at representatives of government and the colonial order in general, the insurgents' violence also targeted another major group. Already in the first days of the uprising, "a very large number of Hindu houses" in the affected districts had been attacked and looted. A week after the outbreak, the British authorities reported "widespread violence and robbery directed against Hindus."³³⁶ Rebel bands looted and burned down temples, too. Armed Moplahs presented government servants, notably policemen, with the option to side with the rebels or die if they were Muslims, and mostly killed them instantly if they were Hindus. To be sure, British reports made no effort to distinguish between the social positions of the insurgents' victims, many of whom were landlords. The insurgents' fury, however, affected average Hindus, too: Evans wrote that "one of the greatest difficulties [...] lies in the helplessness of the non-Moplah population who drift about from panic to panic, and whose chief care is avoidance of giving the slightest offence to the rebels who prey upon them."³³⁷

British sources abound of similar reports. They also mention a number of forced conversions. In November, Thomas had "good information" about 180 cases, excluding the worst-affected areas. He estimated their total between 500 and 1000, in addition to "many" murders for refusal of conversion.³³⁸ In January 1922, Sir William Vincent replied to a question in the Legislative Assembly that their number "probably runs to thousands," although there would never be exact figures. Much in the same manner, he put the number of destroyed Hindu temples at over 100. Forced conversions seem to have been conducted mostly by rank-and-file Moplahs, not the leaders, who were not interested in converting the Hindu population.³³⁹

By the end of 1921, the army had largely restored colonial order, albeit it would take until March 1922 to crush the rebellion and suspend martial law. Isolated murders of Hindus

³³⁵ "Press Communique No. 5, dated 26th August 1921," in *ibid.*, 181; see also "Note by the Special Commissioner for Malabar Affairs Mr. A. E. Knapp," in *ibid.*, 406.

³³⁶ "Prom the General Officer Commanding, No. 8/250/110/G," in *ibid.*, 60; "Notes on the Rebellion," in *ibid.*, 48.

³³⁷ Home/Poll/1922 Nr. 241/1b, 57 (quote); see also "Reports from Mr. F. B. Evans cxx," in Tottenham, *The Mapilla Rebellion*, 277; "From M. R. Ry. K. Karunakaran Nayar, Sub-Inspector of Pandikkad Station, to the Superintendent of Police, South Malabar," in *ibid.*, 80; and Robert Hardgrave, "The Mappilla Rebellion, 1921: Peasant Revolt in Malabar," *Modern Asian Studies* 11 (1977): 82.

³³⁸ "Telegram from the District Magistrate, Calicut," in Tottenham, *The Mapilla Rebellion*, 173.

³³⁹ Home/Poll/1922 Nr. 241/24, 10, 13. For an in-depth discussion of the issue see Menon, *Malabar Rebellion*, 351–69.

continued into late spring. More than 2300 insurgents had been killed in encounters; another 301 were sentenced to death during or after the rebellion.³⁴⁰

Distilling a Social Movement

Although communists had had no part in the rebellion—in fact, the CPI hadn't established so much as a single cell on the subcontinent yet—it soon figured prominently in the localization of communism. In view of Roy's anti-bourgeois stance in the Comintern debates on the agents of revolution in colonial countries, the Moplah rebellion was a much-needed point of reference on two counts. First, it figured as a prime example of the militant mass struggle that Roy posited as the core of the khilafat and non-cooperation movements. Second, the uprising served to showcase the relative lack of radicalism in Gandhi and the Congress. Gandhi had condemned the insurgents because of their ample use of force. The communists, however, soon fashioned it into the beginning of revolution.

Neither the scarcity of reports nor the tenor of the few available pieces of information could detract from the communist determination to claim the rebellion. On the contrary, its initial perception through the lens of an Eastern revolutionary paradigm ensured that its pronounced fundamentalist component contributed to a positive assessment. A 1921 *Inprecorr* (International Press Correspondence, the international organ of the Comintern) article located the rebellion's origins in religious outrage: Soldiers had entered mosques in a bid to arrest Muslim leaders and thus had desecrated the sites. This had caused "understandable" indignation among the Muslim population.³⁴¹ Abdur Rab, not yet fallen from Bolshevik revolutionary grace, felt vindicated in his view that Brahmins were no more than hesitant compromisers, whereas "the Muslims" had gone straight for "immediate revolution."³⁴² For him, the uprising was anti-colonial struggle par excellence. In a rare case of agreement between the two, Roy echoed this endorsement when he called for extending what had "burst out spontaneously at [...] Malabar" to the entire subcontinent in the manifesto submitted to the 1922 Gaya Congress. Later, Roy even boasted to have had a hand in the uprising through his agents.³⁴³ While this seems presumptuous, his

³⁴⁰ Home/Poll/1923 Nr. 129/6, 6; Home/Poll/1923 Nr. 129/IV, 17; *Pioneer*, 3 March 1922, quoted in Home/Poll/1922 Nr. 241/14, 39.

³⁴¹ "The Revolutionary Movement in India," *Inprecorr*, Roll No. 1921/3-B, 18.

³⁴² *Isvestija*, 11 May 1922, quoted in Home/Poll/1922 Nr. 884, 5–6.

³⁴³ Home/Poll/1924 Nr. 261, 110 (quote); Petrie, *Communism in India*, 283.

straightforward embrace of the rebellion leaves little doubt that its religious fanaticism did at least not contradict Roy's aspirations.

Ironically, these first responses bore close resemblance to British assessments. The only difference was that they embraced the rebellion on the very grounds that led British officials to discount it as obstinate fundamentalism. Slogans such as the call for a khilafat republic had stirred the refractory Moplahs into action, and thanks to their inherent fanaticism they had taken the injunctions literally. The extent to which a social dimension of the conflict was gainsaid becomes apparent in a telegram to the Government of India, where Evans stipulated that there was no reason to suppose "that agrarian discontent was even a contributory cause of the rising".³⁴⁴ Initially, the colonial and the communist point of view concurred in the cultural substance of the argument.

Only when cues to non-religious motivations of the revolting Moplahs became available did subsequent communist contributions switch to the emphasis of the rebellion's purported materialist underpinnings. Referring to the report of a Kerala Congress committee tasked with an enquiry, the *Vanguard* approvingly quoted from a speech by the committee's head, V. S. Gayatri Iyer, characterizing the uprising as a consequence of "long standing and acute agrarian grievances."³⁴⁵ The systematic destruction of public records demonstrated that forced evictions had been a core cause of the outbreak. Roy jumped to the conclusion that Iyer had "proved [!] that the rebellion was neither for the Khilafat nor directly against the British government [...] [but] primarily against landlordism."³⁴⁶

Yet, in the mid-1920s the rapidly worsening inter-communal climate forced Roy to reconsider the religious factor. The surge in communalism after the end of non-cooperation made it difficult to uphold the conviction that religion was just a relic, an ephemeral phenomenon bound to be swept aside by the strides of history (that is, the class struggle). Since all it had been swept aside in were the terminological regulations Roy had applied, in the end he came round to admit an "ugly character of religious fanaticism."³⁴⁷ Still, this had been possible only because the conflicting classes had belonged to different religions. As to the basics, he remained convinced that despite a "certain religious character" the Moplah

³⁴⁴ "Telegram to the Government of India, Home Department, No. M. 163," in Tottenham, *The Mapilla Rebellion*, 200. See also "Note on Malabar affairs," in *ibid.*, 32, and "Letter from the District Magistrate," in *ibid.*, 17.

³⁴⁵ Quoted in "Materialism vs. Spiritualism," *Vanguard*, 1 August 1923. This was long after Roy's embrace of the rebellion in his manifesto to the 1922 Gaya Congress.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ "Economics of Communal Conflict," *Masses of India*, January 1925.

revolt had been “an agrarian revolt.”³⁴⁸ In the same measure that religious fanaticism had been emphasized earlier, communist commentary would henceforth belittle it to the extent that the rebellion acquired the halo of a revolutionary example for peasant communism.

Towards a Domestic Revolutionary Heritage

And yet, the CPI-led Kerala state government’s bid to introduce pensions for veteran insurgents on rebellion’s golden jubilee in 1971 met with unequivocal rejection from senior CPI(M) opposition leader Namboodiripad (1909–1998). His claim—understandable from his biographical experience as an indirect victim since his family of wealthy landlords had had to live as refugees for half a year, but very unusual for a communist—that the uprising had been a communal movement seemed to indicate a comprehensive reversal of the rebellion’s embrace in communist quarters.³⁴⁹ What had happened?

Indeed, his assessment appeared diametrically opposed to earlier communist stances. Saumyendranath Tagore’s (1901–1974) pamphlet *Peasants Revolt in Malabar, 1921*, written after an extensive tour of the area during the early 1930s, constituted the first ‘native’ communist commentary on the rebellion. Certainly it was the first to rely on first-hand accounts. The text was a manifesto of radical dedication to a communist ‘history from below’ and of equally radical determination to preserve the materialist pristineness of popular self-assertion: Throughout the history of revolt among Moplahs, the “apparent causes” of outbreaks had been not religious, but “purely agrarian.”³⁵⁰

Consequently, Tagore portrayed the uprising’s communal dimension as a malignant rumor. “The Moplah peasants were not anti-Hindu by any means [...] Not a single Hindu was molested or plundered in those days just because he happened to be a Hindu.”³⁵¹ Victims among Hindus inevitably had been either class enemies or pro-British, and only those who had collaborated with colonial institutions had been harassed and robbed. Evidently, Tagore didn’t waste time with questions such as how exactly the rebels had told those aiding the British from those loyal to the insurgents. Instead, he extensively quoted allegations by Ahmad Hazi, a peasant leader during the rebellion, that it had been the

³⁴⁸ “The Calcutta Riot,” *Masses of India*, May 1926.

³⁴⁹ The state government had considered the rebels freedom fighters and as such entitled to special pensions. The central government refused to comply because compatriots had been among the rebellion’s victims as well, triggering an intense debate in Kerala whether the great rebellion belonged to the national movement or not. See Menon, *Malabar Rebellion*, 475–7.

³⁵⁰ Saumyendranath Tagore, *Peasants Revolt in Malabar, 1921*, PCJ CPI 2A, 5 (quote), 10–12.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 16–18.

government which had engineered the destruction of temples and the looting of Hindu houses in order to defame the rebels.³⁵²

Tagore's reductive simplicity soon invited Namboodiripad's criticism. As it was written during the pro-Muslim euphoria of the CPI's 'nationality period' (see chapter V.3), it is all the more remarkable to see Namboodiripad's 1943 classic *A Short History of the Peasant Movement in Malabar* spell out the rebellion's motivations in no unclear terms: "The beginning of the riot was partly political and partly agrarian but very soon it developed into a communal movement."³⁵³ Namboodiripad attacked Tagore and other "so-called Marxists" for neglecting a couple of "simple but relevant questions"—such as why the tenant movement and the subsequent rebellion had been restricted to Muslim-majority areas. Neither the bureaucracy nor the landlords had been partial towards Hindu tenants. Nevertheless, the latter had experienced the uprising as predominantly anti-Hindu. Also, Tagore had ignored the forced conversions, which "cannot by any stretch of imagination be explained away as part of a purely agrarian movement."³⁵⁴

Still, it was Namboodiripad's very theoretical sophistication that eventually enabled him to arrive at a comprehensive absolution of the rebellious Moplahs, and in the end more or less confirm Tagore's position. To begin with, despite admitting that "a certain percentage of the crimes are of a purely fanatical type" he was quick to identify culprits outside of the 'masses': What the corruptive khilafatist influence had been to Tagore, the mullahs were to Namboodiripad. Allegedly, it had been in their interest to turn "the anti-jenmi [landlord] sentiments of the peasants into the anti-Hindu sentiments of the Moplahs." It had come as no surprise, then, that the uneducated peasants had fallen for this. Rather, the remarkable fact was that there had been relatively few "fanatical outbursts": "It clearly shows that with all his traditional illiteracy, backwardness and priest-riddenness, the Moplah peasant is much more a class-conscious peasant than a community-conscious Moplah."³⁵⁵ As to why the "class-conscious peasant" had taken a "partially communal turn," then, Namboodiripad pointed to the withdrawal of Hindus from the movement when it turned violent. "The Moplah found that his Hindu compatriots [...] deserted him; the military arrived to hunt him out of his abode; his Hindu neighbours helped the military against him.

³⁵² Ibid., 24.

³⁵³ E. M. S. Namboodiripad (interviewee), 3, 5 (quote).

³⁵⁴ Namboodiripad, "A Short History," 179, 182.

³⁵⁵ All quotes *ibid.*, 174–5.

He naturally got enraged at them [!].”³⁵⁶ Having thus become victims both of the British military and the treacherous infidels, Namboodiripad considered it understandable that the Moplahs turned against Hindus, even common ones.

This rationalizing drive was topped off with a baffling appropriation of the movement’s leadership as suitable revolutionary material. Quite possibly this was a reflection of the CPI’s contemporary holistic embrace of resistive Muslim self-assertions, an embrace that tended to downplay rifts and differences in the exaltation of the greater Muslim cause. Consisting of “saintly Moplahs” strangely unconnected to the maligned ulema, the ideological (that is, religious) lapses of the uprising’s leadership were merely a matter of correct instruction and at any rate eclipsed by their merits as anti-British agitators and peasant leaders:

Sincere anti-imperialists, they, however, think and speak in the terms of religion which had tremendous effect in rallying the Moplahs [...] *most of them were good material as peasant cadres if only there had been a good and efficient central leadership* [...] they showed their mettle as good organizers both before and during the rebellion.³⁵⁷ (emphasis added)

Namboodiripad’s reasoning was all the more remarkable because it concluded a text starting out with an attack on “so-called Marxists” for their ignorance of disagreeable communal facts. As an apparently much better Marxist, Namboodiripad could even imagine the very same leaders doing the very same thing under a properly, that is, communist-organized revolution.

His later positions display a similar, if somewhat more sophisticated rationalizing impulse. Emphatically sympathizing with the hunted and deserted Moplahs in a 1970 interview, his justification of their suspicions and aversions towards Hindus became more dogged in the same measure that the latter’s fears and apprehensions were devalued. Namboodiripad averred that the crucial, communally divisive factor had not been actual forced conversions, but rather the fear of them on the part of Hindus. Similarly, he estimated the number of killed Hindus to be quite low, as “it was not so much the number that mattered but the atmosphere [sic!] of tension.”³⁵⁸ Hence, he attributed the spike in the Malabar Arya Samaj’s popularity after the rebellion, which furthered the intercommunal divide, solely to Hindu phantasmagorias, outsourcing the irrational factor to the non-rebelling population segment that had developed essentially unjustified fear. The betrayed and beleaguered Moplahs, on the other hand, had had a rational foundation for their

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 184. This motive was dominant in Namboodiripad’s writings on the matter; see Namboodiripad, *A History of India*, 177.

³⁵⁷ Namboodiripad, “A Short History,” 184.

³⁵⁸ Namboodiripad (interviewee), 20, 22.

communal outrages as the few Hindus remaining in the area had actively cooperated with the British.³⁵⁹

In view of this background, it can be safely said that Namboodiripad's seemingly contrary stance on the matter during the above-mentioned 1971 pension controversy originated in motivations of political distinction. Considering his other efforts to acquit the common Moplah peasant (if not the rebellion as a whole) from the charge of communalism, this was clearly an anti-CPI move designed to expose the rival party's reactionary trends for political reasons rather than because of an evolution in his own positions. Mutual recriminations of the same pattern abounded in the years after the 1964 party split. Hence, the principal merit of Namboodiripad's "most sophisticated analysis" (Robert Hardgrave) lies in the attainment of an impressive level of rationalization and exculpation, and in the inadvertent exposition of the mechanisms at work there.³⁶⁰

By temperament not prone to complicated theoretical analysis, popular Kerala communist leader Ayillyath Kuttiari Gopalan (1904–1977) confirmed the Moplah rebellion's importance as a reference point for communist identification of resistive subjectivity. His 1973 autobiography confessed that the "Moplah rebellion excited [his] imagination." Even while the rebellion had been "bereft of intelligent political leadership [and] well-conceived policy or programme, the brave deeds of my Muslim brethren who fought against imperialist oppression enthused me."³⁶¹ Notwithstanding their shortcomings, the rebelling Moplahs, braving the constraints of time and place, had managed to come out progressive in a political and a social sense:

The class sense of Muslim peasants [of Malabar] has sprung from a century-long struggle against feudalism [!] [...] The last of these struggles against feudalism took place in 1921 [...] There is no memorial yet to the countless martyrs who laid down their lives in the fight for land for the peasants.³⁶²

Strikingly, Gopalan didn't bother to explain away (or even mention) religious militancy. To him, one of the most renowned popular leaders of the South Asian communist movement to date and a native of Kerala to boot, the defining criterion seemed to be 'activity from below' plain and simple: The political self-assertion of a socially declassed population segment through a rebellion that counted landlords and foreign rulers among its enemies compensated for possible uglier aspects. Ideological motivations apart from those

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 26.

³⁶⁰ Hardgrave, *The Mappilla Rebellion*, 90.

³⁶¹ Ayillyath Kuttiari Gopalan, *In the Cause of the People: Reminiscences* (Bombay: Orient Longmans 1973), 9.

³⁶² Ibid., 249.

acknowledged by coarse Marxism seemed either irrelevant or non-existent to Gopalan's perspective, mirroring the entire party's blind proximity to fundamentalist currents.

A contemporary of the Moplah rebellion, the Akali movement in the Punjab formed the second pillar of early communist revolutionary optimism. While not as extensive, violent, or radical as its Moplah counterpart by far, it nevertheless displayed considerable tenacity in confronting the colonial government on the issue of communal self-government and was highly popular notably among the Sikh peasantry. In the following, the incorporation of a very Sikh grass-roots movement into the communist revolutionary fold will be illustrated.

III.1.2 The Akali Movement

Akalization of the Panth

From before its integration into British India in 1848, the Punjab had been a heavily agricultural province with a somewhat unique social set-up. The Jats formed the numerically dominant group, land-owning farmers who incarnated the ideal type of Punjab social life until the end of the British Raj. In contrast, extensive landholdings were limited to the (Muslim) western Punjab. In the central and eastern parts of the province, the 1900 Punjab Land Alienation Act had largely prevented the concentration of land by limiting the possession of land to "peasant castes" and thereby banning the entry of commercial capital into the land market. This provision contributed to the sharp divide between urban and rural life in the Punjab, which in due time would make itself felt in provincial politics (including the communist movement) and also affect the province's fragile communal balance.³⁶³

Similar to processes among Hindus and Muslims, political activity among Sikhs grew out of movements of religious reform with a strong educational component. As a result of the combination of numerous factors, among them increasingly virulent anti-colonialism, the grant of separate electorates to Muslims in the 1909 Morley-Minto reforms, and the ascendancy of several institutions committed to the promotion of Sikh political, cultural, and religious 'rights,' "the first decade of the twentieth century brought about a great religious

³⁶³ Gopal Singh, *Politics of Sikh Homeland (1940–1990)* (Delhi: Ajanta Publ. 1994), 19–20; Javed, *Left Politics in Punjab*, 239; see also Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs: Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century* (Delhi: Manohar 1978), 189–93.

and political awakening among the Sikhs.”³⁶⁴ The movement against the 1907 Land Colonization Bill had first borne this out. In its course, current communal idioms were connected to social questions, leading to the agitation among Sikhs assuming a distinctly communal character. Popular songs like *Pagri Sambhal Jatta* (“O, Jat, see that your turban, the embodiment of your honor, is not dislodged”) attested to an identitary sense of protest in the community.³⁶⁵

The assertion of a collective Sikh identity also fostered a critical attitude towards a government viewed as hemming in the community’s aspirations. Events such as the demolition of a Delhi gurdwara (Sikh temple) in 1914 had caused considerable resentment, even though the British generally saw to it to maintain quiet in the strategically, militarily, and economically important Punjab—enough for the Sikhs to remain mostly loyal. After the World War, however, the nascent movement for the reform of the gurdwara management was abetted by the anti-government wave sweeping the subcontinent. In the Punjab, the repercussions of the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, where British troops had fired into a peaceful protest rally and killed hundreds of civilians—an event that “turned the tables of political fortunes across India”—were doubly felt.³⁶⁶ The increasingly radicalized and militant wing of the movement named itself “Akali” after a term coined by Guru Gobind Singh for “immortal.” It denoted those who would risk their lives to defend the Sikh religious sites.³⁶⁷

The Akalis lost no time to show their religious colors. Jathas (religious protest rallies) were organized in rural Punjab demanding that Sikh religious institutions be administered by the panth (the Sikh community); that the office of the mahant (Hindu temple administrator) be abolished in favor of a responsible management elected by the Sikhs from their ranks; that the property and income of the temples be utilized “for the purpose for which they were founded”; and that Sikhism be practiced “according to the teachings of the

³⁶⁴ Raghbir Singh, *Akali Movement (1926–1947)* (Delhi: Omsons 1997), 13. On the background of this awakening and the accompanying inner-Sikh controversies see Reetz, “Religion and Group Identity,” 79.

³⁶⁵ Kailash Gulati, *The Akalis: Past and Present* (Delhi: Ashajanak Publications 1974), 19, 199 (endnote).

³⁶⁶ Reetz, “Community Concepts and Community-Building: Exploring Ethnic Political Identity in Colonial India,” in *Changing Identities: The Transformation of Asian and African Societies under Colonialism*, ed. Joachim Heidrich (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch 1994), 128. On the influence of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (whose perpetrator, Brig.-Gen. Rex Dyer, had been elevated to the status of a “honorary Sikh” and defender of the Sikh faith by the then Golden Temple management in recognition of his achievements), see Gulati, *The Akalis: Past and Present*, 10.

³⁶⁷ K. L. Tuteja, *Sikh Politics, 1920–1940* (Kurukshetra: Vishal Publ. 1984), 54. “Akali” means “without time” or “timelessness,” hence the meaning “immortal”: Gulati, *The Akalis: Past and Present*, 17, 24.

Sikh Gurus as preserved in the *Adi Granth*,” the holy book of the Sikhs.³⁶⁸ The campaign resounded most among the Sikh intelligentsia and the middle and lower Jat peasants.

With the need for a separate organization increasing, the Central Sikh League was formed in December 1919. It declared allegiance to the Congress and joined the non-cooperation movement as the government neglected the “rights of the Sikh community.”³⁶⁹ Politically, though, it was soon eclipsed by the rise of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). Originally, the SAD had been the militant wing of the central Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC), established in November 1920 as the self-governing body to manage the temples in the spirit of the panth. Soon, however, the political and religious radicals from the Akali Dal became the dominant group within the latter’s fold. Their agenda consisted in restoring what they believed to be original tenets of Sikhism, with the first goal being the ouster of the mahants.

The institution of Hindu temple priests or mahants dated back to the times of independent Sikh rule in the Punjab. In the wake of the establishment of British rule, the quality of temple management deteriorated as heredity gradually displaced responsibility. At the same time, the income from the temples’ land holdings increased considerably due to the expansion of canal irrigation, rendering the mahants’ exclusive access to the wealth exposed to intensified challenge. Petitions to dislodge the mahants and reorganize gurdwara administration had surfaced already in the first decade of the 20th century, and had emanated not from a popular movement, but from the Sikh aristocracy. However, resentment against their practices seldom surfaced in the shape of purely managerial criticism. According to Kailash Chander Gulati, it was the “vices of the mahants” that “created religious discontent among the Sikh laity.” Not only “unauthorised expenditure,” but particularly also “sacrilegious misuse of the sacred precincts” counted among the sins of the temple priests.³⁷⁰

The government, seeing no need to disturb the hitherto prevailing amicable relations with the established Sikh leadership, and fearing that the gurdwaras be taken over by nationalists, responded with repression. The resulting casualties further popularized the largely non-violent movement. After a prolonged struggle and numerous clashes, which claimed the lives of hundreds of activists and had thousands injured and jailed, the efforts

³⁶⁸ Singh, *Akali Movement (1926–1947)*, 15.

³⁶⁹ Gulati, *The Akalis: Past and Present*, 20–2.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 24. See also V. D. Chopra, R. K. Mishra, and Nirmal Singh, *Agony of Punjab* (Delhi: Patriot Publ. 1984), 57–9; and Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Struggle. A Retrospect* (Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors 1988), 16–19.

eventually bore fruit. In November 1925, the Sikh Gurdwara Bill was passed, providing for the management of Sikh temples by an elected body, the SGPC.³⁷¹

The latter's agenda, largely determined by the SAD, had germinated from religious considerations. The SAD, in turn, was "the product [...] of the church embodied by the historic Sikh shrines."³⁷² Accordingly, the Akalis were determined to "see that the sanctity of the shrines was restored and its affairs were conducted by the [...] congregation in time [sic!] with the original teachings of Guru Gobind Singh." These motivations became closely linked to broader anti-British politics among the Punjab Sikhs: The "growing national consciousness among the Sikhs found its immediate expression in their [...] struggle for the democratisation of the management of the gurdwaras."³⁷³ Such a link also was to Gandhi's taste, who extended the INC's support to the Akalis, signifying their suitability for the pan-religious project that was his vision of Indian nationalism. In this, he would not be disturbed by reports of his local informer Pannikar, who repeatedly pointed to the "religious fanaticism and narrow-mindedness of the general [Akali] body" and had first-hand experience of religious friction between Akalis and Hindus.³⁷⁴ Indeed, the connection between nationalism and religion also worked the other way round: According to Gopal Singh, the movement had "politicized the Sikh identity" and thus brought about a permanent division between Hindus and Sikhs, a division that would become deeply manifest in the demand for a separate Sikh state in the 1940s.³⁷⁵

Socialization of the Akalis

Just as in the case of the Moplah rebellion, South Asian communism was eager to appropriate the Akalis for social emancipation and national revolution. Unlike the Moplah uprising, however, the movement's religious dimension never came to be treated as the 'other' of the more progressive aspects of the mobilization—not least because the communal excesses of Malabar were not reproduced in the Punjab. Instead, religious assertions figured as core ingredients of a mixture of nationalist, 'cultural,' and social

³⁷¹ Gulati, *The Akalis: Past and Present*, 29–31. The act merely formalized already existing realities. See Singh, *Akali Movement*, 15.

³⁷² Gulati, *The Akalis: Past and Present*, 10.

³⁷³ All quotes in Chopra *et al.*, *Agony of Punjab*, 60.

³⁷⁴ *Letter of Pannikar of the Akali Sahayak Bureau to Gandhi*, Home/Poll/1924 Nr. 67/III, "Akali Jathas," Nr. 1893. See also Chopra *et al.*, *Agony of Punjab*, 61.

³⁷⁵ Singh, *Politics of Sikh Homeland*, 47.

factors rendering the movement worthy of support. From the outset, it was fashioned into an integrated whole in the proper Eastern revolutionary sense.

Additionally, the Akali agenda was unduly glorified for envisioning a revolution in land relations. Thus, *Inprecorr* wrote in mid-1922 that the movement aimed for redistribution of the estates of large temples among the peasant cultivators. Although this was clearly beyond the scope of the movement, the Comintern's organ was certain that "nothing less than expropriation" was on its agenda.³⁷⁶ Roy similarly maintained that the movement was "of a seriously revolutionary nature."³⁷⁷ Moreover, he asserted that the Akalis were "heroic Sikhs," whose "determined fight" had been betrayed by the Congress:

Unfortunately the Congress has a very wrong conception of the *Akali* Movement which is looked upon by it as a religious affair; whereas it is a revolt of the expropriated peasantry [...] Essentially what the *Akali* Sikhs are struggling for is not a religious reform, but to regain possession of these communal estates. In other words, it is a class struggle between the landlords and the peasantry.³⁷⁸

Two factors facilitated the short-circuiting of Sikh revivalism with a full-fledged peasant revolution. One, the SAD's composition: Among the Akalis were many "remnants or survivors of the Ghadr Party who had [...] escaped the gallows [after having unsuccessfully staged an armed uprising in 1915]." The prominent role of revolutionaries who might well have ended up in the CPI, had it existed earlier, spurred communist sympathies.³⁷⁹

Two, the hopes and aspirations Roy put into the movement were pinned on a particularly militant factor: The Babbar Akalis ("immortal lions"), armed brigands harassing loyalists and those they intended to rob, went a long way to rouse communist sympathy for the movement. They were a splinter group of the Akali Dal calling for non-payment of land revenue and striving to "liberate" the temples, apparently with a temporary measure of success: According to British sources, they had managed to establish an "absolute reign of terror" in parts of several central Punjab districts during the latter half of 1922.³⁸⁰ Many Sikh sympathies were with the Babbars, who seldom targeted fellow religionists during their robberies—after all, they were staunch flesh from the Akali bone, frequently shouting slogans such as "Sat Sri Akal" and singing shabads (holy Sikh hymns).³⁸¹ *Inprecorr* raved

³⁷⁶ "The Peasant Movement in India," *Inprecorr* 2, no. 51 (1922), Roll No. 3396, 379.

³⁷⁷ "Terrorism in the Punjab," *Vanguard*, 1 July 1922. See also *Times of India*, 4 April 1922 and 5 September 1922.

³⁷⁸ "Notes and Comments: Class Struggle," *Vanguard*, 15 October 1922.

³⁷⁹ Gulati, *The Akalis: Past and Present*, 25–6 (quote); Petrie, *Communism in India*, 138.

³⁸⁰ Home/Poll/1924 Nr. 1/X "Note on the Babbar Akali Movement," 1–2, 4. See also Sarkar, *Modern India*, 211.

³⁸¹ *The Times of India*, 31 May 1923. When Gandhi disowned them in late 1922 and both Akali Dal and SPGC followed suit, the police campaigns bore fruit and the Babbar Akalis were subdued in the course of a year. See

that the Babbars were “terrorizing the landholders and agitating for a revolt which will overthrow the British government and establish a government of the Sikhs.”³⁸²

British fears of disquietingly successful Akali endeavors to spread propaganda among Sikh regiments, as well as the colonial stance expressed by the *Pioneer* that the SGPC “are now a formidable revolutionary organisation determined to bring the Government to their knees,” further contributed to communist sympathies for Akali militancy—from which the religious quality of its anti-colonialism could not detract one bit.³⁸³ Sufficiently informed to characterize their “aggressive campaign of agitation” among soldiers as one conducted by “special propagandists” by means of literature in the vernacular, it is telling that Roy made no mention of its content.³⁸⁴ Things seemed too obvious: In the course of the Akali campaign, Roy opined that even the “most simple Akali peasant” had grasped what his struggle was about.³⁸⁵

Apparently, his *Vanguard* had grasped it, too. In an almost hagiographic sketch, Evelyn Roy praised Babbar leader Mota Singh for having initiated a campaign against “corrupt religious leaders and their government coadjutors, for the reclaiming of rich temple lands and their redistribution among the peasant masses.” Not stopping at this somewhat creative characterization of the Babbars, Roy went on to glorify its Sikh heritage: The “history of his conquered race [!], the *Sikhs*,” was burning in Singh’s heart, the “proud and martial blood of a soldierly people” was flowing through his veins. Hiding from the police, he had moved underground and spread “doctrines of simple communism.”³⁸⁶

Others shared in this appraisal. Bolshevik support for the Akalis had from an early point exceeded mere solidarity addresses. Mohamed Ali, in charge of the Comintern’s Central Asian “Mali bureau” in the early 1920s, had sent considerable sums for revolutionary propaganda to Mota Singh and other Akalis in 1921 and 1922.³⁸⁷ Fittingly, both Ghadriles and the Comintern exhibited few reservations towards Sikh identitarianism when they approached the SGPC with the suggestion to set up secret societies under its umbrella. Disguised (!) as communal associations, they were to work for the revolution.³⁸⁸ This was

Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in the Punjab. A Study of the Movement up to 1967* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications 1994), 49.

³⁸² “The Peasant Movement in India.”

³⁸³ Quoted in *The Times of India*, 5 October 1922.

³⁸⁴ “Akali Propaganda in Indian Army,” *Vanguard*, 1 December 1922.

³⁸⁵ “The Artful Dodger,” *Vanguard*, 15 January 1923.

³⁸⁶ Shanthi Devi, “Mota Singh, Leader of the Indian Peasants,” *Inprecorr*, 1 September 1922, Roll No. 3396.

³⁸⁷ Also, a number of Muslim activists connected to the “Khilafat extremist Abul Kalam Azad” had thus received Soviet support. See Kaye, *Communism in India*, 89–90.

³⁸⁸ Petrie, *Communism in India*, 138–40.

more than a whim born from contemporary revolutionary enthusiasm. The Moscow-based International Peasant Council would consider the Akalis a full-blown peasant movement for years to come.³⁸⁹

In contrast, communist responses from the subcontinent proper have ever been low in numbers, and even more so among contemporaries. More precisely, Dange was the only contemporary communist on the subcontinent to comment at all, and the metamorphosis in his assessment of the Akalis speaks of a rapid socialization as a communist: At first, he viewed the Akalis as a movement against British control over “the Sikhs,” who were “fighting for” what Dange deemed “their rights.” The Akalis’ ideological moorings seemed to resonate positively with Dange when he attacked the INC leadership for its contemplative attitude: “We cannot say that the Akalis are fighting for their religious question and sit silent. [...] What we must urge is sympathetic and simultaneous action in other parts of India in support of the Akalis.”³⁹⁰ However, a couple of weeks later, while Roy was still in the process of reaching ever new heights in extolling the merits of a revolt under Sikh auspices, the *Socialist* carried an editorial marked by a radical turn in the assessment of the movement. Notwithstanding the repression unleashed by the government, he considered the Akalis victims not so much of the British as of

an institution, that they themselves created [...] Men in history have carved out kingdoms and amassed wealth by heroism and industry but the subtleties of the priestly craft have outflanked them all by carving kingdoms with the aid neither of a sword or a war-horse but by an invisible invention of the Great Fear and charity to Temples and Priests. If the individual mahants go, a committee will come, if a committee goes, a dominating class will come. It is the property of the Gods; that is the main evil. The vice of the mahant is a creation of that property and the property is a creation of that great invention of the priestly craft.³⁹¹

The mahants, Dange went on, were not the real problem. They merely administered the grants of land made to the temples. Not just the Punjab, the whole of India was affected by “the same curse.” There was just one way of ending the sorry state of things: “Cease to create property in the temples and everyone will cease to clamour for rights in them, religious or otherwise.”³⁹²

Back then, Dange had been an independent socialist inspired by, and communicating with, Roy in Europe, but not yet a Bolshevik. Diverse strands of left-wing thought had not

³⁸⁹ “Letter from A. N. Voznecienski, Manager of the Eastern and colonies department of International Farmer’s Council (Krestintern), to the editor of *Langal*,” in *Meerut Conspiracy Case, 1929–32*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/5994>, 39.

³⁹⁰ *Socialist*, 9 September 1922, quoted in *Indian Freedom Fighters. Struggle for Independence*. Series 50, S. A. Dange, ed. S. R. Bakshi (Delhi: Anmol Publications 1993), 13–14.

³⁹¹ *Socialist*, 30 September 1922, quoted in Bakshi, *Freedom Fighters*, 22.

³⁹² *Ibid*, 24.

yet been unified and cast into a streamlined ‘party line,’ but were freely competing within the future communists’ minds. In Dange’s case, this meant that the unqualified absolution of broadly resistive grass-roots movements was not the only option available to a radical left-wing perspective. Straightforward criticism of religion, still a meaningful component in the assessment of social phenomena, could assume priority over the heady euphoria for hazily resistive ‘masses’—especially if the religion in question was outside one’s own, accustomed metaphysical turf.

Dange’s next comments in October 1922, however, were marked by another turn that bore testimony to the exposure to the influence of contemporarily prestigious Bolshevism. Not incidentally, this novel turn occurred at a time when correspondence between Roy and Dange intensified.³⁹³ It exhibited Dange’s gradual drift towards a ‘mature,’ more systematized left-wing worldview: Remaining silent on the religious aspect, the *Socialist* now limited itself to commending the SGPC for its “highly efficient organisation and conduct of the campaign,” and emphasized that deteriorating economic conditions after the war had occasioned the movement against the mahants. Excessive taxation of land and speculation in food grains lay at the root of the problem.³⁹⁴

Still, as against Roy’s explicit embrace of the movement’s religious grounding Dange could bring himself no further than supporting the Akalis on account of them being a political social movement. The overtly religious character of their campaign had raised his sense of alarm, reasonably acute outside the premises of Hindu-tinged extremist nationalism. However, in the same measure that Roy’s prestigious and influential position as the chief organizer of communism on the subcontinent recognized by the highest revolutionary authority, that is, the Comintern, gradually diffused into the scattered groups on the ground, original ambiguity succumbed before the uniform imperatives of party communism.

As these imperatives discouraged criticism of ‘mass action,’ but on the other hand set no limits to identification with the latter, it is hardly surprising that affirmation of the movement including its religious features characterizes what little later South Asian communists have published on the matter since. A case in point was CPI leader Sohan Singh Josh (1896–1982), whose political career had begun in the Akali movement itself—no exceptional feature among early Punjabi communists.³⁹⁵ For Josh, its crude anti-

³⁹³ See the preserved letters in NAI-KCC File I, esp. 89–97.

³⁹⁴ *Socialist*, 21 October 1922, quoted in Bakshi, *Freedom Fighters*, 27–9.

³⁹⁵ Chopra *et al.*, *Agony of Punjab*, 61.

establishment impulse went a long way towards its justification. The political act of joining it had been an act of defiance of the then prevailing “feudal respectability” in the villages. Even so, those who endorsed Josh’s decision did not necessarily sport a more progressive mind-set: “The reaction of the more religious people [...] was that [I] had done the right thing. The Sikh religion was under attack.”³⁹⁶ Indeed, while the “heavy burden of direct and indirect taxes” levied from the peasants had also contributed to a mood of unrest, Josh underlined that the mahants had succeeded in “polluting” the Sikh religion with Hindu rituals and thereby pulling the teeth of official Sikhism.³⁹⁷

Josh admitted that the movement’s mainstay consisted of radicals “fanatically dogmatic in religious matters.”³⁹⁸ This, however, was no strong deterrent: Although he claimed to have spoken out against many of the “principles” passed at Akali gatherings (like a ban on inter-communal marriage or degradation of the status of women), he stuck to the movement. Josh’s zeal and bravery in political struggles even seem to have sufficiently cemented his reputation to have him elected general secretary of the “august” SAD in 1923.³⁹⁹ Before this background, Josh’s claim to have been forcibly ejected from a number of Akali meetings because of his stubborn opposition to their traditionalist agenda appears odd. Despite high numbers of arrests, it seems unlikely that the movement had no other leaders of stature to fall back onto. His awkward maneuvering between extolling his own revolutionary merits and disclaiming the context in which they were accrued allows the interpretation that, quite contrary to his retrospective account, he seems to have been quite at ease with the more radical Akalis.

A process of cutting the cord followed this initial phase of embrace of a religious movement: In jail, the lecture of Charles Sprading’s *Liberty and the Great Libertarians* sowed the seed of Josh’s alienation from the Akalis, with the result that by the mid-1920s he had drifted away from the movement and openly criticized its religious outlook. Josh began publishing articles in ex-Ghadrite Santokh Singh’s paper *Kirti* (worker), of which one called to break the power of the priests because they were agents of the rich, free the minds from inherited dharma and fatalism, and exhorted the workers to liberate themselves. Upon becoming editor of the paper after Singh’s death in 1927, he removed the prominent quotation from the *Adi Granth* on the front page and replaced it with a Marxist phrase.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁶ Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, 24–5.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26, 28.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 68–110, esp. 98–101.

And yet, in a reenactment of the communist reconciliation with ‘national culture,’ Josh eventually shed all reservations about Sikh religion in his autobiography. His retrospective portrayal of the ouster of the mahants as part of the class struggle ontologized Sikhism as an inherently resistive and even social revolutionary force: According to Josh, the Gurus of old had taught to fight tyranny, whereas the mahants’ “class interest had blinded them to the tenets of Sikhism.”⁴⁰¹ The circle had come full.

This section has traced the reception of two upheavals of the early 1920s in communist quarters and their fashioning into central points of reference for the localization of early revolutionary currents on the subcontinent. However, the appraisal of both phenomena did not follow a unitary pattern, despite a number of parallels. Much like the Moplah leaders, the upper echelons of the early Akali agitation have ever been exempted from criticism. In contrast to the usual practice of castigating the leadership for misdirecting an ‘essentially’ progressive struggle, as in the case of the non-cooperation movement, this pointed to a wholesome embrace of the respective movement. In the case of the Akalis, this was facilitated by the fact that communist opinion, unlike in the case of the Moplah rebellion, didn’t have to deal with obvious and disagreeable manifestations of exuberant fanaticism. In contrast, Akali religious assertiveness (and even Sikh religion proper), lacking a violent anti-Hindu edge, could figure as a positive point of reference. Thus, Roy short-circuited the community-centered grass-roots movement for reform in the administration of the gurdwaras with a full-scale peasant revolt. Militant Sikhism was not purged from the movement’s essence, as happened with Moplah radical Islam in much of later-day communist reception. On the contrary, its allegedly resistant traditions were invoked to back up positive appraisal. Consequently, the Akali movement’s religious rigidity seldom formed the target of criticism, directed largely ‘inwards’ as it was. Dange’s lone dissenting voice soon transformed into more ‘mature’ communist political commentary. Moreover, even his initial opposition suffered from a bias to problematize religiousness in all contexts except in his own Hindu one. In most assessments of the Akali movement, religion and social politics fused into an integrated whole worthy of communist support, whereas in case of the Moplahs, religion had to be dissected from the rebellion’s motives, and their fanaticism rationalized, to retain them as an instance in the self-localization of communism on the subcontinent.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 28.

This opalescent combination directly leads to the communist woes with one of the defining moments of political assertion on the subcontinent coming to the fore in the mid-1920s. What has become known as ‘communalism’ in public and academia alike not only abstractly formed an integral part of formation of political will. It also immediately affected the very ‘masses’ the communists were eager to claim for their own project of social emancipation. Accordingly, this development formed a potent challenge to unqualified accommodation of mass struggles and their ideological fundamentals. The following section explores the communist twin endeavor: To destroy communalism while keeping its agents in the ‘masses’ free from the odor of communal politics, and thus retain them as addressees for communism.

III.2 Whose Communalism? Antinomies of Consciousness

Most studies dealing with the emergence of communalism emphasize the crucial last third of the 19th century, and, hence, the divisive British influence. The time before is often characterized as largely free of religious conflict, or even as an inter-religious synthesis with only few exceptions such as Aurangzeb’s rule. This point of view is mostly represented by Indian nationalist and postcolonial historiography. On the other end of the spectrum, a communalized school of historiography traces two fundamentally diverse and inevitably hostile Hindu and Muslim “nations” back into history.⁴⁰² Others note that predominantly peaceful coexistence did not preclude riots and mutual antagonism. Long before colonial rule, social and religious developments on the subcontinent had exposed community-related fault lines. Indeed, numerous cases of 18th-century inter-religious strife exhibit patterns reproduced in later colonial India’s increasingly communalized set-up.⁴⁰³

Yet, during the later 19th century the traditional form of inter-communal tensions—that is, sporadic outbursts in violent clashes—gave way to systematic mutual delineation on a

⁴⁰² For a discussion of the issues involved in a sharp delineation of different “schools” of interpretation of communalism and its history from an anti-colonial perspective see Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1990), 9–13.

⁴⁰³ See, for example, Christopher A. Bayly, “The Pre-History of ‘Communalism’? Religious Conflict in India, 1700–1860,” *Modern Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1985). See also Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah and His Times* (Canberra: Ma’rifat 1980), 197, and Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Oxford: Blackwell 1998), 199.

political, educational, and social plane. This is because the conditions of colonial modernity contributed decisively to communal identity formation even while the British abstained from basing their rule on religious idioms: Like all colonial rulers, they had endeavored to control “the lives of individuals without necessarily sharing their values.”⁴⁰⁴ However, the tendency of British governance to recur, consciously or not, to pre-existing notions of community and weave them into the fabric of the colonial public sphere at all levels—from urban planning and employment to education and political representation—and thus accommodate and foster a broad social process of communalization went a long way towards a far-reaching modernization of traditional religious ties.

Influential sections among the respective communities eagerly reciprocated this compartmentalizing trend. Phrasing a wide array of political and social aspirations—most notably, elite conflicts over public jobs and political appointments—in communal idioms became established practice during the heyday of the British Raj, and in turn endowed these idioms with an increased sense of legitimacy. In the 1916 “Lucknow Pact” between INC and ML, where the Congress accepted separate representation for Muslims as demanded by the League, the national movement itself confirmed the communities’ status as core categories of politics. This model exerted decisive influence on the articulations and aspirations of other sub-national communities.⁴⁰⁵

In turn, religious communities became a quasi-natural focal point for the crystallization of nationalist sentiment. Eventually, “All-India” communities of Hindus and Muslims came to be defined and pitted against each other, not to mention the multitude of smaller regional communities. Pan-religious nationalism as preached by Gandhi undertook to unify the major communal entities under the roof of the national movement by accommodating their sentiments. Yet, this necessarily led to an affirmation of the respective collective identities, as evidenced by Gandhi’s acknowledgement and adaptation of the khilafatists’ religious demands. Thus, he paid for a temporal bridge over the inter-communal gap by deepening it. On the institutional side of things, the avenues for participation in politics and administration opened up by the 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford reforms were likewise constructed on the premises of separate electorates and thus had a “built-in temptation” to take the short-cut through the communal quarter.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁴ Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1986), 45.

⁴⁰⁵ Sarkar, *Modern India*, 59–60; and Reetz, “Religion and Group Identity,” 82.

⁴⁰⁶ In contrast to nationalist and postcolonial interpretations alike, Sarkar is one of the few to acknowledge communalism as a movement from below. Sarkar, *Modern India*, 156–8, 234 (quote); see also Pandey, *The*

After a long-time low during Gandhian non-cooperation, communal tensions erupted with renewed vigor after the movement's suspension. By the mid-1920s, mutual suspicion, aversion, and competition dominated an increasingly communalized political landscape. The latter became marked by the drive to "reclaim 'victims' and protect the 'faithful'" in the hangover after the aborted common struggle for swaraj.⁴⁰⁷ The upsurge of the shuddhi and sanghathan, and tabligh and tanzim movements, respectively, as well as accelerating social separation bore testimony to the path community sentiments were going down. Violent outbursts were only the most evident hints to the state of things. More than a hundred communal riots occurred between 1922 and 1927, killing hundreds and injuring thousands.⁴⁰⁸

III.2.1 Theoretic Conundrums, or That which Must not Be Cannot

The upsurge in communal violence during the 1920s in one way or another influenced the agendas of all political actors. In contrast to the mutual recriminations of communal leaders—in politics, these originated notably from Hindu Mahasabhis and some Muslim Leaguers—, INC grandees Motilal Nehru and Abul Kalam Azad made plans for the formation of an All-India party in 1924. Its membership would exclude members of any communal organization (quite possibly the blueprint for the provision to the same effect in the CPI's 1925 program). In Bengal, Chittaranjan Das negotiated a pact between both communities for the sharing of employment opportunities in the public sector, and Gandhi protested against the rise of inter-communal violence with a widely publicized three-week fast in autumn 1924. Yet, these endeavors proved largely ineffective: The Nehru-Azad party never materialized, Das died soon after the conclusion of his pact, which quickly became undone, and Gandhi's sincere but only momentarily effectual efforts did little to dispel long-term constellations for communal conflict.

Construction of Communalism, 16. On the close intertwinement of religion and (sub-)national group formation on the subcontinent see Reetz, "Religion and Group Identity."

⁴⁰⁷ Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 233–4. For a (not exhaustive) list of the most important sites of riots in the 1920s, see *The Communal Problem: Report of the Committee Appointed by the Indian National Congress (Karachi Session 1931) to Enquire into the Kanpur Riots of March 1931* (Delhi: National Book Trust [1933] 2005), 150–1.

⁴⁰⁸ For the numbers, see Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian*, 193. The tendency of riots to propel escalation in further riots and thus deepen the communal rift is emphasized in P. K. Dutta, "War over Music: The Riots of 1926 in Bengal," *Social Scientist* 18, no. 5–6 (1990): 40–1.

The increase in violence was also noticed in communist quarters. Still caught in the whirl of the post-war upsurge, they were loath to acknowledge the reality of religious rifts among the erstwhile revolting ‘masses.’ At the same time, however, denouncing rising communalism as the ‘natural’ consequence of an ill-designed movement also provided grist to Roy’s anti-bourgeois mills, and *ex post* supported his refusal to forge ties with the non-cooperators. The analysis took shape accordingly: While the absolute number of written contributions on the communal issue remained low, from the outset they undertook to externalize the religious divide from the spirit of protest, even religious, that had carried the movement until its termination. In a February 1923 comment Evelyn Roy identified religious extremism as “rank reaction,” but only “when exposed in its true colours,” hinting at a non-reactionary quality—little wonder given the lingering communist enthusiasm for anti-imperialism based on religious radicalism.⁴⁰⁹ In June 1923, the first text explicitly dedicated to the problem appeared in the *Vanguard*’s columns and considered the issue from a more materialist angle. M. N. Roy contrasted the “helpless” undertakings of South Asian leaders to contain the growing communal tensions by well-meaning appeals with his own analysis: “Communal rivalry is fomented by the upper classes of both the communities, and the Government always stands behind the scene.”⁴¹⁰ The solution lay in exposing intra-communal class conflicts for fostering unity in the struggle for freedom.

Under bourgeois auspices, however, the fuss around injured communal sentiments would never cease. By following the injunctions of their spiritual leaders, Hindus and Muslims were “consciously or unconsciously playing into the hands of Imperialism.”⁴¹¹ This was not a product of Roy’s imagination. (Pro-)British and conservative newspapers had been quick to question the viability and reasonability of subcontinental self-government upon the outbreak of communal riots.⁴¹² Nevertheless, notwithstanding his counterfactual claim—in the years before, it had been the very injunctions of spiritual leaders that had brought about a uniquely huge protest movement—Roy could obviously not imagine a worse incrimination than national betrayal. This is telling because it demonstrated two essentials of Roy’s view: First, that the problematic of communalism was not religious; and second, that neither the anti-libertine and socially conservative character of communal assertions, nor even their aggression against other communities, were overly disturbing to him.

⁴⁰⁹ Santi Devi, “Bolshevism for India,” *Vanguard*, 15 February 1923.

⁴¹⁰ “Communal Conflict and the Congress,” *Vanguard*, 1 June 1923.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² See, *pars pro toto*, the *Manchester Guardian*, quoted in *Times of India*, 7 April 1926.

The “Manifesto on the Hindu-Moslem Unity and Swaraj,” written by both Roys and published in the *Vanguard* in October 1923, constitutes one of the most often-cited communist texts on the issue to date.⁴¹³ The pamphlet summarily blasted non-cooperation, the main error of which had been that an “unreliable ground,” that is, “religion was allowed to play the chief part in the movement.” Also, the khilafat movement finally began to appear as problematic—half a decade after its inception, during which time considerable revolutionary laurels had been bestowed upon its militantly anti-British pan-Islamism. With the khilafatists’ Islamic anti-imperialism fast transforming into political anti-infidelism Roy now identified it as a culprit for the current debacle, a “foregone conclusion of such an ill-started movement.” Nevertheless, it was not all bad as the khilafat committees had at least succeeded in creating “some sort of political consciousness among the Mussulman masses of India.”⁴¹⁴ Interestingly, Roy didn’t bother to scrutinize quality of this consciousness, probably for the same reasons that another article in the *Vanguard* had vaguely deemed khilafat leader Mohamed Ali the “better revolutionary” than Gandhi.⁴¹⁵ Under the prevailing circumstances, a thorough investigation into the categories constituting contemporary revolutionarity might have turned out overly disappointing. In this light, the allegation that the upsurge in religious conflicts testified to the “essentially reactionary character” of bourgeois politicians only rang even hollower.

Accordingly, the Hindu and Muslim ‘masses’ had been distracted from their actual unity on class grounds. They had fallen victim to those who cunningly operationalized religion: “The consciousness of this union is interfered with by large doses of conflicting religious dogma administered by interested parties. Religious propaganda is an indigenous method of exploitation of the ignorant masses by the able doctors of Divinity.” The latter depended on the support of the feudal upper classes for their existence, and apparently shaped mass consciousness at will. Reversely, nationalist middle-class intellectuals just had to shed their religious prejudices and “replace the religious propaganda and metaphysical

⁴¹³ Usually Roy is credited as the author; however, it appears to have been Evelyn who wrote the text, and Roy only published it: Innaiah, *Evelyn Trent*, 21, 113.

⁴¹⁴ All quotes in “Manifesto on the Hindu-Moslem Unity and Swaraj,” *Vanguard*, 1 October 1923. Rajani Palme Dutt concurs: Dutt, *Modern India* (Bombay: Sunshine Publishing House 1926), 117–19, 124–6. Only much later were communists able to thoroughly criticize the heavily religious formation of political consciousness among Hindus and Muslims. See, for example, Sajjad Zaheer, “Recent Muslim Politics in India and the Problems of National Unity,” in *India and Contemporary Islam: Proceedings of a Seminar*, ed. S. T. Lokhandwalla (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study 1971), 209–11. For contemporary positive appraisals of the khilafat movement, see Shramendra Karsan “Die politische Krise in Indien,” *Inprecorr* Roll No. 3-B (1921):28; and Shadananda Karsan, “Revolutionary India,” *Inprecorr* 1, no. 18 (1921), Roll No. 3396, 150. Both were aliases of Roy, see Ganguly, *Leftism in India*, 293–6.

⁴¹⁵ Hasan Ibn Sabah, “The Release of Mohamed Ali,” *Vanguard*, 15 September 1923.

abstractions by economic slogans to make the masses conscious.” Yet, in the absence of national liberation, “India must continue to be a helpless victim of religious civil war.”⁴¹⁶

This underscores the commitment of contemporary communism to national liberation and highlights the redeeming qualities associated with its mere advent. Its embrace was precipitated on the deep sense of the Leninist demand for national self-determination of an essential intactness of indigenous culture, however religious its assertions. The latter had to be salvaged from the communally polluting colonial encumbrance in order to develop healthily: Roy opined in the *Constructive Programme* that men could not be educated in modern political principles “unless they extricate themselves from the bondage of religious superstitions and social prejudices,” which was impossible without a “free and normal national life.”⁴¹⁷ The latter followed its own messianic teleology, as the “inevitable and inexorable” development of nationalism on “purely secular” lines would by itself put an end to communalism.⁴¹⁸ Such ‘historical-materialistic’ eschatology is obviously closely related to its religious counterpart; hence, it is not surprising that Singaravelu reveled in similar prophecies at Kanpur with respect to the end of untouchability (“with the advent of Swaraj, these social and religious disabilities will fall of themselves”⁴¹⁹). Roy even deemed revolutionary nationalism “the deadly enemy of communalism”—a daring claim in view of the religious leanings of many revolutionary nationalists. Undaunted, he maintained in 1927 that national liberation was revolutionary in itself.⁴²⁰

Firmly rooted in the antinomy of national liberation, which envisaged the emancipation of the ‘backward’ masses through a “free and normal national life” resting on, and achieved by, these very same masses, his views made Roy the prompter for left-wing nationalism. From the early 1930s onwards, leftist Congress leaders increasingly insisted on British departure as the only solution to the communal problem. In his 1936 autobiography Nehru commented on the post-1922 riots that “divide and rule has always been the way of empires,” and was similarly convinced that “communal leaders represent a small upper class reactionary group” and “exploit and take advantage of the religious passions of the masses.”⁴²¹ The parallels to the communist pattern of analysis are obvious. Roy’s line of

⁴¹⁶ All quotes in “Manifesto on the Hindu-Moslem Unity.” See also Dutt, *Modern India*, 113–15.

⁴¹⁷ “Constructive Programme,” *Vanguard*, 15 May 1922.

⁴¹⁸ “Unity,” *Vanguard*, 15 November 1924.

⁴¹⁹ NAI-Satyabhakta A/17, 5.

⁴²⁰ “Unity,” *Vanguard*, 15 November 1924 (quote); “The Workers’ and Peasants’ Party,” *Masses of India*, April 1927

⁴²¹ Jawarhalal Nehru, *An Autobiography. With Musings on Recent Events in India* (London: Bodley Head 1936), 134–6, 467–8. Roy’s stances on the question were almost verbatim reproduced by the nationalist press during the Calcutta riots (see next section): See *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 and 27 June 1926; *Forward*, 27

argument contributed to the constitution of nationalist progressivism that regarded nationalism as

all that was forward-looking, progressive, ‘modern’ in Indian politics. Communalism was all that was backward-looking, reactionary. Nationalism reflected the spontaneous urge of the Indian people for economic advancement and freedom from exploitation. Communalism reflected the machinations of the colonial regime and reactionary upper-class elements.⁴²²

The communist approach was the first to systematize these tenets. Hence, rather than being indistinguishable from left-wing nationalism until the late 1930s it was the communist analysis of subcontinental religiousness and communalism that provided later left-wing nationalists with the essentials of their own stance. This testifies to the dynamic and modernizing impetus of communism in colonial South Asia, where its ambiguous relationship with nationalism entailed not only fierce political rivalry and competition but also the potential for cross-fertilization. The mutual quality of this process was ensured by the nationalist socialization of most subcontinental communists, who, after all, started out as chips off the nationalist block, and never severed their ties with mainstream nationalism.—

Even within the purview of his own theoretical perspective, however, Roy’s critique of interreligious strife reveals itself to be principled to the same extent that communalism was recognized as a thing-in-itself. Which it was not: While Roy’s interventions formed the most vocal and most analytic criticism of communalism of its time, the efforts to confine communalism to the influence of imperialism and the upper social strata clearly exhibited blind spots towards religious mass militancy. Roy’s determination to appropriate the social content of the openly religious Moplah rebellion (and, although in a different manner, also the Akali movement) suggests that *revolutionary communalism* could be a legitimate point of reference as long as it was distinguished by a sufficiently radical and popular anti-establishment thrust. Non-revolutionary, that is, neither anti-colonial nor (however mildly) anti-landlord communalism, on the other hand, was exactly the kind of communalism that couldn’t be accepted as part of mass.

Therefore, Roy clung to the conspiratorial character of such ‘non-revolutionary’ communalism: “Anonymous persons” hired “goondas [...] to start trouble,” which could be done “by such simple means as playing Hindu music before a Mussulman mosque; by Mussulmans slaughtering a cow before the enraged eyes of Hindu worshippers; by

April and 20 May 1926; *Atmasakti* und *The Statesman*, both 23 April 1926. See also Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 242; Habib, “The Left and the Nationa,” 23; and S. Gopal, “Nehru and Minorities,” in *Jawaharlal Nehru. Political Thinkers of India* 10, ed. Verinder Grover (Delhi: Deep and Deep 1992), 210–11.

⁴²² Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 241.

sensational reports of kidnapping of children of one community by the other.”⁴²³ While the subcontinent was the best example that religion was indeed the opium of the people, “the virulence of this kind of opium-poisoning in the body-politic of India [...] shows” not the critical state of ideologized popular consciousness, but merely “to what extent the dealers of this dope have been active.”⁴²⁴ This approach deflected the challenge to progressive notions of mass consciousness into a separate mercenary sub-cosmos by asserting that those who actually participated in riots were “the scum of society, which cannot be said to possess any sincere religious fanaticism.”⁴²⁵

Since in this reasoning not even the most vociferous and violent proponents of communal antagonism were considered true fanatics it was only consequential to downplay basic communal differences themselves as “artificially fomented” and, hence, “less serious” compared to “other defects in the programme, ideology and organization of the nationalist movement.”⁴²⁶ This was the core of Roy’s analysis: Writing away the urgency of a widespread reactionary social phenomenon and thus uphold the proper communist hierarchy of (anti-imperialist and socialist) emancipation. Yet, even this approach did not remove uncertainties: Just as Roy had criticized the inclusion of communal unity among the prerequisites for swaraj by the Congress in 1924 (as this paid undue homage to an artificial conflict), he advocated the opposite only a year later when he attacked the veteran nationalist and Hindu Mahasabhaite Lala Lajpat Rai for denying the necessity of communal unity for the attainment of independence.⁴²⁷

To be sure, Roy was not the only architect of this theoretical edifice. Contemporary communist opinion concurred with the thrust of his analyses. For example, Rajani Palme Dutt (1896–1974), a leading CPGB theoretician, confirmed Roy’s positions in his influential 1926 oeuvre *Modern India*. If anything, he was even less convinced of communalism’s ideological significance, and more optimistic than Roy that the laws of historical materialism would ensure the proper course of history. Even though Dutt castigated the bourgeoisie for fishing for “all kinds of cults and superstitions of barbarism, ignorance,

⁴²³ “What Lies behind Hindu-Muslim Discord?,” *Vanguard*, 15 August 1924.

⁴²⁴ “The Hindu-Muslim Problem,” *Masses of India*, April 1925.

⁴²⁵ “Unity,” *Vanguard*, 15 November 1924.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, and “Lalajis Mistake,” *Masses of India*, February 1926. The reluctance to over-emphasize a ‘non-essential’ conflict was behind Roy’s demonstrative ignorance towards religious questions throughout his programmatic writings in 1924. See *Vanguard*, 1 January and 15 April 1924, where the provision to separate the state from religion appears at the end of the list of programmatic demands, and is the only instance to refer to religion at all.

submission to God, etc., in order to spread these among the masses,” the attempts to influence the latter were ultimately in vain: It was “idle to believe that this fashionable make-believe can have the slightest effect on the real processes at work.”⁴²⁸ However, subsequent events on the subcontinent would cast an eerie light on these “real processes.”

III.2.2 The Domestic Response: Calcutta 1926

While the seminal theoretical texts on communalism had developed under conditions of the considerable spatial and temporal distance of European abodes to the actual manifestations of communal consciousness, communists on the subcontinent were more directly confronted with this peculiar type of upheaval. This had led to differences in its assessment as early as 1924: Evidently annoyed by Roy’s reticence to comment straightforwardly on the issue—references to the religious problematic were even sparser in pamphlets and manifestos appearing outside the *Vanguard*’s pages—, the *Socialist* published an open letter to Roy from J. P. Begerhotta, a member of the INC Working Committee and a future CPI secretary, in September 1924. It emphasized that “all efforts should be made to abolish religious influence from the people. Hindu Muslims unity can not be successful until every body is well fed and religious bigotry is removed.”⁴²⁹ Apparently, Begerhotta had had his fair share of exposure to what Dutt had called “real processes.” At the Kanpur communist conference, Singaravelu had responded by attempting to reconcile communism with ‘reasonable’ religiousness. The 1926 Calcutta riots gave rise to another, considerably more influential way of addressing communalism.

Simmering tensions in the city had erupted in early April in attacks by Muslims on Marwari traders before the background of a steady downward trend in inter-communal relations. Assertions of communal identity during the non-cooperation movement and notably the communally uneven participation in the political and administrative sphere had profoundly strained the traditionally quiet (if not amicable) coexistence of the two big communities. Not only the *bhadralok*, the Bengali Hindu middle-class faced with Muslim competition for jobs in the public services and feeling increasingly threatened in its elite position, had embarked on a sustained process of communalization. The influx of work

⁴²⁸ Dutt, *Modern India*, 123–4.

⁴²⁹ CPI(M), *History of the Communist*, 81.

migrants from more communalized areas on the upper Ganges introduced another volatile element into the city. Both the early abrogation of Das's Hindu-Muslim Pact for the sharing of seats in administration and public employment and the campaigns for the upcoming elections for the Legislative Council also fed into the atmosphere of tension.⁴³⁰

Not uncommonly for the time, the riots originated in an Arya Samaj procession playing music in front of a mosque during Ramadan. What happened in several episodes during the following month, however, constituted the worst colonial India had seen of communal violence in decades. Over a hundred people died, the biggest part within the first couple of days. Besides religious buildings, rioters also attacked and burned numerous houses and shops. Regular troops had to be called in to restore a tenuous order.⁴³¹

In the face of the frenzy, the Calcutta communists around Muzaffar Ahmad reedited the *Manifesto on the Hindu-Muslim Unity and Swaraj* and distributed it as one of the few voices of religious neutrality in the city's highly charged atmosphere. Ahmad therefore had considerable trouble to have it printed. It probably helped that the *Manifesto's* editors avoided open anti-religious criticism, just as its authors had done. Besides theoretical reasons (namely the desire to classify religious phenomena as ephemeral) and personal bias deriving from involvement in a religious life-world, more tangible considerations had also influenced this stance. After all, open pronouncements of anti-religiosity had meant inviting trouble already in the past: Earlier in the same year, the renowned lawyer and author Abul Hussain had publicly accused Abdul Kader, a student activist of the communist-led Workers' and Peasants' Party of Dhaka, of offending Muslim sentiments and had warned him not to do so henceforth.⁴³²

Now faced with the choice to either attack "third-rate ideas" (Lenin) and risk influence in a society dominated by them, or tailor political ambitions to the conditions dictated by the environment, domestic communism clearly went with the latter option. This, however, did not happen discreetly. As had been the case with Muslim anti-colonialist radicals of the early 1920s, the Calcutta communists took the bull by the horns and appropriated the

⁴³⁰ On the communal turn of the bhadralok see Joya Chatterji's seminal study, *Bengal Divided*, esp. 3, 13–14; on the gradual polarization of communal relations in Bengal Sarkar, *Modern India*, 236–7. The election results would reflect the state of communal polarization insofar as even the technically supra-communal Swaraj Party won the majority of Hindu seats, but only a single Muslim seat.

⁴³¹ For an in-depth discussion of the riots see Dutta, "War over Music"; for a British account see Home/Poll/1926 11/VII, 4083–132.

⁴³² WBIB File 320/26 SL 310/1926 (no page); Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, 166. Although Kader's "transgression" had been rather mild and not directly aimed at Islam or its tenets, he and the other activists accepted the rebuttal.

ideological status quo for their project of emancipation. Other opportunities were found even more lacking: With Gandhi focusing on his “constructive work,” militant nationalism was on a long-time low. Jawarhalal Nehru’s efforts to revive non-cooperation and satyagraha began in earnest only in 1927. Even then they were limited to paper politics: The INC’s association to the League against Imperialism and the moving of a resolution for complete independence at the Madras Congress session were not suited to spawn a broad movement against British rule.⁴³³ Accordingly, the *Manifesto* did not emphasize peace and restraint, but closed with a blazing call to take the fight to the rich, who after all were responsible for the predominance of religious ideology:

Fatalism, fanaticism, submission, superstition, obedience and faith, the offsprings of religion, are the offensive weapons in the hands of the oppressors; poverty, miseries, self-renunciation, sacrifices are the consoling factors ordained by religion for the poor and oppressed. Our rich people [...] are committing daily highest treason in broad day and tormenting the poor by invoking the aid of God. The people are still very ignorant and they are kept so by our religious leaders as one of the essential conditions of their own power.⁴³⁴

This conclusion carried a meaning significantly different from the original *Manifesto*’s. The 1926 Calcutta outbreak had been incomparably larger in scope and magnitude than the riots of 1923. The latter had been more akin to isolated occurrences and could more plausibly be traced to small groups of instigators. In Calcutta, however, considerable population sections had joined in the fray. Hence, in its context the reprint signaled not a reaffirmation, but a departure from Roy’s understanding of communalism. Ahmad’s comments in *Langal* (“Plough”), the Bengal Workers’ and Peasants’ Party’s organ, spelled out the shift at the peak of the riots:

The upper strata of society have all along been plundering the lower ones. The looting which has to-day taken place in Calcutta under the thin cover of Hindu-Moslem dissension, *is but the reaction from that spoliation*. The matter for regret is that, the affair has floated before our eyes tinged with [sic!] a religio-communal line.⁴³⁵ (emphasis added)

Here, Ahmad harked back to Roy’s radical early positions. They had affirmed ‘revolutionary communalism’ in the wider Moplah and Akali contexts and fashioned religious politics into expressions of underlying social concerns in *India in Transition*, written at the high tide of non-cooperation. In 1926, however, there was very little in terms of a mass movement to latch onto—except for increasingly widespread communal manifestations. Hence, Ahmad’s approach to communalism sought to establish linkages to progressive aspirations, and conferred a double meaning on it: ‘From above,’ communalism

⁴³³ Shashi Joshi, *Struggle for Hegemony in India 1920–47. The Colonial State, the Left and the National Movement*, vol. 1, 1920–34 (Delhi: Sage Publications 1992), 187.

⁴³⁴ WBIB File 35/26 SL 2/1926, 64–5.

⁴³⁵ *Langal*, 9 April 1926, in: PCJ 1926/48.

cemented the position and increased the bargaining power of a section of upper classes while at the same time weakening the unity of the voices of the underprivileged. Yet, ‘from below,’ it was a precise indicator of being dispossessed and deprived, and hence reflected the drive to combat the conditions providing for dispossession. Ahmad even argued that the charge of communalism was the last straw of the possessing classes to portray themselves as victims of backward underdogs, while in reality the true victims were rising against the class regime. Even though this did not happen consciously, theirs were acts of social desperation indicative of an unfulfilled desire to be free.⁴³⁶

This was a potent radicalization of the classical Marxist approach, where religion pointed to social relations necessitating its existence as the “heart of a heartless world.” Religion itself was ‘necessarily false consciousness,’ an ideology. The Calcutta communists, however, associated religion (in the shape of a communal outbreak) with the struggle against the very world producing it. Such radicalism had been prompted by first-hand experience of the riots, which had obsolesced the classical approach of treating communalism and its perpetrators as alien to society’s mainstay. The Calcutta group instinctively realized that a communist perspective had to evolve new responses to the fact that communal terror had an undeniable popular dimension—new responses, however, that conformed to the old imperatives of mass politics. Hence, in the absence of a broad political movement communalism appeared as the closest approximation to social or even revolutionary militancy.

Terrified by the outbreak, Roy had initially prepared the ground by suggesting that religion proper could indeed function as the arena of class struggle, albeit only where the class divide corresponded to the religious divide.⁴³⁷ Notwithstanding the lack of such a constellation in Calcutta, declaring communalism a misguided class struggle as the local communists did was consequential and advantageous. Ahmad could achieve both: paying homage to the actual state of the mass psyche *and* claim its agents for the communist revolution. Unbeknownst to him, thereby he probably came closest of all subcontinental communists to translate German Social Democrat leader August Bebel’s view that anti-Semitism was the “socialism of fools” into a subcontinental context. Similarly ignorant that

⁴³⁶ Ibid.; see also Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, 246–8.

⁴³⁷ For example, in Malabar, the Punjab, or parts of rural Bengal: “The Calcutta Riot,” *Masses of India*, May 1926. Roy’s interpretation would enjoy a measure of popularity in communist commentary in the following decade: See “A Call to Action. Being the Resolutions, Theses and Report presented to the Third Annual Conference of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Party of Bengal,” in *Meerut Conspiracy Case, 1929–32*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/5994>, 173; and ex-muhajir Rahmat Ali’s (alias Zakaria) PhD thesis at the Sorbonne: Rahmat Ali, *Contribution à l’Etude du Conflit Hindou-Musulman* (Paris: Geuthner 1933).

the ideology in question was not just a preliminary stage of progressive ambitions, and similarly unaware of the grave consequences such a sympathetic assessment could yield, Ahmad's reputation in communist circles (and his positions) remains similarly unassailed. On the contrary, he counts as one who had always fought tooth and nail against "all forms of deviation from Marxism."⁴³⁸

All this is not to imply that the communists supported, or even were directly involved in, communal propaganda, let alone atrocities. Nor were they perceived to do so: *Langal*'s consistent attacks against communalized nationalist politics led to a perceptible drop in the paper's sales. The insertion of Pyarimohan Das's (Hindu) name as an editor alongside Ahmad, intended to counteract *Langal*'s reputation as an anti-Hindu paper, could not turn the tide.⁴³⁹ It did not help that criticism of Muslim identity politics continued to figure significantly less prominently in its pages. Even the re-edition of Roy's *Manifesto* exhibited this general trend: An added excursus on the historical role of Islam called on the subcontinent's Muslims to join "heart and soul" in the struggle for freedom and blamed reactionary elements in Islam on the institution of the caliphate ("a weapon for privilege and oppression"). At the same time, the creed's historical roots resonated more positively ("the rise of Arabs under the banner of Islam was the rise of mass consciousness under the slogan of equality, fraternity and brotherhood"). In view of the less magnanimous reality on the subcontinent, such positions scared off many Hindu readers while failing to attract Muslims. Police reports gleefully noted the sharp downturn in the sales of *Langal*, and remarked equally satisfied that its successor *Ganavani* initially had to be distributed for free to maintain an audience.⁴⁴⁰

In fact, there was not much the communists could do against the riots except writing against them, and their principled opposition had limits: A sympathetic understanding of the riots as a class phenomenon confirmed that religious, or communal, radicalism was not necessarily opposed to a communist agenda. Against this background, attributing the CPI's failure to effectively combat communalism to organizational deficiencies alone merely reiterates traditional left clichés of a strict dichotomy of 'progressive' and 'reactionary'

⁴³⁸ "Resolution of the Thirteenth Congress of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)," in *On Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad*, esp. 5, 9 (quote). This perspective also informs the hagiographic thrust of Khaled, *A Study in Leadership*.

⁴³⁹ Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, 200

⁴⁴⁰ WBIB File 35/26 SL 2/1926, 66 (quote); WBIB File 320/26 SL 310/1926.

forms of consciousness. Moreover, it ignores the active role of communist instances in the amalgamation of these categories.⁴⁴¹

Roy's reaction went down another path. Later in 1926, he responded to the riots with an elaborate "class analysis" of the communal phalanx. According to him, it consisted of a "parasitic class of priests," reactionary politicians, the unemployed intelligentsia and petty bourgeois traders (both of which faced increasing competition from Muslims), and "lumpen-proletariat and goondas [...] used by the police to start the affray." Behind them was the "hidden hand of imperialism." All of these groups had their political and material stakes in sustained communal campaigns, and hence inflamed the widespread "discontent in the name of religion." However, even though designed to locate communal ideology at a safe distance from the "masses," Roy's efforts at containment could not dispel rising doubts about the integrity of mass action. Even non-cooperation, hitherto merely a bourgeois framework of a progressive mass movement, appeared in a skeptical light: "A political movement based on religion cannot but lead to religious aggressiveness."⁴⁴²

This shift somewhat belatedly reflected debates in the Comintern problematizing the lack of 'cultural' criticism in the mid-1920s. While the V congress had defined the main task of the communist parties as getting even "closer to the masses," for the first time there were prominent voices questioning the ideological implications of such an approach. Leading theoretician Nicolai Bucharin referred to heated discussions on religion that required the Comintern to clarify its world-view. Clara Zetkin attacked the Comintern's practice by proxy of railing against the (socialist) Second International: She accused it of avoiding the confrontation with "bourgeois religious ideology" by fashioning religion into a private affair, and had similarly "fatalistically assumed that with the [...] establishment of communist production, a communist ideological superstructure and mature communist ideology would emerge." Zetkin pointedly ostracized the Second International for having shirked the battle for "complete Weltanschauung,"⁴⁴³ a battle Roy committed to take up in

⁴⁴¹ Cf., for example, Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, 200.

⁴⁴² All quotes in "The Communal Strife," *Masses of India*, October 1926. Notably the emphasis on the central role of the socially insecure petty bourgeoisie still resonates in Marxist historical analysis. See, for example, Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House 1986), 297–308; and also Ashgar Ali Engineer, "Communalism, Its Facets and Roots," *Mainstream* 24, no. 43 (1986): 16.

⁴⁴³ All quotes in *Die Ergebnisse des V. Kongresses des Kommunistischen Internationale und des IV. Kongresses der Kommunistischen Jugendinternationale* (Berlin: Verlag der Jugendinternationale 1924), 6, 512, 971, 1041. Obviously under fire, Zinoviev (one of the chief blenders of Muslim-communist brown water earlier in the decade) invoked the "101 of communism," according to which the state was to be impartial in religious matters, whereas the communists somewhat ambiguously were "not neutral at all" (ibid.)—at any rate, after the V Congress exuberant proclamations of religious-communist unity largely subsided.

1926: Henceforth, the CPI was to expose communal plotters, fight radical Hinduism and extremist Islam alike, and liberate the population from religious fanaticism and “traditional social evils.”⁴⁴⁴

Yet, Roy also had a more seminal approach in store that would unfold its appeal to the CPI’s policies only much later. In March 1926, he had outlined a minimum program demanding a “guarantee for national minorities” and envisaging a “solution of the communal question on the basis of democratic rights.”⁴⁴⁵ Two months later, the events in Calcutta had obviously initiated a process of theoretical churning: A guest column by a Soviet trade union leader in the *Masses of India* criticized the INC for conceding “inordinate importance” to issues of religion and opined that “essentially the question was a question of national minority.”⁴⁴⁶

This plank of thought, even while of little resonance for the time being, seemed to present a workable solution of the communal problem on communist terrain and in communist terms (“national minority”). It allowed for an analysis of the communalist phenomenon paying due homage to the inclusion of the “masses” without raising the need for criticism of their religious predispositions. The thought appealed sufficiently to Roy to include it in the CPI’s manifesto to the 1926 Congress session at Guwahati, which demanded that the “communal question [...] should be approached as the question of a national minority.” However, referring to the superficiality of communal boundaries did not forestall their acknowledgement and operationalization in national terms by Roy himself: With clear cultural overtones, he demanded that “one of the main planks in the nationalist platform must be the protection for national and communal minorities.”⁴⁴⁷

Apart from these tentative considerations, the CPI’s analyses remained largely on par with left nationalists. In the wake of the Calcutta riots, Nehru recognized the need to secularize the intelligentsia in the sense of “toleration of all faiths and beliefs and permissible religious practices.” Programmatically, this materialized in the demand for freedom of worship and religious neutrality of the state, just as in the communist manifestos.⁴⁴⁸ The consequences were similarly alike. Since attempting a political settlement of the question was a “waste of time” (Nehru), both left-wing nationalists and communists envisaged a long-term solution through industrialization and national

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ CPI(M), *History of the Communist*, 95.

⁴⁴⁶ All quotes in “The Calcutta Riot,” *Masses of India*, May 1926.

⁴⁴⁷ All quotes in “Communist Party of India’s Manifesto (to the 41. INC Congress in Guwahati 1926),” in *Documents* 1:333.

⁴⁴⁸ S. Gopal, “Nehru and Minorities,” 209.

independence. In the short run, however, the differences in their political orientation made themselves felt: While Nehru campaigned for a conciliatory stance on the part of the Hindu majority, the events of the mid-1920s prodded the communists on a path of reorientation. Edging away from the ‘masses,’ they turned emphatically to their ‘proper’ revolutionary constituency: the workforce.

III.3 From “Mass” to “Working Class” Complex

III.3.1 Towards a Proletariat

By the mid-1920s, the working class as a social stratum still had gone virtually unnoticed by subcontinental communism. This had been due to the transfer of its revolutionary prerogative onto the ‘masses,’ and a concomitant obfuscation of the borders between both categories typical for an Eastern revolutionary paradigm. If Roy’s *India in Transition* had conceptually inflated the working class to encompass much of the subcontinent’s population, the *Vanguard*’s rechristening into the *Masses of India* in January 1925 bore out this shift emblematically. To be sure, such name changes frequently occurred because of police surveillance and censorship of communist publications; nevertheless, a new name could also be indicative of the editors’ programmatic approach. In Roy’s case, it certainly was. Taking up a quote from C. R. Das for the subtitle, the *Masses* demanded “Swaraj for the 98 per cent” (a reference to the 1920 Government of India Act, which had enfranchised only two per cent of the population), vowed to take the “point of view of the masses,” and went on to short-circuit the “98 per cent” with the proletariat: The ‘masses’ “constitute the working-class—the producing majority [...] the exploited and expropriated working-class.”⁴⁴⁹ In 1926, the Calcutta group staged a similar move by renaming their organ *Langal* into *Ganavani* (“Voice of the Masses”).⁴⁵⁰

In view of the not exactly gargantuan proportions of the working class proper, that is, the factory workers, their numerical hyperinflation and conflation with the ‘masses’ had been a plausible move to multiply the communists’ potential revolutionary basis: While the

⁴⁴⁹ “Point of View of the Masses,” *Masses of India*, January 1925.

⁴⁵⁰ “Letter from Muzaffar Ahmad to A. N. Voznecienski,” P 447(8), *Meerut Conspiracy Case, 1929–32*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/5994>, 36.

number of factories and workers had risen steeply during the second decade of the 20th century, it was still low even in absolute terms. In 1918, there had been 3,500 “organized factories” on the subcontinent, and mill workers numbered around 2.6 million in 1921.⁴⁵¹ Their concentration in large urban centers occasionally endowed organized workers with a punching power above their numerical weight. Still, they formed no more than a miniscule minority of the population. Roy’s conceptual inclusion of the “masses” of “potential proletarians” (Horst Krüger) in the working class responded to the same imperative to present favorable non-bourgeois revolutionary perspectives that had earlier led him to claim a staggering nine million factory workers by 1920.⁴⁵²

At the time communist interest in the subcontinental proletariat cropped up, the former was numerically and idiomatically still very much a class ‘in the making.’ It was only in the 1920s that the defining steps towards the constitution of a working class were undertaken in the shape of competing, and sometimes complementing, efforts ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’⁴⁵³

Official interest in the life and working conditions of subcontinental factory workers surfaced only after the World War. It was sparked by the October revolution, intensified by the accelerated formation of trade unions, and materialized in a streak of comparably effectively implemented labor legislation. Obviously, the main thrust of the definition and uplift of the workforce was to prevent it from becoming a hotbed of unrest, and possibly also to curb the advantages subcontinental entrepreneurs derived from excessive exploitation vis-à-vis their more constricted British counterparts.⁴⁵⁴ Concurrently, processes

⁴⁵¹ Krüger, *Die internationale Arbeiterbewegung* 1:57–8; Sarkar, *Modern India*, 41. See also Chowduri, *Leftism in India*, 17–18; and John Callaghan, “The Heart of Darkness: Rajani Palme Dutt and the British Empire—A Profile,” *Contemporary Record* 5, no. 2 (1991): 263–4.

⁴⁵² This obviously unrealistic figure didn’t even include those employed in the transportation and mining industries and the rural proletariat that alone numbered another twenty-six million: Roy, *India in Transition*, 101, 107–19. See also Krüger, *Die internationale Arbeiterbewegung* 1:62–3.

⁴⁵³ Nitin Sinha, among others, has pointed to persistent working class militancy in Bengal and the railways from an early point: Nitin Sinha, “World of Workers’ Politics: Some Issues of Railway Workers in Colonial India, 1918–1922,” *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 5 (2008): 1009. See also Sarkar, *Modern India*, 62–3. The evolution of the subcontinent’s workforce is well documented and needs no repetition here. For an outline, see *Documents* 1:xv–xviii; Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal’s Freedom*, 3–6; Sinha, *The Left-Wing in India*, 10–14; Brian Roger Tomlinson, *The Economy of Modern India, 1860–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), esp. 92–9; on the subcontinent’s industrialization see Daniel Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalistic Enterprise in India*. 3 vols (New York: Macmillan Co. 1934); Morris D. Morris, “The Growth of Large-Scale Industry to 1947,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, ed. Dharma Kumar, vol. 2, 1757–1970 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983), 553–676.; and Michael Mann, *Geschichte Indiens. Vom 18. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 2005), 291–305.

⁴⁵⁴ A Labor Bureau had been established in 1920, followed by the 1922 Factory Act, the 1923 Workmen’s Compensation Act, the 1926 Trade Unions Act, the 1928 Trade Disputes Act, the 1929 Maternity Benefits Bill, and, finally, the 1933 Payment of Wages Act: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*:

of organization ‘from below’ took shape. Properly organized trade unions appeared on the scene at the end of the 1910s, replete with an umbrella organization, the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which was founded in 1920. Initially dominated by moderate labor leaders and left nationalists, it came under communist influence in the second half of the 1920s.⁴⁵⁵

Systematic communist efforts to organize the laboring classes began around 1926. This date is important for two reasons: First, as has been shown, the streak of communal riots peaking in the Calcutta bloodbath on the whole had cooled off the CPI’s zeal for mass politics and underscored its lack of capacity for effective intervention. Second, following the 1924 V Comintern congress’s call to set up a broad-based left movement—notably in the trade unions—under communist participation, the CPGB involved itself actively on the subcontinent. Between 1926 and 1928, it dispatched “emissaries,” British communist agitators, to the subcontinent on long-term missions to organizationally assist the CPI comrades. Among others, George Allison, Philip Spratt, and Benjamin Bradley encouraged the formation of trade unions and regional Workers’ and Peasants’ Parties (WPP), communist-controlled mass organizations with a moderate agenda open to a wide array of social activists and left nationalists. Among these emissaries, notably Spratt proved to be an “industrious and capable ally,” and communist trade union activity took a sharp upturn in the decade’s second half.⁴⁵⁶

The emissaries complemented indigenous efforts to establish legal front organizations in the aftermath of the Kanpur Conspiracy Case, which had showcased the dangers of open communist activity. A month before the 1925 Kanpur communist conference, Nazrul Islam and Halim had been among the founders of the Labour Swaraj Party in Bengal. Two years later, it was converted into the Bengal branch of the WPP on the initiative of Spratt and Bradley. The latter had both also taken part in the formation of the Bombay WPP. The Punjab branch came into existence by the conversion of the Ghadrīte KKP into a WPP unit a couple of months later. In the UP, a promising young activist called Puran Chandra (P. C.) Joshi (1907–1980) presided over the formation of a UP WPP unit in 1928, the same year in

Bengal, 1890–1940 (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press 1989), 70–1. For an account of the colonial government’s industrial policy, see Clive Dewey, “The Government of India’s ‘New Industrial Policy’, 1900–1925: Formation and Failure,” in *Economy and Society: Essays in Indian Economic and Social History*, ed. Clive Dewey and Kirti Chaudhuri (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1979), 215–57.

⁴⁵⁵ Sarkar, *Modern India*, 61–2.

⁴⁵⁶ Petrie, *Communism in India*, 108 (quote); Ganguly, *Leftism in India*, 74. For a list of Spratt’s activities, see his personal recollections in Spratt, *Blowing up India*, 35–46. Later, Ghate put the extent of the emissaries’ contribution in its proper colonial context: “A white face was a great asset.” See Ghate (interviewee), 23–5.

which the regional bodies were unified into an official—if powerless and short-lived—all-India organization.⁴⁵⁷ Agenda-wise, the WPPs limited themselves to advocating freedom from imperialist and bourgeois dominance in comparably modest terms. Their mobilization centered on labor demands such as the eight-hour day, a minimum wage, improvement of labor conditions, and the ban on child labor. The youth wing was to address “special grievances” of the young generation, notably unemployment.⁴⁵⁸

Outlook

But who were the workers the communists set about to mobilize? Since the onset of subaltern studies in the 1980s, a lot has been written on the development of consciousness ‘on the ground’ under colonial modernity. With respect to the subcontinent’s working class, the contributors can roughly be divided into two, not diametrically opposed, strands: Those who emphatically deny the applicability of a universal understanding of the “modern” to a subcontinental working class context, and those who, informed by rational choice theory, link the process of development of the working class milieu to the universal by framing it in terms of an evolving rationality.

For the first approach, Dipesh Chakravarty has argued in a study on Bengal’s jute mill workforce that the development of consciousness in the working class was an uneven process and quite different from the West. While class solidarity had become firmly entrenched, workers’ sectional ties and affiliations remained largely intact. The “community” of the workers defined itself in terms of residence, language, and (perhaps mainly) religion.⁴⁵⁹ Hence, the workers held potential for mobilization on both ‘progressive’ matters—such as wage increases—and ‘reactionary’ ones—such as inter-communal strife. Workers displayed initiative and determination to fight, as represented in their joining militant unions, and responded to political as well as economic slogans. Yet, traditional loyalties of caste and parochialism persisted side by side with “advanced” class

⁴⁵⁷ Petrie, *Communism in India*, 274; Manjappa, *Colonial Cosmopolitanism*, 81. For a comprehensive account of the activities of the WPPs, see chapter 5 in Saiyid, *Exporting Communism*. A biographical sketch of Joshi is provided in Sunanda Sanyal and Soumya Basu, *The Sickle and the Crescent. Communists, Muslim League and India’s Partition* (London: Frontpage, 2011), 13–18.

⁴⁵⁸ Home/Poll/1928 Nr.18/7 K.W. 7. On WPP activities on the youth front, see CPI(M), *History of the Communist*, 126. Needless to say that the “special grievances” of youths growing up in an environment characterized by suffocating religious inhibitions went unmentioned, even though the impetus to overcome these moral inhibitions in favor of a freer life (including, but not limited to, extra-marital sex) marked the biographies of many émigré revolutionaries, including Roy and Virendranath Chattopadhyay. See Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of Earth* (Old Westbury [NY]: Feminist Press 1976), esp. 171–270.

⁴⁵⁹ Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, 138, 213. On this point, see also Krüger, *Die internationale Arbeiterbewegung* 1:58–60.

consciousness. Far from submerged and repressed, they asserted themselves in the workers' understanding of their environment.⁴⁶⁰

On the other hand, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, probing into Bombay's textile workers, has made a case for what he calls "rationality" in the city's working-class society. His study frames social relations in proletarian Bombay neighborhoods in the inter-war years in terms of traditional social arrangements. A sophisticated network of informal mutual obligations occupies center stage in his narrative of the Bombay workforce, inferring that other constituents of traditional social mediation, such as hierarchies of caste and religious ritual, were similarly part of the social make-up. Potentially "modernizing" impulses from outside, such as strikes and labor unrest, for a long time did not pose a serious challenge to these loyalty ties and solidarity relations knit around the central middlemen figures of the jobbers and *dadas*, the informal instances of labor recruitment, allotment, and militancy.⁴⁶¹

While the influence of these middlemen—and, in part, the cultural microcosm they represented—declined over time, other pillars of "traditional" worker culture were slower to fade, or even reinforced. Chandavarkar's main argument for the rationally understandable choice of the workers to remain in these conditions—the reciprocity of obligations—ultimately confirms the dominance of traditional *and*, in their context, "rational" social arrangements. For example, although generally dis-emphasizing the role of religion in worker consciousness Chandavarkar concedes that religious festivities had been "focal points of community sentiment and rivalry."⁴⁶² Hence, despite the (spatial) difference in their objects of research, both his and Chakrabarty's findings permit the identification of a traditional and religious outlook of the working class throughout and beyond the 1920s.

Early approaches to labor organization from above had reflected this circumstance. Annie Besant had infused a theosophical tinge into the trade union movement, reinforced by pioneering trade unionists from Bombay such as Bahman Pestonji Wadia and the Tilakite Joseph Baptista. Both were convinced of the spiritual mission of the subcontinent's

⁴⁶⁰ However, Chakrabarty's controversial claim that "the worker's relationship to the machine [...] was mediated through the North Indian peasant's conception of his tools, whereby the tools often took on magical and godly qualities" (Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, 89) reiterates much older judgments of colonial historiographers: According to Daniel Buchanan, "the factory and the power-machine have been [...] given due place in religious ceremony": Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalistic* 1:409.

⁴⁶¹ Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, "Workers' Politics and the Mill District in Bombay between the Wars," *Modern Asian Studies* 15 (1981):611–19, 628. For a more critical assessment of the *jobbers* see Krüger, *Die internationale Arbeiterbewegung* 1:61.

⁴⁶² Chandavarkar, "Workers' Politics," 618. As to "modernizing" developments in workers' organization, see Lieten, *Colonialism, Class, and Nation*, 242; and Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1965), 205–7. For a discussion of some of its limits see Chandavarkar, "Worker's Politics," 632–9.

workforce, which was to harness the “humanising spiritualism of the East” in order to “chasten the brutalising materialism of the West.”⁴⁶³ Even though soon supplanted by nationalism and left-wing agitation, their approach left its traces notably in the Gandhian brand of labor organization. According to an undated issue of the *Indian Labour Review*, trade unions oftentimes had their own temples, and important decisions necessitated prior religious ceremony. Similarly, workers and officials alike offered thanksgiving prayers for improvements in living and working conditions.⁴⁶⁴

Community consciousness could also manifest itself in labor unrest. Nitin Sinha provides an example of a strike conducted under the auspices of dharma. While the inclusion of religious idioms augmented the mobilizing potential, the appeals of trade union leaders to overcome caste distinctions mostly went unheard.⁴⁶⁵ In the mid-1920s, a strike rally of workers celebrated both the WPP and the mother goddess of the Ganges (“Ganga Mai ki Jai!”). To the dismay of their communist organizers, the participants later refused to join an inter-caste dinner, declaring that “we can give up our lives [for the workers’ struggle] but not our religious beliefs.”⁴⁶⁶ Veteran communist Gautam Chattopadhyay aptly commented retrospectively that “this reveals the particular stage of the consciousness of the workers and helps us not to oversimplify.”⁴⁶⁷

III.3.2 The Reds’ Care

Due to the CPI’s initial neglect, there are few communist references to the composition, outlook, or even the role of the proletariat proper before the later 1920s. Roy had contented himself with categorically declaring that the working class that had shed all remnants of caste mentality. Although their “ignorance” prevented the workers from assuming a more prominent role in national politics, workers would soon become the one “relentless and

⁴⁶³ Sinha, *The Left-Wing*, 49. For a eulogizing biography of Baptista see K. R. Shirsat, *Kaka Joseph Baptista: Father of Home Rule Movement in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan 1974).

⁴⁶⁴ Quoted in Kumar, *Communist Movement in India*, 87.

⁴⁶⁵ Sinha, “World of Workers’ Politics,” 1033. See also Lieten, *Colonialism, Class and Nation*, 71.

⁴⁶⁶ All quotes in Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal’s Freedom*, 139.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid. Just a few examples: In 1896 and 1897, there were riots among Calcutta workers around the issue of cow-slaughter: Sarkar, *Modern India*, 62. On 11 and 12 April 1925, Amritsar was shaken by riots between Hindu and Muslim workers: Home/Poll/1925 Nr.125. Among the Ledo coal miners, severe communal conflicts were common in the early 1930s: Home/Poll/1931 Nr. 18/VI “Fortnightly Report,” 42. The question of the relation of vertical caste loyalties to horizontal organization in trade unions remained relevant long after the period under review; on the example of Coimbatore, see E. A. Ramaswamy, “Trade Unionism and Caste in South India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 10 (1976):361.

uncompromising revolutionary force.”⁴⁶⁸ Reports from communists on the spot indicated that there was still some way to go:

Ill-paid, ill-clad as they are they cannot but fall an easy prey to these missionaries [instigators of communal riots], who promise to adjust their economic apparatus. And quite ignorant of the historical role they have to play, they think that the key of their poverty’s solution lies within the reach of these emissaries of God.⁴⁶⁹

It is mostly retrospectives detached from events on the ground that muster more enthusiasm, “knowing the working class to be the standard-bearer of socialism” and trusting in “its capacity to play the leading role in the national revolutionary struggle.”⁴⁷⁰ Gopalan seconded that in the face of miserable conditions, the worker “resists committing suicide only because, unknown even to himself, there are germs of a revolutionary sense in him.”⁴⁷¹ Dogmatic ontology superseded empirical experience in ‘mature’ Marxist analysis.

Properly grooming these germs in a “revolutionary sense,” however, was problematic with regard to the communist vanguard no less than the workers themselves. While not entirely implausible, Chandavarkar’s assessment that the communists “satisfied themselves that caste and religious identities were simply manifestations of false consciousness shortly to be subsumed by the emergence of the real thing” oversimplified matters.⁴⁷² It presupposed a binary distinction between a unitarily areligious communist avant-garde and a “backward” working class, which does not hold in the face of both inclusive communist practice and the individual activists’ own situatedness. For example, in a 1929 speech A. A. Alwe, President of the Bombay-based communist Girni Kamgar Union (“Red Flag,” GKU), attributed his success in laborious grass-roots mobilization efforts to god’s help, “for which I am thankful.”⁴⁷³

Moreover, communists were involved in conducting trade union business along communal lines. If the January 1929 demand of the Transport Workers’ Union of Bengal, a WPP-affiliated radical union, for granting leave on “official religious holidays” seems innocuous, British reports record the case of the Kirti Dal, a Sikh-only trade union from Calcutta. It closely cooperated with the WPP in Bengal and counted Abdul Halim, a core

⁴⁶⁸ Roy, *India in Transition*, 115. See also “Constructive Programme,” *Vanguard*, 15 May 1922; “Answer to Our Critics,” *Vanguard*, 1 September 1922; “India and the World,” *Vanguard*, 1 October 1922; and “Prepare for the Fight,” *Vanguard*, 1 November 1922 (quote).

⁴⁶⁹ *Letter from Usmani to Roy*, 22 April 1923, NAI-KCC File IV, 60.

⁴⁷⁰ Bhalchandra Trimbak Ranadive, “The Role Played by Communists in the Freedom Struggle of India,” *Social Scientist* 9 (1984): 13.

⁴⁷¹ Gopalan, *In the Cause*, 54.

⁴⁷² Chandavarkar, “From Communism to ‘Social Democracy’,” 102.

⁴⁷³ “Mr. Alwe’s Reply to Jhabwala,” *Kranti*, 20 January 1929, in *Meerut Conspiracy Case—Defence Exhibits from Kranti*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/6008>, 194.

member of the Calcutta CPI unit, among its leaders.⁴⁷⁴ In other instances, communists were not so much agents as reproducers of communal separation. Founded in 1932 in Ahmedabad, where the Gandhian Ahmedabad Labor Union (ALU) dominated the labor scene, the CPI-supported Mill Mazdoor Union consisted almost exclusively of Muslims who had not been absorbed into the largely caste-Hindu ALU.⁴⁷⁵ The congruity of communist peasant and worker unions in South India with caste and religious groups has been diligently researched.⁴⁷⁶

These practices derived equally from biographical preformation and conscious tactical ‘deviations,’ both nourished by the quiet conviction of doing the right thing as expressed by Rajani Palme Dutt’s apodictic statement that trade unions contained the seed of communism. It is possibly for this reason that nuisances such as religion or caste were virtually absent from statements of communist labor unions of the time, including the WPPs. An example among many, the Red International of Labor Unions’s (RILU) Indian section’s 1927 outline of a constitution for an independent subcontinent covered labor, education, political rights, and social security, but had nothing to say on caste or community formation.⁴⁷⁷ The All-India WPP’s 1928 *Manifesto* reproduced Roy’s 1922 *Program* for the Gaya Congress verbatim on the religious question, demanding freedom of worship and the separation of religion and state. Next to doctrinal class ontology, there are also signs of pervading insecurity and helplessness: A draft AITUC statement on the Nehru Report and its contested handling of communal representation recommended that “probably the best solution of the communal problem is to ignore it.”⁴⁷⁸ The lone contemporary communist to explicitly demand a “guarantee of certain common rights of humanity, such as the abolition of caste [...] discriminations” in his draft of an agenda for trade unions was a foreigner—Spratt.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁴ On the Transport Workers’ Union of Bengal’s letter see P 489, *Meerut Conspiracy Case, 1929–32*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/5994>, 129. See also Sarkar, *Modern India*, 62.

⁴⁷⁵ Subodh, *Communism in India* 1:302, 393.

⁴⁷⁶ See, for example, Kappadath Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles: Mobilisation and Organisation of Rural Workers in South-West India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1988), 94–125; chapters 1–3 in Mammen, *Communalism vs. Communism*; and Robin Jeffrey, “Matriliny, Marxism and the Birth of the Communist Party in Kerala, 1930–1940,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 38 (1978): 138–40.

⁴⁷⁷ Dutt, *Modern India*, 115–6, PCJ CPI 1926/73A; on the RILU’s program, see Sinha, *The Left-Wing*, 133.

⁴⁷⁸ “Draft of Statement by the Trades Union Congress on the Nehru Committee’s Report and Constitution,” in *Meerut Conspiracy Case, 1929–32*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/5994>, 341 (quote); “Manifesto of the Workers’ and Peasant’s Party of India,” in *Meerut Conspiracy Case, 1929–32*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/5994>, 23. On the Nehru Report, see Sarkar, *Modern India*, 261–4.

⁴⁷⁹ Philip Spratt, “Draft of Proposed Statement ‘Labour and Swaraj,’” in *Meerut Conspiracy Case 1929–32 Defence Statements*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/6007>, 538.

Obviously, the proletariat's spiritual affiliation continued to vex the communists, and challenge them to confront it, even by way of adapting their political and social vision to it. *Kranti* ("Revolution"), the organ of the Bombay WPP, in July 1927 recounted a speech of the Madras Trade Union Congress's president, Narayan Rao Joshi. He underlined that the working class had "no religion, caste or nationality or anything." Rather, increasing the power of worker organizations and improving economic conditions counted as the workers' "religion."⁴⁸⁰ In the same spirit, Narayan Malhar Joshi, leader of the AITUC's reformist wing, averred that the proletarian class was the workers' caste. Yet, such categorical declarations could not do away with unwelcome identity patterns demanding to be recognized and addressed, if only to prevent the worst. On the occasion of Muharram 1927, *Kranti* issued a call to the "Musalman and Hindu people" to preserve communal peace, and emphasized that the WPP welcomed "people of all religions."⁴⁸¹

The WPP's 1928 guidelines for trade union functionaries pointed to the outlook prevailing even among the 'vanguard' by demanding that "all leading Trade Unionists etc. must be freed from communalism [...] In particular, all Party members must [...] themselves do no religious propaganda of any kind."⁴⁸² Frontal attacks on religion and traditional culture, on the other hand, were delicate enough to be outsourced. Addressing the WPP's 1928 Youth Conference, Bombay WPP President D. R. Thengdi boldly urged the next generation to take up the task which he and his ilk had apparently shirked:

The youths' movement should start a campaign, a veritable crusade against all injustices, barbarities and malpractices, such as Untouchability, Child Marriage, caste system purdah, sex inequality, prohibition of widow remarriage etc. It should challenge and attack whatever is reactionary and decadent in social conceptions and institutions [...] It should declare a war on all communal movements which split the Indian People on un-historic [!] communal lines.⁴⁸³

In view of this deferral of a task that was as complex as it was essential, the eventual declaration of war between Hindu and Muslim workers should not have come as a surprise.

⁴⁸⁰ "What is the Religion of the Worker?," *Kranti*, 30 July 1927, in *Meerut Conspiracy Case—Defence Exhibits from Kranti*, on <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/6008>, 83–4.

⁴⁸¹ "Workers' and Peasants' Party. Message to the Musalman and Hindu people," *Kranti*, 16 July 1927, in *Meerut Conspiracy Case—Defence Exhibits from Kranti*, on <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/6008>, 68.

⁴⁸² "Elementary Course," in *Meerut Conspiracy Case 1929–32 Defence Statements*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/6007>, 478.

⁴⁸³ "Manifesto of the Workers' and Peasants' Party to the Youth Conference," in *Meerut Conspiracy Case, 1929–32*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/5994>, 393.

III.3.3 Proletarian Communalism: Bombay 1929

Bombay had developed into a hub of communist activity by the late 1920s. The local CPI around Shantaram Savlaram Mirajkar, R. S. Nimbkar, K. N. Joglekar, and—once released from prison in 1927—Dange successfully organized workers and conducted strikes. Occasional government repression such as a raid on *Kranti* in July 1927 rather served to increase its reputation and circulation.⁴⁸⁴ However, it was during and after the resounding victory in the general strike of the city's textile workers from April to October 1928 that communist labor activity shot to real prominence and fame. The strike prevented major wage cuts and exhibited considerable tenacity and discipline on the part of the strikers. They organized themselves in mill committees, resisted all attempts to break the strike, and joined the GKU in scores.⁴⁸⁵

To the Bombay communists, the strike confirmed the expectations reposed in the working class. The rejection across communities of the offer of Shaukat Ali, head of the local khilafat committee, to provide strike funds only for Muslim workers strengthened communist trust. *Kranti*'s message that the distinction between "Hindu or Musalman [...]" does not exist in the law of loot of capitalism" seemed to stick.⁴⁸⁶ At the beginning of 1929, the GKU was the strongest, most prestigious, and best-organized trade union in Bombay. The communal riot of February 1929 burst into this communist success story.

Its prelude had taken place in mid-January: Striking oil workers had attacked Muslim Pathan blacklegs. The Pathans had not only repelled the assailants, but pursued them to their quarters, where they had rioted and looted.⁴⁸⁷ In the aftermath, rumors that the Pathans were kidnapping children quickly spread among Hindu workers, leading to a "man hunt for Pathans" on 3 February that left two dead.⁴⁸⁸ On 4 February, the unrest spread to the mill area, where over 30,000 workers had struck work, armed themselves, and commenced another "man hunt for Pathans."⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁴ Saiyid, *Exporting Communism*, 102.

⁴⁸⁵ See Sarkar, *Modern India*, 271; and Chandavarkar: "From Communism to 'Social Democracy'," 102. For a British appraisal of communist labor activity in Bombay in 1928, see Home/Poll/1928 Nr. 18/7, esp. K.W. 2 and 9.

⁴⁸⁶ "Thoughts. Treacherous to the People, of Delusive Patriots," *Kranti*, 16 July 1927, in *Meerut Conspiracy Case—Defence Exhibits from Kranti*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/6008>, 73. On the rejection of khilafat funds, see "Statement of S. A. Dange, Accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case," in *Documents* 2:1154, and Dange, *Selected Writings* 3:112–13. Ali's offer could be rejected because of the influx of strike funds from international labour organizations, particularly Soviet ones.

⁴⁸⁷ *The Times of India*, 14 January 1929.

⁴⁸⁸ *The Times of India*, 3 February 1929

⁴⁸⁹ *The Times of India*, 4 February 1929.

On the following day, the municipal government called in the army to restore order. Shaukat Ali announced the organization of Muslim self-defense, and on 7 February, it was now Hindus who were “battered to death.” The latter, however, did their best to even the balance: A large crowd, originally having resumed work, responded to anti-Pathan rumors by striking work anew and rushing out to seek revenge.⁴⁹⁰ During the next days, the riots spread over the city in defiance of a curfew and patrolling armored cars. In total, over a hundred deaths were reported.⁴⁹¹

The communist response was unequivocally apologetic. From the outset, Dange was convinced that the “imperialists and their agents [...] decided to involve [...] the whole city in a furious communal rioting.” The imposition of a curfew and the efforts to nail down the culprits were only a “smoke-screen” to obscure the true originators—the “agent-provocateurs who had directed the huge crime of a communal strife.” Among them counted Shaukat Ali, “who, once an anti-imperialist, is now the active paid agent of imperialism, planted in the bourgeois national movement to disrupt it by communal dissensions.”⁴⁹² Similarly, Mirajkar ever asserted that the riots had been “deliberately staged by the British Government,” and Ranadive traced the disturbances to the British administration’s desire to attack the “powerful arm of the working class” by engineering a “serious Hindu-Muslim riot to smash the class solidarity.”⁴⁹³

Upon closer scrutiny, the adamant determination to externalize the source of the riots queerly coexists with the endeavor to deny outbreaks among workers altogether—an endeavor that falls flat even on the plane of textual immanence. Dange’s appraisal that the workers were “exceptionally free from the Hindu-Muslim feeling” and that they had become “class-conscious and not caste-conscious”⁴⁹⁴ is tempered by his own admission that only communist intervention had prevented them “from being excited into a suicidal fury.”⁴⁹⁵ And while the committed efforts of communist labor leaders on the spot to stop the riots are beyond doubt, this was a shaky claim. Other passages allow for glimpses on the reality on the ground, such as when Dange conceded that the “rioting was never serious in the workers’ locality,” or more clearly, that the GKK had undertaken everything in its power “to

⁴⁹⁰ *The Times of India*, 6 and 7 (quote) February 1929.

⁴⁹¹ *The Times of India*, 8 and 11 February 1929.

⁴⁹² All quotes in Dange, *Selected Writings* 3:237, 242, 253.

⁴⁹³ Shantaram Savlaram Mirajkar (interviewee), recorded by Hari Dev Sharma (interviewer), 8 August 1974, NMML-OHP, AccNo 433, 85–6; Ranadive, “S. A. Dange—A Sketch,” in *Indian Communism: Life and Work of S. A. Dange*, ed. Mohit Sen (Delhi: Patriot Publ. 1992), 15.

⁴⁹⁴ Dange, *Selected Writings* 3:242 (quotes), 248–9.

⁴⁹⁵ “Statement of S. A. Dange,” 1270.

stop the mad fury [...] We issued every day one or two handbills, telling them of the *great harm they were doing to their class* by such action.”⁴⁹⁶ (emphasis added) Even the confirmation of the endeavor’s successful completion (“the temporary communal deviation was checked and corrected by the G.K.U.”) renders his claim of an “inherent superior proletariat morality of the workers” doubtful.⁴⁹⁷

More adequately—if probably unintendedly—, British communist Clemens Dutt ambiguously summarized in late 1929 that the events of 1928–9 had left “no ground for uncertainty as to the advance of the revolutionary tide there.”⁴⁹⁸ And in Ghate’s recollection, a lone example of admitting uncertainty and first-hand experience into the picture, the “superior proletarian morality” takes more concrete shape:

One day such a situation was created that we did not know what to do: [the workers] became very militant. [...] They said that they wanted to kill some Muslims [...] The workers would not go back [to work] because all sorts of rumours were being spread [such as their wives being abducted during their absence].⁴⁹⁹

At least retrospectively, Ghate’s perception was acute enough to admit not only the fact of disturbances between Hindu and Muslim workers, but also that they had been “provoked by the workers themselves, not by the management,” which had sought to maintain peace and keep production going.⁵⁰⁰

Apparently, the “great harm” mentioned by Dange had been done to communist notions of the working class no less than anything else. The outbreak dismayed the Bombay activists, who felt the need to support the best inside ‘their’ workers against empirical evidence. This incredulity explains the contradictory fashion of coupling the outsourcing of the riot to social adversaries with its outright denial, a procedure typical for an exonerating Western paradigm of externalization. That which must not be could not, and as communists they had chosen to chain themselves to their—supposedly pristine—revolutionary subject. Mirajkar later explicated this fateful bond: “Whatever Tata may say, he is always wrong, whatever worker says, he is always right.”⁵⁰¹ This kind of allegiance undercut the realization of the Bombay workforce’s communal undercurrent.

⁴⁹⁶ All quotes *ibid.*, 1278–9; see also *The Times of India*, 4 February 1929.

⁴⁹⁷ “Statement of S. A. Dange,” 1280.

⁴⁹⁸ Clemens Dutt, “The Role and Leadership of the Indian Working Class,” *Labour Monthly* 11, no. 12 (1929):741.

⁴⁹⁹ Ghate (interviewee), 53–5.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 57–8.

⁵⁰¹ Mirajkar (interviewee), 60.

In fact, the workers were no choristers. There had been serious religious friction already in 1927, and it was common to accuse blacklegs of soiling the heritage and the prestige of the Marathas and Shivaji himself. Both references had a distinctly Hindu coloring, with Shivaji being a directly anti-Muslim symbol.⁵⁰² Even within the Hindu block, things were far from settled, and the communists did not necessarily contribute to the resolution of tensions. Once the GKU had reached a critical mass and consolidated itself in the wake of the general strike, debates on caste reared their head, sparked by the simultaneous non-Brahmin movement. The Bengal WPP had booked the matter under counter-revolutionary “encouragement of differences among Indians” roused against their “chief political and intellectual leaders, who are Brahmins.”⁵⁰³ The response among Bombay communists was similarly unfavorable. Dange, a Brahmin himself, intensely distasted the non-Brahmin movement, which he had accused of “unpatriotic and narrow-visioned” petty-bourgeois outlook and “Fascist terror” against Brahmins as early as 1922.⁵⁰⁴ A corresponding inclination to regard the movement as divisive marked *Kranti*’s position, which knee-jerkingly dubbed those attacking caste hierarchies in the GKU as “spies.”⁵⁰⁵

It was only a government assault on the movement that fostered détente and restored unity: the arrest of the leaders for the Meerut Conspiracy Case in March 1929. Dange would digest the experience by reducing the conflict to the petty bourgeoisie’s proneness to communal agitation. “Brahmin and non-Brahmin, Muslim and Hindu [...] are the various brigades of the economic struggle of the petty-bourgeois clerkdom.”⁵⁰⁶ Even if this was correct to an extent: Dange’s critical faculty for pernicious identity formation interacted closely with his refusal to reflect on the substance of caste oppression—and, not least, his

⁵⁰² Roy, “The Calcutta Riot,” *Masses of India*, May 1926; Chandavarkar, “Worker’s Politics,” 627. On the disturbances among millworkers, see Home/Poll/1927 Nr. 11/22.

This state of things would last into the late 1930s, as a 1939 report by Soli Batliwala illustrates. During the (dismally failed) general strike called by the CPI upon British India’s forced entry into WWII, he interviewed a group of Muslim workers in Madanpura. His representation indicated the level of alienation and social separation between workers of different religious denominations, as well as their motive for participation (yet, it may also have been a ‘muslimizing’ question of Batliwala the workers responded to): “This is our strike, too. The Britisher is no friend of Islam. And we know the Red Flag [the Girni Kamgar Union] stands equally for everybody.” Asked about the strength of communist positions in “their area,” they replied: “More than fifty per cent of Muslim workers have obeyed the Red Flag consciously”: Soli Batliwala, “The Bombay Strike,” in *Documents* 4:122.

⁵⁰³ “Presidential Address at the Third Annual Conference of the Bengal Workers’ and Peasants’ Party,” *Meerut Conspiracy Case, 1929–32*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/5994>, 172.

⁵⁰⁴ *Socialist*, 25 November 1922, quoted in Bakshi, *Indian Freedom Fighters*, 48–51.

⁵⁰⁵ “Beware of Spies. Brahmin-Non-Brahmin and Other Quarrels not Wanted in the Labour Movement,” *Kranti*, 25 November 1928, in *Meerut Conspiracy Case—Defence Exhibits from Kranti*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/6008>, 185. For Dange’s unproblematic stance towards him being a Brahmin, see Dange (interviewee), 1–2, 8.

⁵⁰⁶ “Statement of S. A. Dange,” 1074.

own privileged position in the caste hierarchy. His ready dubbing of those pointing to religious oppression in the movement as “reactionaries” smacks of a certain sense of comfort, resulting from his own situatedness, with the traditional social order. In this, he fused considerations of a bigger picture of united struggle with reluctance to question personal entanglement in and benefit from caste hierarchies into a stance beyond neat categories such as ‘progressive’ or ‘reactionary.’

A similar diffusion characterized much of the communist ingredient in the ferment of radicalism leavening in the 1920s. According to Shashi Joshi, CPGB Member of Parliament Shapurji Saklatvala had “struck the right tone” with the communists by identifying himself as a “Tilakite extremist” during his visit to the subcontinent in 1927.⁵⁰⁷ Before the 1929 riot, even the Ali brothers, protagonists of the khilafat movement, had by no means been ostracized from the fold of those with whom the communists—including the khilafat skeptic Dange—maintained political and personal ties: When Dange came out of jail in 1927, the “friends and admirers” assembled to welcome him included a number of khilafat volunteers led by Maulana Shaukat Ali himself. Obviously, the latter’s communal leanings made him deserving of communist criticism only when he applied them in the wrong, that is, non–anti-imperialist context.⁵⁰⁸

Synopsis of Chapter III

In this chapter, subcontinental communism’s modes of analysis, its strategies of identifying revolutionary subjectivity and its efforts to distinguish the latter from— or link it to— religious militancy have been scrutinized. Central to it was the impulse to identify with grass-roots militancy and equate mass action with progressive motives. The original emphasis on mass politics and its religious motives, and the elevation of the community-centered Akali and Moplah rebellions into role models for revolution emblemized this approach.

Roy’s subsequent analyses of communalism were genuinely innovative. They undertook to identify its social basis. However, reducing communalism to ulterior motives

⁵⁰⁷ Joshi, *Struggle for Hegemony in India* 1:182–3. Fittingly, the meeting with the CPI leaders had taken place in the Arya Samaj temple at Chowri Bazar in Delhi: Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist*, 441.

⁵⁰⁸ “Release of Mr. Dange,” *Kranti*, 28 May 1927, in *Meerut Conspiracy Case—Defence Exhibits from Kranti*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/6008>, 33.

of certain elite factions led to its sustained de-ideologization. Roy's criticism of communalism as a means rather than as an end in itself paved the way for an entrenched understanding of communalism not as an ideology, but as an "imperialist" and "reactionary" *technique*.

At the same time, the high incidence of communal violence rendered his externalizing formulae increasingly unsatisfactory. The ensuing process of theoretical churning yielded different results. First, the Calcutta group responded with a qualified elevation of communalism, considering the latter as the best substantiation of mass struggle to be had at the time. Second, Roy made steps towards an understanding of communalism as a problem of national minorities. And third, a re-orientation set in towards a clearer identification of the revolutionary subject—towards the subcontinent's proletariat, up to then virtually indistinguishable from the 'masses.'

This also included tentative criticism its of endemic religious outlook. Yet, the 1929 Bombay riots highlighted the communist involvement's limited educating impact. At the same time, it revealed its limited capacity for self-reflection. Nevertheless, the Bombay communists' dismissal of the communal madness forms a stark contrast to the Calcutta group's empathy for 'their' riots. Besides underpinning the party's spatial and theoretical segmentalization, this highlights the different analytical perspectives of Eastern and Western revolutionary paradigms: If the latter maintained progressive revolutionarity *against* manifestations of communal militancy (whose proletarian agents nonetheless remained part of the communist struggle), the former affirmed revolutionary potential *because* of them.

IV Towards Acculturation

IV.1 Sea Changes

IV.1.1 A Lowering Tide

Apart from an increase in trade union activity, the impact of the efforts to establish a proper communist party remained negligible. The CPI was still very much a formation without official program or clear-cut ideological profile, organizational structures to speak of, and with few connections to the communist movement outside the subcontinent.⁵⁰⁹ In view of its negligible role in subcontinental politics, the main instrument to achieve communist hegemony were the WPPs. Their first aim was to substantially expand the party's constituency: Following its turn towards the East, the Comintern had realized that no revolution, neither proletarian nor national, was going to take place in the colonies and 'backward' countries without mobilization of the peasantry. A sizeable section of the *Theses on the Eastern Question* passed on the IV congress concerned the "agrarian question."⁵¹⁰ Its contribution to overcoming the urban isolation of both CPI and WPP was limited since the peasantry remained largely outside their grasp. If the mobilizing potential inherent in the Comintern's shift soon yielded remarkable results in parts of China and Southeast Asia, in case of the subcontinent its impact remained confined to regional pockets.⁵¹¹ An example from Bengal illustrates how rural efforts at mobilization on a class base failed, and how they were rationalized. In August 1926, a Habi from Dinajpur bitterly wrote to Ahmad:

I have also been trying my level best since 3 years for waking up the peasant class but all my endeavours have failed. I cannot make out how this sleeping class may be waked [sic!] up. [...] The greatest of the difficulties is that peasants are illiterate. They cannot distinguish between good and bad.⁵¹²

The peasants' failure to manifest their inherent revolutionarity in a positive response to communist mobilization yielded Habi's regretful blaming of adverse conditions at the root of their supposed immaturity. However, their actual political self-assertion disproves his

⁵⁰⁹ *Annual Report 1927*, PCJ 1927/45, 1–6. See also Home/Poll/1927 Nr. 100.

⁵¹⁰ Saiyid, *Exporting Communism*, 41.

⁵¹¹ A similar experience had already marked Swami Vidyanand's efforts to initiate a supra-caste peasant movement in Bihar in the early 1920s. Poor high-caste peasants had stayed away, perceiving the mobilization for improving the lot of poor peasants and tenants as an attack on the high castes. Gulab drily summarizes that "despite the realisation of exploitation the pauperised peasantry did not develop into a 'class for itself'":

Gulab, *Caste and the Communist*, 159–62 (quote); see also Khaled, *A Study in Leadership*, 38–42.

⁵¹² *Letter from Habi to Ahmad*, 19 August 1926, WBIB File 168/22(i) SL 121/1922 (K. W.), 6.

conclusion: The contemporary “realisation of exploitation” on the part of the peasants was more acute—and articulate—than Habi was able or willing to countenance. The WPP’s optimism that widespread “backwardness” did not preclude revolutionary action was partly justified, albeit not in the communist sense.⁵¹³ In the eastern tracts of Bengal (Habi’s area of activity), Muslim peasant leaders like Shamshuddin Ahmad and his brother Afsaruddin were about to prove that Muslim tenants and middle peasants could indeed be mobilized against landlord, trading, and moneylending interests if those were identified as *Hindu* interests. As a result of the greater appeal of an agitation inclusive of religion, the organization of peasants materialized in communally segmented bodies. The Bengal WPP, the best-run and numerically strongest section, found itself running against an impenetrable wall in the minds of the Muslim East Bengal peasantry, which by the late 1920s increasingly gave a communal answer to the social question.⁵¹⁴

Hence, the WPPs were not able to establish themselves in the countryside “even though they gave radical anti-feudal slogans.” The overwhelming opposition of many social groups—landlords, moneylenders, brokers, lawyers, and mullahs—and already-entrenched communal formations discouraged many an enthusiastic activist. As a consequence, the Bengal WPP soon lost its peasant wing. It was not even possible to find a secretary for the peasant section in 1928.⁵¹⁵ Unable to penetrate to the lower stratum of rural society and maligned by the Hindu Mahasabha as protectors of Muslim communalism, the movement remained virtually barred from access to either community of rural society. Conversely, the communal polarization of politics took its toll on the WPP. Between 1926 and 1928, the Bengal unit’s Executive Committee lost all its Muslim members, confounding even the surveillance agencies.⁵¹⁶

Still, the WPPs were the best instrument to forge ties with grass-roots movements available to the CPI. Left-leaning historians tend to eulogize them, and some stipulate that subcontinental communists, left to their own ingenuity, had managed to devise effective

⁵¹³ Sinha, *The Left-Wing*, 190.

⁵¹⁴ WBIB File 859/36 Rajshahi SL 199/1936, 17–24. See also Tajul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947* (Boulder: Westview Press 1992), 113; and Hashmi, “The Communalisation of Class Struggle: East Bengal Peasantry, 1923–1929,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 2 (1988):171–204. On the corresponding process among the West Bengal Hindu elite from the 1930s onwards, see Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, 3, 130–40. See also Wendy Singer, “Peasants and the Peoples of the East: Indians and the Rhetoric of the Comintern,” in *International Communism and the Communist International 1919–43*, eds. Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1998), 276.

⁵¹⁵ CPI(M), *History of the Communist*, 169 (quote); WBIB File 210/27 SL 23/1927.

⁵¹⁶ WBIB File 320/26 SL 310/1926; on the ineffectiveness of communist peasant mobilization, see also the reports by W. H. Nelson and J. Hodge in WBIB File 859/36 SL 173/1936, 8–10.

means of intervention and establishing a mass base. Many portray the process that led to their dissolution in 1929 as an entirely external affair, a proof of the Comintern's obnoxious influence.⁵¹⁷

Others, however, have pointed to an increasing estrangement of the subcontinent's communists from bourgeois and left-wing nationalists alike, suspected to compromise with imperialism. According to this version, "sectarian tendencies" grew in strength in both CPI and WPPs in the late 1920s. The theoretical input from the simultaneous VI congress was not the cause of the CPI's swing towards left extremism, but rather a reinforcing boost.⁵¹⁸ At any rate, the (unauthorized) CPI emissaries to the VI congress, notably Usmani, if anything reinforced the leftward push during the proceedings.⁵¹⁹

Convening in July and August 1928, the VI Comintern congress introduced a sea change in the policy of communist parties. Its political thesis declared that the capitalist system had developed to its final stage and faced imminent collapse. Communists everywhere were to cut ties with the 'reactionary' bourgeoisie and wage all-out struggle. This explicitly included 'reformist' leftists and social democrats—the "social fascists."⁵²⁰ With respect to colonial countries, the Chinese disaster of 1927 (where the Chinese CP, under Roy's and Borodin's joint guidance, had been all but dismantled by its former Kuomintang allies) greatly abetted the emergence of a militantly anti-bourgeois line.

The consequences of this realignment were drastic. It isolated the communist subcosmos and led to an often catastrophic loss of social and political foothold: In Europe, the Comintern line prevented united action against fascist groups, immensely facilitating the takeover of the Nazi Party in Germany. On the subcontinent, the severing of ties with bourgeois nationalism (that had "betrayed" the freedom struggle by the suspension of non-cooperation in 1922) and moderate leftists were doubly felt. Not only did the communists boycott the popular civil disobedience movements of the early 1930s, but also did they

⁵¹⁷ Bhagwan Josh, "Foreword," in P.C. Joshi. K. Damodaran. *A Documented History of the Communist Movement in India. Select Materials from Archives on Contemporary History*, vol. 1, 1917–1922, ed. Sobhanlal Datta Gupta (Delhi: Sunrise 2007), xiii; Khaled, *A Study in Leadership*, 56–8; Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny*, 298.

⁵¹⁸ Lieten, *Colonialism, Class and Nation*, 101–5.

⁵¹⁹ Usmani participated under the alias of Sikander Sur: Usmani, *Historic Trips*, 91. On his role during the proceedings see *Inprecorr*, 30 October 1928, NMML, Roll 1921/3-B.

⁵²⁰ For a detailed presentation of the concept, see Willy Huhn, *Der Etatismus der Sozialdemokratie. Zur Vorgeschichte des Nazifaschismus* (Freiburg: Ça Ira 2003); more condensed in Wayne Price, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives* (Bloomington, IN: Author House 2007), 152–4.

dissolve their links with all “counter-revolutionary” sections of society.⁵²¹ This spelt the end for the WPPs.

In a sardonic twist of history, the VI congress also heralded the end of Roy’s career in official communism just as the Comintern finally adopted the gist of his long-time anti-bourgeois stance. Having risen steadily in rank, Roy had become a senior operative and authoritative expert on Asia by the second half of the 1920s. However, his refusal to cooperate with Stalin in the latter’s efforts to oust the Trotskyite opposition from the Comintern led to his speedy downfall. Unable to attend the VI congress because of illness, Roy was not re-elected into any major body. In 1929, the Comintern expelled him on the grounds of contributing to the paper of the “rightist” German communist opposition around Ernst Brandler and August Thalheimer.⁵²² Returning to India in 1930, Roy’s involvement in politics continued on communist lines, but in a separate organization—the “Roy group of communists,” or “Royists.”

IV.1.2 The Meerut Class

The impending communist isolation was intensified by developments back home. About 20 March 1929, the police carried out raids throughout British India and rounded up 33 CPI members and trade unionists on charges of conspiring to violently overthrow British rule on the subcontinent, and brought them to court in Meerut.

However, trying them ultimately not only failed to eliminate communism, but also backfired in a number of ways. Even though the CPI went through a virtual eclipse during the proceedings, which lasted until 1934, the effect remained temporal. At the same time, the main purpose—delegitimizing communism in public—materialized in its opposite: Extensive media coverage of the trial popularized the accused and put them in the spotlight of public interest far beyond the subcontinent.⁵²³ There was overwhelming sympathy for the political prisoners, who in turn used the trial as a stage to popularize their ideas. Observers with a penchant for radicalism were encouraged: Spratt boasted that “on the whole, the

⁵²¹ CPI(M), *History of the Communist*, 146.

⁵²² See the rich account of his downfall in chapters 1–5 in Ray, *In Freedom’s Quest*, vol. 3.1, *Against the Current (1928–39)* (Kolkata: Renaissance Publishers 2005).

⁵²³ For example, the Manchester street theatre group “Red Megaphones” staged the play *Meerut* in 1932 demanding the release of the prisoners: See <http://www.wcml.org.uk/contents/international/india/meerut--the-workers-theatre-movement-play/?keyword1=Meerut&keyword2=> (last checked 12 December 2014).

revelation of our secret methods caused people to admire us: we had done what most young men wanted to do.”⁵²⁴ A new generation of communist activists—among others, Ranadive, S. V. Deshpande, and R. D. Bharadwaj—appeared on the scene to fill the gap.

Notwithstanding lack of evidence, the accused were sentenced to various terms of transportation, which were substantially reduced on appeal. Ahmad received the highest term—three years—and along with Dange and Usmani remained imprisoned, but all other accused were free by early 1934.⁵²⁵

Apart from the increase in popularity, the trial at Meerut also turned out beneficial for the communist detainees in that it provided them with an opportunity many of them had not had so far. As the accusations were partly based on the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, the under-trials had to be granted access to the ‘evidence’ in order to prepare their defense. Accordingly, they dug into Marxism and not only fortified their own theoretical position, but prepared elaborate statements to justify (and sermonize) their political activity. Dange’s statement alone went over 90 hours, and took three months to be read out.

Langford James, the first chief prosecutor, directed his efforts towards isolating the communists from the values of subcontinental politics and society alike. He attacked communism for its anti-religiousness: Not only had the Bolsheviks no god; their propaganda aimed at the destruction of the belief in god, and they were calling for the murder of priests and the desecration of churches: “You are anti-country, you are anti-God, you are anti-family.”⁵²⁶

This was a potent charge pointedly pinning down the ideological and cultural dimension of emancipation as envisaged by Marx. The latter had denounced the “traditions of all dead generations” weighing “like a nightmare on the brains of the living” in the *18th Brumaire*.⁵²⁷ However, the communists had to refute Langford James’s charges: Their envisioned revolution was primarily about the ‘masses’ and only indirectly about emancipation from tradition and custom. Accordingly, the communists among the Meerut accused had to—as (Western) Marxists—confirm and at the same time—as (Eastern)

⁵²⁴ Spratt, *Blowing up India*, 47–59, 51–2 (quote); see also Barooah, *Chatto. The Life and Times*, 260–1, and Pyotr Kutsobin, *Ajoy Kumar Ghosh and Communist Movement in India* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers 1987), 16–17.

⁵²⁵ Detailed in Ranadive, “The Role Played by Communists,” 52–3; Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian*, 301–2. Usmani had been arrested on his way back from the VI congress and brought to Meerut belatedly; see Usmani (interviewee), 58.

⁵²⁶ Mitra, *Indian Annual Register*, vol. 11/1, 1929 (Sibpur: Annual Register Office 1929), 69 (quote). See also Barooah, *Chatto. The Life and Times*, 260–1.

⁵²⁷ Marx, *The 18th Brumaire*, 115.

revolutionaries—refute the suspicion of confronting the subcontinent’s vestiges of tradition.⁵²⁸

In their statement, the under-trials dutifully reiterated Marx’s positions, only to put their implications at arm’s length from the agenda of revolution. For example, patriarchy and exploitation of women and children, both desirable aims, would end only with the advent of socialism and therefore didn’t warrant specific criticism. Similarly, while communists advocated the emancipation of women and demanded the abolition of “institutions as the ‘purdah’,” this would be possible only after the socialist transformation. To address matters of family in its institutional form or even to abolish it likewise was not on the communist agenda.⁵²⁹ Little wonder, then, that despite numerous interactions with women, their inclusion in socialist and communist organizations remained a low-priority item. Rather, they remained all-male groups.

The same ambiguity characterized the communists’ approach to religion. It was subject to the imperative to shield the ‘masses’ from the implications of radical criticism, which the party nevertheless entertained. Hence, the assessment that the subcontinent was in the “bounds of mediaeval superstition” had its culturally critical edge blunted by shifting the blame for this state of things onto imperialism. Even where the accused were clear that religion was not only a function of rule but also a problem in itself, an “intellectual obstacle to clear and scientific thinking. It obscures class differences. It enjoins obedience and submission to the oppressor in this world [...] It is ‘the opium of the people’,” and “we cannot but oppose it. We do not disguise our opposition to all religions, and we cannot allow religious propaganda or the open observances of religious practices, by any Communist,”⁵³⁰ the consequences drawn from this radical stance effectively neutralized it:

We are not concerned primarily with religious propaganda though we do not [!] exclude it. We combat religion mainly by pointing out its reactionary role in political and social affairs, and its historical roots in exploitation and the subordination of class to class. We resist and expose the efforts of Imperialism to utilize both religious prejudices and religious institutions etc. for its own ends. [...] We do not refuse co-operation with individuals who hold religious beliefs or even preach religion. We consider the economic and political struggle the important question, to which questions arising from religion must be subordinated.⁵³¹

⁵²⁸ This balancing act was characteristic of much of communist practice. Even though subcontinental communism would not be averse to experimenting with alternative forms of cohabitation (the best-known example probably being the Bombay ‘commune’ of the 1940s of full-time party workers), this had to be strictly confined within the limits of traditional morality, meaning collective abstinence and celibacy.

⁵²⁹ “General Statement of the Meerut Accused,” in *Documents* 2:486–7 (quote); “Statement of S. A. Dange,” 768–70.

⁵³⁰ All quotes in “General Statement,” 492–3.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 493.

Thus, the communists could assure the watchful Comintern, Langford James, and not least themselves of their sincerity by sharply criticizing religion, while simultaneously reassuring the ‘masses’ and, again, themselves that such radicalism did not in the least detract from accommodation of reactionary forms of social identity and motives of political mobilization—after all, the real culprit was imperialism. This was no innovation on the part of the CPI; rather, the above passage quoted Lenin almost verbatim. Yet, the direct application of his postulates under subcontinental conditions emphasized their culturally relativist thrust. Separation of state and religion (now including education) and a “campaign of enlightenment” for emancipation from religious prejudices were to solve the religious question. The *Statement* even felt compelled to reemphasize that “we shall not persecute religious beliefs.”⁵³² Anyway, it was a side issue: Out of the *Statement*’s total of 425 pages (in the *Documents*’ enumeration), four-and-a-half, or slightly more than one per cent, were dedicated to it.

Accordingly, religion and communism interacted *beneath* grand policy. Mobilization efforts targeted not religion, but foreign rule and economic exploitation. Under capitalist auspices, notably the latter lost its erstwhile unmediated character through the gradual substitution of the contractual form for personal relations of exploitation, a development actively supported by communist organizers. To Dange, this even was a *fait accompli*: Since capitalist exploitation in itself was blind to differences of gender, caste, creed, or culture, subcontinental capitalists and workers had “*the same social actions and reactions as those of other countries*. The only difference would lie in the degrees of development. Therefore, the *general form or method of our class struggle will be the same* as in other countries.”⁵³³ (emphasis added)

Such epistemological idealism—as it was mainly in communist diction, notably the sort arrived at on the VI congress, that a world thoroughly unified on capitalist lines had emerged—points to a centerpiece of subcontinental communism’s meaning and highlights the trappings of a universal Western paradigm: The representation of society in categories whose empirical content corresponded only in a limited sense to their theoretical connotations created a semi-conscious illocutionary gap. The combination of concept and thing subsumed under it caused a degree of de-facto-autonomy not only of the categories against their communist appliers, but also of subcontinental communism as a whole against international communism. Under the rigid grate of Stalinization, the implementation of

⁵³² Ibid., 494.

⁵³³ Dange, *Selected Writings* 2:485–6 (quote); “Statement of S. A. Dange,” 1075.

Bolshevik doctrines acquired a resistive life of its own precisely because Dange's extreme view was inherently unable to acknowledge that the subcontinent's proletariat could in any way be different from others.

Inversely, such monism laid the foundation for a communist "ignored knowledge" of the still strongly non-bourgeois character of social organization and accompanying ideology formation. Put pointedly, the CPI's focus on bourgeois sociality tended to align itself with traditional, personal, non-institutional, and direct forms of social interaction empirically prevalent in the family, the community, and even the proletariat—against mediated, indirect, 'modern,' and at least partly juridified forms of oppression and exploitation: Unconditionally close to the 'masses,' whose 'backwardness,' while often deplored, was never properly realized, and hence itself became part of the revolutionary project.

IV.1.3 A United Front

The remedying effect of the leadership's post-trial release was limited. Although the party could finally constitute itself properly, that is, replete with a general secretary (Adhikari, replaced by P. C. Joshi in 1936), a Politbureau (consisting of Joshi, Ajoy Kumar Ghosh, and R. D. Bhardwaj), a Central Committee, and with clear affiliation to the Comintern, it was banned in May 1934.⁵³⁴

To make matters worse, the sectarian political line permitted few connections to the outside world. Even though it had no apparatus worth mentioning, the party had a clear vision of its numerous enemies. The 1931 *Joint Platform of Action*, a forerunner of the first party program, summarily blasted non-communist political actors: The bourgeoisie's "present 'opposition' represents merely maneuvers with British imperialism, calculated to swindle the mass of the toilers." An even greater danger emanated from the INC's growing left wing and its proponents such as Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose:⁵³⁵ "The most damning and dangerous hindrance to India's revolution is the agitation of leftist elements in

⁵³⁴ Mukhopadhyaya, *Secret British Documents*, 170–1. Nevertheless, "the successful formation of the party took place in the year 1933–34": Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian*, 305. For a comprehensive list of general secretaries up to the 1964 party split, see *Party Life* 2, no. 6 (1966):17–18, Communist Party of India Library, Ajoy Bhavan, Delhi (hereafter: CPIL-AB).

⁵³⁵ "Joint Platform of Action of the Communist Party of India," in *Documents* 3:80.

the national Congress [...] The most ruthless fight against the ‘left’ national reformists” was necessary to rescue the Indian revolution.⁵³⁶

This severely impaired the integrative potential of subcontinental communism and prevented it from responding sympathetically to the rising socialist current within the INC. Consisting of left nationalists and worker and peasant activists dissatisfied with Gandhi’s handling of civil disobedience in the early 1930s (foremost his readiness to forego militant forms of struggle for minor political concessions), this current materialized organizationally in the foundation of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) at Patna in 1934. Although critical of Gandhism, it firmly rejected the CPI’s sectarian stance. Former executive board member Madhu Limaye even argues that the CSP would probably never have come into existence had the communists “adopted a friendly attitude towards nationalism and had taken part in the struggle for independence.”⁵³⁷

However, once the Comintern discarded left-wing radicalism (see below) the CSP functioned as the umbrella under which communists worked inside the Congress. Differences between the two parties were pronounced, but not mutually exclusive. While the CSP aimed to “convert the Congress to socialism” and turn it into an instrument of struggle against the British and vested interests alike, on other accounts both operated on more related grounds.⁵³⁸ For example, the CSP accorded a similarly low degree of importance to issues of caste and religion. Its *Socialist Programme for India* almost echoed the CPI’s phrasing in that it demanded that the state should not discriminate according to caste or creed. The socialist addendum consisted in the provision that the state was to monitor that the lands of religious bodies were administered in a “religious spirit,” and in doubt impose its own interpretation of said ‘spirit.’⁵³⁹

This demand to turn the state into an arbiter at the nexus of material and spiritual considerations reflected the aspirations of folk socialists, who held that an uprightly “religious spirit” in worldly matters would correspond to socialist principles. As against the bolshevized CPI, the CSP’s less dogmatic doctrinal corset permitted a much greater range of opinions. Sentimental grass-roots socialists coexisted with, for example, early proponents of ‘socialism of the backward castes’ such as N. G. Ranga and vocal cultural critics such as

⁵³⁶ Quoted in Minoo Masani, *The Communist Party of India: A Short History* (New York: Macmillan 1954), 42–3.

⁵³⁷ Madhu Limaye, *Evolution of Socialist Policy* (Hyderabad: Chetana Parkashan 1952), 2. On developments leading up to the CSP’s foundations, see Sarkar, *Modern India*, 331–6; and also Sinha, *The Left-Wing*, 304–5.

⁵³⁸ A. Satyanarayana, “Rise and Growth of the Left Movement in Andhra, 1934–1939,” *Social Scientist* 15, no. 2 (1987):36.

⁵³⁹ Home/Poll/1934 Nr.41/1; see also Sinha, *The Left-Wing*, 326.

Jayaprakash Narayan. In general, many of the CSP's cadres—even while criticizing the role of religion as supporting pillar of the present order—leaned towards a situated approach not dissimilar to the CPI's early Eastern days, which enabled popular religious ideologemes to resonate more perceptibly.

Two examples illustrate the party's integrative power. A long-time left activist, early correspondent of Roy, and key figure in the young CSP (who, by association with his erstwhile student Usmani, had also been implicated in the investigations leading up to the Kanpur Conspiracy Case), Sampurnanand published *Samajvada* (Socialism) in 1936. The book sought to reconcile a Marxist apparatus of analysis with the homage to the metaphysically absolute (that is, god) and establish socialism on the basis of the Vedas. To Sampurnanand, there was no essential difference between Marxist and Vedantic socialism, as the “practical programmes were very much the same.” Notwithstanding the Vedas' caste-based notions of social order, Sampurnanand saw “no need for Indian revolutionaries to take up cudgels against religion.”⁵⁴⁰ Even as he attacked the role ethics, god, religion, law, and the state were playing as “handmaids of the possessing class,” for him their truth lay elsewhere: While the dialectic processes as described by Marx operated in the material world, the Brahma of the Vedas was the ultimate reality. Consciousness was not determined by being, but belonged to an independent higher sphere.⁵⁴¹

Bhagwan Das, a theosophist and senior CSP activist, conceptualized a less theoretical variety of spiritual socialism, “ancient scientific socialism.” Manu's postulates and the ancient Hindu ideals of his provenience were to provide the central virtues of a socialist society. As much a Hindu fundamentalist as a socialist reformer, he held that Hinduism's errors and injustices had accrued to it over time—and not been at the core of Manu's rigid and un-egalitarian laws. On the contrary, the application of original Hinduism's “eternal principles” would give rise to a just society conforming to subcontinental humanity. Rejecting the abolition of the family, private property, and religion on the grounds that they constituted elementary human needs, he advocated their ‘correct’ application, and in Singaravelu's vein deemed the founding figures of great faiths—among them Buddha and Christ—“true socialists.”⁵⁴²

Although neither the CSP's program nor its leadership officially endorsed such views, the red line separating the party's socialism from traditional belief systems was appreciably

⁵⁴⁰ Sampurnanand, *Reflections* (London: Asia Publishing House 1962), 41, 85. A quite subjective account of his activities in the CSP can be found *ibid.*, 72–86.

⁵⁴¹ Sinha, *The Left-Wing*, 336–40.

⁵⁴² All quotes *ibid.*, 365–7.

thinner than in the case of the communists, and at any rate more permeable. Highlighting the priorities of the party, N. G. Ranga, an eminent organizer of the All-India Kisan Sabha and a leading figure in the CSP, in late 1936 expressed the hope that the elected provincial governments to be formed after the 1937 elections would undertake “a determined attack through [...] even social and religious means [!] upon the many and varied privileges of our vested interests.”⁵⁴³

Still, the concrete handling of religion by both left-wing parties exhibited a large degree of congruence. It appeared as problematic mainly as a tool in the hands of the ruling class, not as a harmful cultural fetter, indicating that to a certain extent a “United Front” between both did already exist in this field.⁵⁴⁴ As yet, such parallels were eclipsed by the CPI’s adamant refusal to countenance cooperation with any bourgeois or moderately left outfit.

It was only when another sea-change occurred at the VII Comintern congress in 1935 that the political conditions for more connective work were created. General Secretary Georgi Dimitrov’s report declared that the communist movement had committed a number of errors deserving the label “sectarianism,” concretely

overestimating the revolutionization [sic!] of the masses [...] The power of the traditional contacts between the masses and their organizations and leaders had been underestimated, and when the masses did not break off these contacts immediately, the attitudes taken towards them was just as harsh as that adopted towards their reactionary leaders.⁵⁴⁵

Furthermore, slogans and tactics had been unduly generalized to the detriment of individual requirements for revolution in each country. This change in orientation stemmed from the realization that isolation from and opposition to bourgeois and social democratic parties had spelt disaster for the communist movement in many European countries and colonies alike. The new approach crystallized in the call to form “United Fronts” for the attainment of a minimum program with as broad a section of the political spectrum as possible.

In subcontinental terms, where there was no threat of a fascist take-over, this meant forming broad coalitions in the struggle for independence. The pamphlet *The Anti-Imperialist People’s Front in India* cast the new line in a programmatic shape. Tellingly for the time, not a single CPI member was involved in its drafting. Rather, the paper materialized after its authors, CPGB leaders Bradley and Dutt, had held consultations with

⁵⁴³ Mitra, *Indian Annual Register*, vol. 18/2, 1936 (Sibpur: Annual Register Office 1936), 281.

⁵⁴⁴ Limaye claims that both were close on a whole range of programmatic issues in the CSP’s early days: Limaye, *Evolution of Socialist Policy*, 2.

⁵⁴⁵ Quoted in Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian*. 339. In fact, the novel shift had been anticipated already in mid-1934 when *Inprecorr* had tacitly recommended the forging of ties with petty bourgeois circles and leftists within the INC: Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 164.

Nehru in Europe. Both became convinced that an involvement of communists in the INC would meet with sympathy on its left wing. Therefore, they re-recognized the Congress as the most important agency to seek national liberation.⁵⁴⁶

Many regard the changes in the wake of the VII Congress as amounting to a “total break with the past”⁵⁴⁷ and having ushered in “a completely new chapter in the history of the communist party of India.”⁵⁴⁸ This is true insofar as the rehabilitation of the INC and moderate leftists opened up many avenues for involvement and cooperation and contributed handsomely to the rapid advances of the party in the following years. Through the CSP, the CPI began to operate under the umbrella of the INC. Its broad involvement transformed it into a serious political force, notably after its quasi-legalization in the provinces where Congress ministries took over after the 1937 elections. For example, fruits of the integrative policies ripened in Bombay, where the local INC unit came under communist influence. The latter’s popular fundament manifested in the 1938 municipal elections, when all communist candidates won by singularly large margins.⁵⁴⁹

However, concerning the status of religion there were few immediate consequences, not least since the understanding of what constituted revolutionarity remained more or less unchanged. The new line merely broadened the selection of political *agents* deemed appropriate for alliances and the furtherance of the revolutionary will of the ‘masses.’ Despite the acceptance of bourgeois national independence as an intermediate step, the cultural *content* of the envisaged revolutionary transformation remained substantially unaffected. The turning point came only in the aftermath of the 1937 elections, when the framework established by the VII congress interacted with the CPI’s analysis of post-election developments to bring about a caesura and initiate the communists’ cultural turn.

The upward trend in the CPI’s fortunes was reflected organizationally as well. The disunited sections in Bengal, Madras, Bombay, and the Punjab assumed a more uniform appearance (not least due General Secretary P. C. Joshi’s indefatigable touring between the groups) as the CPI gradually began to function as a proper party. Following the CPI’s opening up, membership expanded quickly. Many imprisoned terrorists, notably from Bengal, had already joined in the first half of the 1930s, and further spread their ideas

⁵⁴⁶ Ben Bradley and Rajani Palme Dutt, “The Anti-Imperialist People’s Front in India,” *Labour Monthly* 18/March (1936). See also Joshi, *Struggle for Hegemony*, 21, and Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian*, 343.

⁵⁴⁷ Khaled, *A Study in Leadership*, 72.

⁵⁴⁸ Joshi, “Foreword,” XV–XVI.

⁵⁴⁹ For details on the episode, see Conrad Wood, “The Communist Party of India: From Leftism to United Front,” in *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front*, ed. Jim Fyrrh (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1985), 198.

among jailed activists of the civil disobedience movements. The Cannanore prison was a particularly fruitful point of exchange.⁵⁵⁰

Notably the involvement in the CSP contributed to the broadening of the communist base. Communist strength manifested in the election of four communists into the party executive in 1937, among them Sajjad Zaheer from Lucknow and Namboodiripad. Two entire CSP provincial units—in Andhra and Malabar—were communist rather than socialist in outlook, which became apparent when both broke away upon the expulsion of the communists from the CSP in 1940. Surveillance agencies nervously corroborated the CPI's ascendancy.⁵⁵¹

And yet, there was more to it. The resurging CPI of the late 1930s had changed from its old, pre-Meerut self in more ways than organization, connectivity, and correct replication of the Marxist vocabulary of the day. Beneath the turbulent history of the CPI in the decade after the VI Congress, a tectonic shift occurred in the communist conceptualization of society. “Tectonic,” because this shift was as fundamental as it seemed inevitable: If communist mobilization in the 1920s had at times been both close to and sympathetic towards political manifestations of religious radicalism and its identity connotations, the communities proper had remained outside the communist categorical horizon. In contrast, by the end of the 1930s communists participated full-bloodedly in the debates on the status of Muslims in the future subcontinental polity. The next section retraces the path that lead there.

⁵⁵⁰ Marcus Franda, “Radical Policies in West Bengal,” in *Radical Policies in South Asia*, eds. Paul Brass and Marcus Franda (Cambridge [MA]: MIT Press 1973), 190–1; Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1971), 13; Robert Hardgrave, “The Kerala Communists: Contradictions of Power,” in Brass and Franda, *Radical Policies*, 121. On British anxieties of the spread of communism in the prisons, see also WBIB File 35/26 SL 2/1926, 250–1. As faithful practitioners of Stalinist self-criticism, the party leadership viewed its situation in 1936 much less favorably: It regretted that the party's condition was “so shocking, so scandalous that we have no right [...] to call ourselves Communists and thereby defaming Communism.” There was ubiquitous “utter confusion” in ideological questions, strong “factional tendencies,” and “complete anarchy” in lieu of discipline: *Party Letter*, WBIB File 854/36 SL 213/1936, 30–1.

⁵⁵¹ WBIB File 364/28 SL 174/1938, 24. For a rudimentary study of the CPI's development in Andhra, see G. S. Bhargava, *A Study of the Communist Movement in Andhra* (Delhi: Siddharta Publ. 1955), 7–17.

IV.2 Reworking the Mass Perspective

IV.2.1 Enter 'Community'

The VI Comintern congress had profoundly readjusted the coordinates for communist orientation. As the bourgeoisie was lumped into the imperialist camp as a whole, the 'masses' were the only agency to fall back on to as the workers and their organizations alone represented too small a part of society. Accordingly, the 'masses' had been deemed ready for the "destruction of all relics of feudalism" and to end the "the yoke of various pre-capitalist (feudal and semi-feudal) relationships" together with imperialist rule and capitalist exploitation in one fell stroke.⁵⁵² This thrust manifested in pamphlets such as the 1934 *Manifesto of the Anti-Imperialist Conference*, which summarily claimed workers, peasants, and the petty bourgeoisie for the revolution. All of these groups purportedly were "in constant conflict with reactionary forces of the old semi-feudal caste society."⁵⁵³

Yet, given the experiences of the past decade the 'masses' could not without further ado be fashioned into bourgeois society's revolutionary 'other' anymore. The *Manifesto's* rigid separation of traditional religiosity and culture from its social agents had become unsatisfying. It was as evidently counterfactual as it was obstructive to a truly mass-oriented policy. Communist publications themselves occasionally exhibited few illusions about "the strength of backward traditions [...] and semi-feudal relationships and habits of the village life" among workers, that is, the "masses."⁵⁵⁴

The resulting tension between the drive towards social and national emancipation, and the concomitant banking on the "masses," whose revolution this was to be after all—positions being no less the CPI's very *raison d'être* than populist expediency—on the one hand, and the occasional acknowledgement of the non-revolutionary, communalized reality on the ground on the other called for a resolution in an inclusive version of communism accommodating both. For the sake of viability, revolutionary perspectives had to appropriate mass sentiments and popular tenets instead of conflating them with reaction. In other words, paying due homage to religious ideologemes and communities in a non-reactionary manner was gaining urgency on the communist agenda.

⁵⁵² CPI(M), *History of the Communist*, 148–9.

⁵⁵³ "The Manifesto of the Anti-Imperialist Conference 1934," in *Documents* 3:184.

⁵⁵⁴ "India: A Few Facts of History," *Inprecorr*, 9 February 1934, NMML, Roll 1921/3-B.

Contemporary negotiations on the subcontinent's political future greatly influenced the recognition awarded and the heightened role eventually conceded to indigenous religious collectives. Most important was the pivotal role allotted to British India's communities and their 'representative' organizations during the deliberations at the three Round Table Conferences held in London between 1930 and 1932. Elevated into authoritative positions to frame a constitution for British India, community leaders directly molded the reforms that materialized in the 1935 Government of India Act. It provided for an extension of the franchise and envisioned limited provincial self-government in British India.⁵⁵⁵

The deliberations *inter alia* resulted in the promulgation of the Communal Award. Heeding the demands of communal representatives, its core feature consisted in the introduction of separate electorates for a multitude of groups and communities, among them workers, women, Europeans, Muslims, Sikhs, and many more.⁵⁵⁶ Gandhi's desperate attempt to ward off separate representation for the "depressed classes," that is, the untouchables through a fast to death led to the hasty conclusion of the Poona Pact with the Depressed Classes Association under Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. It arranged for the reservation of scheduled caste seats within the Hindu contingent. Otherwise, the award's provisions were largely implemented. The debates sparked by the demands of the most vociferous communities—notably Muslims, Sikhs, and the scheduled castes—thoroughly affected the modalities of political articulation on the subcontinent.⁵⁵⁷

In the face of this development, communist commentators directed their fire largely against the reforms' significance for the continuation and stabilization of the British Raj. Bradley was among the few who condemned, if late and briefly, the principle of separate representation as one of "the most reactionary features of the New Constitution."⁵⁵⁸ The indigenous party, however, already leaned towards a different pitch. The *Joint Platform* indicated accordance with communal compartmentalization and, indirectly, the category of 'community' itself by demanding the application of the right to self-determination to all

⁵⁵⁵ See Sarkar, *Modern India*, 308–9, 319–20.

⁵⁵⁶ Representation as provided in the Award did not silence, but exacerbate intercommunal squabbles, as many received less seats than they regarded as their due. Notably Muslim politicians felt deprived of two majority provinces: In Bengal, Europeans were represented excessively (10% of the seats with just 1% of the population) at the cost of Muslims (47,8% vs 54%) and especially Hindus, including the depressed classes (32% vs 44% respectively): See Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, 18–21; in the Punjab, the Muslim League's demand of a 56% seat share in the provincial legislature was not met, and Sikh leaders, who had expected 24% of the seats for their community, had to do with 18%: Samina Awan, *Political Islam in Colonial Punjab. Majlis-i-Ahrar 1929–1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), 104.

⁵⁵⁷ Stein, *A History of India*, 332–5.

⁵⁵⁸ Ben Bradley, "The Indian Elections," *Labour Monthly*, April 1937.

“national minorities.” The latter expression resurrected Roy’s mid-1920s placeholder term for minority communities.⁵⁵⁹

To be sure, there were certain distinctions. Besides calling for unspecified “abolition of all inequalities imposed by the old social-religious system,” the *Platform* explicitly demanded the expropriation of, among others, “churches.”⁵⁶⁰ Even in the hypothetical case that this was a deliberately sloppy formulation aimed at covering up the intention to target the property and privileges of all religious institutions, there still was a clear determination to at least appear committed to the conservation of ‘indigenous,’ presumably less objectionable ones. After all, the *Platform* didn’t demand the confiscation of lands of temples, mosques, or any ‘indigenous’ religious organization, although their holdings far exceeded those of Christian bodies. Similarly, the pamphlet singled out Christian missionaries as *personae non gratae*, condemning them as “direct agents of imperialism.”⁵⁶¹ The less domesticized approach of the CPI’s Calcutta unit, whose 1933 pamphlet *The Indian Revolution and Our Task* had called for the expropriation of temples and mosques as well, did not resonate in the party’s grand strategy.⁵⁶²

The Comintern was similarly mindful of the need to proceed cautiously in matters of culture, although it refrained from direct affirmation at this stage. Its guidelines for mobilization among subcontinental workers recommended to “deprecate tactfully the influence of religion,” while most other injunctions chose a considerably ruder pitch (“denounce the capitalists,” etc.).⁵⁶³ Gopalan, quite probably the most popular of all communist leaders, later emphasized this point. Empathy and understanding were the way to go: “We must strive to understand fully the good and the bad points of [the workers’] lives. This should be accepted initially. After that, if the bad elements are pointed out, they will genuinely attempt to rectify them.”⁵⁶⁴ While Gopalan’s approach was ostensibly subject to the aim to convince the prospective revolutionary subject of the erroneousness of religious outlook, the “initial” concessions he envisaged rather evoke the impression that the journey had become the reward:

Just as Bharatheeyan’s ashes, sandalwood-paste and chanting of the Geetha have helped the growth of the peasant movement, a comrade who argued against God’s existence in the peasant committee was able to wreck the local committee [...] Especially while working among the

⁵⁵⁹ “Joint Platform of Action,” in *Documents* 3:78.

⁵⁶⁰ All quotes *ibid.*, 78–82; see also Ranadive, “The Role Played by Communists,” 9.

⁵⁶¹ “Joint Platform of Action,” 82.

⁵⁶² “The Indian Revolution and Our Task,” in *Documents* 3:111.

⁵⁶³ WBIB File 364/28 SL 174/1938, 15.

⁵⁶⁴ Gopalan, *In the Cause*, 65–6.

middle classes, one had to be very careful. We had to convince our audiences that we shared the same ideals [!] and aspirations as they.⁵⁶⁵

K. B. Krishna, a little-known party member from Andhra, in the early 1930s went one step further in approximating religious currents to the socialist cosmos: In a religious society molded by Brahmins, social movements “naturally” assumed a religious form. Buddhism, for instance, had represented a “social revolution” in its context, which was why (!) social revolution “took a religious turn.”⁵⁶⁶ From there, short-circuiting—rather than associating more loosely—communal assertions and social revolutionary aspirations was not far off.

Krishna is an interesting case in that he represented the type of ‘new’ communism that was to achieve—and articulate—the movement’s situatedness under the increasing significance of community politics. In Krishna’s case, this occasioned a keener sense of ideological as apart from material motives, such as in his observations of “community-ism” at the Round Table Conferences. Even while emphasizing its petty bourgeois character as a struggle between “advanced and backward professional classes of different faiths,” Krishna was aware that the strife had developed a life of its own. After all, evident lack of success could not deter staunch communalists:

The objects for which they sought communal representation were, and are, not realised by this device. But they did not care, because their interest in the removal of causes for which they pleaded protection was not keen. [...] When once the principle was recognised, it was demanded more and more. Everything was looked upon from a communal view.⁵⁶⁷

And yet, strikingly, Krishna saw no need for criticism, but ontologized this development as an essentially unproblematic part of the phenomenon called “India.” At any rate, it didn’t count among the *Dangers of Indian Nationalism*: Pondering whether and how India was a nation, Krishna reasoned in 1932 that in view of the many things in common between the two great religious communities, “on the whole religion lays more emphasis on unity than on diversity in India.” In Krishna’s perspective, this was a good thing regardless of the religious framework. And on the caste system he commented that however pernicious its social effects were, it also had advantages: “It absorbed all elements of the population under one fold. It maintained Indian traditions [!]. It made group life rich and varied [!!].”⁵⁶⁸

This cynical phrasing revealed that Krishna found little fault with the existence of the old social order, which he viewed primarily as cultural glue holding together a body of “Indian traditions” worthy of protection. To be sure, no programmatic text of the CPI ever

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 78–9.

⁵⁶⁶ K. B. Krishna, *Theories of Kingship in Ancient India*, Andhra Pradesh State Archives, K.B. Krishna collection (hereafter: APSA-KB), AccNo. 47377, 16.

⁵⁶⁷ Krishna, *National Movement in India*, APSA-KB, AccNo. 47355, 517–18.

⁵⁶⁸ Krishna, *Dangers of Indian Nationalism*, APSA-KB, AccNo. 47368, 17–18.

openly endorsed his stances. Yet, they provide important clues to the currents of thought that would lead to the short-circuiting of national and religio-communal considerations in the 1940s occasioned by the gradual accommodation of the category of community in communist theorizing. This process centered on, but was not limited to, the subcontinent's Muslims.

IV.2.2 Approaching Islam

In furtherance of certain strands in Bolshevik revolutionary tradition, subcontinental communist reservations against even remotely anti-imperialist and non-bourgeois assertions of Islam had ever been minor. As a matter of fact, this common characteristic constituted a bond between the CPI and the early Bolsheviks: Just as the penchant for linking communist anti-imperialism to Muslim identitary notions marking notably the Calcutta group's approach in the early 1920s had been anticipated by the same, only greater penchant exhibited by early Soviet nationality policy, it was international communism's organs that conserved the CPI's claim to the appropriation of committedly Muslim political subjectivity at a time when the party itself was defunct.

A Community of Resistance

Thus, extremist nationalist-turned-communist émigré Virendranath Chattopadhyaya proved that he had grasped the gist of subcontinental communism in a series of reports in *Inprecorr* on the 1930 tribal revolt in the NWFP. The NWFP was a much-neglected backwater of British India without any appreciable amount of infrastructure or avenues for political participation. What little education work had been done had largely been taken up by religious dignitaries of the likes of Maulana Obeidullah Sindhi, whose influence emphasized Islam's anti-British and anti-Western thrust. Accordingly, the formation of political will among the NWFP Pathans was firmly rooted in fundamentalist religious sentiments and aspirations from an early stage.⁵⁶⁹

During the first civil disobedience movement in 1930, a wave of non-violent mass protest under the guidance of the "Frontier Gandhi," Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, gripped

⁵⁶⁹ See Reetz, "Community Concepts and Community-Building," 128–9. After the post-war disintegration of the Berlin group of revolutionaries and long years as a revolutionary vagrant, Chattopadhyaya had found refuge in the Soviet Union. He taught courses at the Leningrad University and was shot along with other émigré revolutionaries in 1937 during the "Great Purges": Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny*, 271–4.

Pathan areas.⁵⁷⁰ According to Chattopadhyaya, their anti-British militancy elevated the Pathans above their reputation as “backward” and fanatical in matters of faith. He discerned a veritably “revolutionary” movement, whose characterization revealed much about Chattopadhyaya’s own notions of practical progressive transformation: Members of their organization, the “Red Shirts,” called themselves “‘Servants of God’”. Recruits are sworn in on the Koran to follow the teachings of Islam, to live a pure and righteous life.” While he conceded that “these objects are anything but revolutionary,” both the “terrible economic conditions” and the low social position of the protesting population apparently went a long way to making amends. Thus, he commended for the volunteers marching from village to village, shouting “Inquilab zindabad” (“Long live the revolution”) and forming local committees. From there—despite, or even because of the yet strong “religious illusions” among the peasantry—, these “revolutionary activities” would eventually spread to Pathan army units, or so Chattopadhyaya hoped.⁵⁷¹

Et voilà a concrete example of an alternative to Gandhian civil disobedience more amenable to communist tastes in the Comintern’s sectarian “third period.” Little did it matter that the main ideological theme of the Red Shirts consisted in a “revival of the Muslim Pathan identity.”⁵⁷² Despite the admission of non-revolutionarity, communist reflexes worked, and sensed revolution whenever Muslims raised radical, anti-colonial slogans. Chattopadhyaya’s assessment remained uncontested even decades later when Namboodiripad nostalgically harked back to the virtues of “an entire people [the Pathans] rising against imperialism.” Their ethno-cultural merits shone in comparison to the INC’s bourgeois civil disobedience.⁵⁷³

The subtle appeal of the ‘Muslim option’ permeated even communist commentaries detached from subcontinental day-to-day politics, such as ex-muhajir Rahmat Ali’s treatise on communalism. Published in 1933 as his PhD thesis at the Sorbonne, it opted for a direct class approach, stipulating that inter-communal conflicts occurred only where class and religious constellations coincided, and chose his examples accordingly—in the main Kashmir, the (eastern) Punjab, and east Bengal. There, as well as in most cities, a Hindu stratum of moneylenders, landlords, and bourgeois confronted a substantial “élément

⁵⁷⁰ On the religious underpinnings of this movement of Pashtun awakening see Reetz, “Religion and Group Identity,” 80–1.

⁵⁷¹ All quotes in Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, “The Indian Mohammedans and the Revolutionary Movement,” *Inprecorr*, 28 May 1930, NMML, Roll 1921/3-B ; Chattopadhyaya, “On the Situation in India,” *Inprecorr*, 12 June 1930, *ibid.*, repeats the gist.

⁵⁷² Reetz, “Community Concepts and Community-Building,” 129.

⁵⁷³ Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian*, 244.

musulman” concentrated in the dispossessed workforce, the service industry, and among poor peasants and tenants.⁵⁷⁴

Although he also included opposite constellations, Rahmat Ali’s conclusions led him away from an impartial assessment. While his tendency to identify the socially disadvantaged position with Muslims largely corresponded to subcontinental reality, his sympathetic comments on the identitary moves of the Muslim bourgeoisie recalled Tatar Muslim communist Mirsaid Sultangaliev’s designation of “Muslim peoples” as “proletarian peoples”: As they supposedly had reason to fear their demise, the Muslim bourgeois “ne firent que leur devoir” by insisting on communal safeguards. To Rahmat Ali, it was perfectly understandable that they had aligned themselves with pauperized Muslim intellectuals and the peasants exploited by Hindu moneylenders for the realization of their class aims in communal terms.⁵⁷⁵ Similar empathy for processes of communalization were absent in his references to Parsees, Sikhs, and of course Hindus—not surprising for someone who had deemed the quran as the “history of the revolution” from an early stage in his political career.⁵⁷⁶

Ahrar Socialism

Before the rise of the Muslim League, the Ahrar movement provided the best link for rooting communist themes in the Muslim field. With the united front policy emphasizing broad anti-imperialist alliances from 1935, the Ahrars counted among the formations eligible for support as they were deemed to vent progressive aspirations of broad population strata.

The Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam (League of Freedom-Loving Muslims) had been founded in 1930 by Muslim nationalists from the Punjab. The Ahrars’ aims were to liberate India from British domination while avoiding a “Hindu raj.” Instead, they envisioned an “Islamic system” for Muslims, and demanded the Muslim community’s material uplift. The Ahrar agenda also called for equal distribution of wealth, the abolition of untouchability, universal respect for religion, and freedom for practicing sharia law. Clearly, the Ahrar leaders “concentrated their political energies on the defense of Islam.”⁵⁷⁷

⁵⁷⁴ Rahmat Ali, *Contribution à l’Etude*, 9–10.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 136–41. Rahmat Ali’s approach would occasionally resurface in later analyses of religious conflict, for example, in Zaheer, “Recent Muslim Politics.”

⁵⁷⁶ Sarkisyanz, *Rußland und der Messianismus*, 280.

⁵⁷⁷ Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, 104–5 (quote); Majlis Ahrar-i-Hind, *Ahrar Point of View*, <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/jspui/handle/1/4032>, 15, 25, 79 (last checked 14 December 2014). For an example of

Accordingly, Ahrar campaigns exhibited a clear religious list. For example, Ahrars participated in the “Muslim Bazaar Campaign,” which called for villagers to supply themselves at Muslim shops only, and mobilized Muslims against the Hindu village elite. They also staged campaigns against social evils such as dowry and untouchability, both of which they by and large associated with Hindu culture. “In their doctrinal training, the MAI [Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam] [...] strictly followed *Sharia*’t.” Their stance towards deviations from Sunni Islam was harsh: Shias, Ahmadis, and more liberal and inclusive Muslims such as Jinnah were victims of Ahrar ostracism.⁵⁷⁸

However, the Ahrars had something to offer to the communists. Their flag was red with a white crescent and star upon it, an obvious aesthetic similarity to the CPI’s own red-white hammer-and-sickle banner. Hierarchy in the MAI was strict and centralized. Another area of agreement between Ahrar Islam and communism was the movement’s pronounced egalitarianism. Since many of the MAI leaders came from lower social strata, socialist ideas held considerable attraction for them. According to Awan, the Ahrars even “had a vague idea of class struggle and the orthodox Marxist ideology.”⁵⁷⁹

As the Majlis-i-Ahrar received communist blessings as an agent of mass progress, it garnered communist sympathy beyond what had hitherto been allotted to Muslim organizations. In the Punjab, CPI and Ahrars joined in an alliance with the INC and the CSP to contest the 1937 elections. The Ahrars’ call to Muslim workers at Kanpur to support the 1937 and 1938 general strikes elevated them considerably in communist opinion. A certain Yusuf—a leading Kanpur trade union activist and CPI member popularly known as “the ‘Maulana’”⁵⁸⁰—commended the Ahrars as a “Left Muslim organization” with a positive influence on the workforce.⁵⁸¹ *National Front*, the CPI’s organ in the late 1930s, included them among “progressive Muslim political organizations” seeking to integrate Muslims into the national movement. After the outbreak of the war, CPI publications praised them for

the highly principled stance with which the Ahrars would approach questions of seat reservations in the late 1930s see Shalini Sharma, “Communism and ‘Democracy’: Punjab Radicals and Representative Politics in the 1930s,” *South Asian History and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2013): 457.

⁵⁷⁸ Awan, *Political Islam in Colonial*, 74 (quote). For a discussion of the Ahrars’ campaigns in the early 1930s, see Tahir Kamran, “Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam: Religion, Socialism and Agitation in Action,” *South Asian History and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2013): 472–6.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 73 (quote), 152.

⁵⁸⁰ *Party Letter*, 20 September 1951, CPIL-AB, 5.

⁵⁸¹ Yusuf, “Cawnpore General Strike. A Landmark,” *New Age*, Supplement December 1937 (quote); P. C. Joshi, “Cawnpore General Strike,” *National Front*, 12 June 1938. On the Punjab alliance, see Sharma, “Communism and ‘Democracy’,” 448.

their anti-enlistment campaigns among Muslims. Already in 1937, Ahrars and communists had cooperated to the same effect in the League against Fascism and War.⁵⁸²

In these admittedly scattered but representative (if only for the lack of critical) references, the Ahrars figured as an ally in key political areas. The religious and communal dimensions of the movement were by no means problematic. It is an indicator for the intermediate period of accommodation of ‘community’ in the mid-1930s that the Ahrar campaigns’ Muslim framework went unheeded in communist commentaries. This pointed to an emerging alternative take on the matter—a non-problematic view on Muslim communal assertions—gradually manifesting itself in communist diction.” Far from a negative attribute attached to community-based formations in opposition to communist notions of society, the attribute “Muslim” came to be used ever more frequently in a neutral, purely descriptive sense. A communist viewpoint was increasingly prepared to countenance the inclusion of not merely Muslims, but a Muslim *entity* in both its social utopian vision and the short-term goal of building a comprehensive national community.⁵⁸³

However, political constellations on the subcontinent had not yet developed to a point to let principled support of Muslim communal aspirations appear as a historical necessity. Other options remained viable paths. This is illustrated, for example, by the avid communist support to the Congress’s “Muslim Mass Contact Campaign” in 1937/38. It had been devised by Nehru and INC strategist K. M. Ashraf in the wake of the 1937 provincial elections, where the Congress had emerged victorious, winning 711 out of a total of 1585 assembly seats and an absolute majority in five provinces out of eleven. Even if the results in Muslim constituencies were meagre—it had managed to win only 26—the Muslim League had tallied only 109 of the 482 reserved for Muslims and was a far cry from being the representative of Muslim opinion it aspired to be.⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸² “Current Notes,” *National Front*, 10 July 1938; *Communist* 2, no. 1 (1939), WBIB File 738/39 SL 475/1939, 103. The importance of the Punjab’s martial tradition in province politics was not lost to communists, who integrated it into their campaigns. See Sharma, “Communism and ‘Democracy’,” 456–7.

⁵⁸³ On a side note, this also indicates that the Republic of India’s eventual post-independence practice of secularism (aptly summarized by Tharileth Oommen as “not only non-interference in the affairs of other communities but also developing a positive appreciation of their distinct style of life”) was a heritage of the communist milieu as well: Tharileth Oommen, *State and Society in India. Studies in Nation-Building* (Delhi: Sage Publ. 1990), 105. P. N. Bhagwan emphasizes that “Indian secularism” “recognises the relevance and validity of religion in life” and therefore, by seeking to strike a balance between the “legitimate functions of religion” and the “functions of the State,” acknowledges ‘community’ as an instance in public life: P. N. Bhagwan, “Religion and Secularism under the Indian Constitution,” in *Religion and Law in Independent India*, ed. Robert D. Baird, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Manohar 2005), 37.

⁵⁸⁴ For the election results see Sarkar, *Modern India*, 345, 349.

The INC's left wing claimed the victory. It had been on the ascent since the mid-1930s, borne out by the election of the left candidates Jawarhalal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose as INC presidents in 1936, and 1938 and 1939, respectively. Notably Nehru's tenure had initiated an appreciable change in the Congress's agenda and appearance (if not necessarily politics) towards a socialist, and also more determinedly nationalist profile. Encouraged by the success of a leftist program in the general constituencies, many in the Congress sensed the opportunity to finally rally the subcontinent's Muslims to the national mainstream: By appealing to them to support the INC's social and economic reforms in the provinces where it formed the ministries.

Accordingly, the Congress refused to form coalition governments with the landlord-backed ML and initiated a broad campaign to win over Muslim peasants, workers, and petit-bourgeois, whom the League regarded as its own constituency. Sympathizing with its aims and similarly relying on the pull of a progressive agenda, the CPI supported Muslim Mass Contact. Yet, it resulted in failure for two main reasons: Not only did the League respond with the development of an assertive, identitary, and populist Muslim image, but also did Congress ministries everywhere fail to deliver on the promised reforms in the agrarian and labor sectors. Sarkar aptly summarizes that "secularist and radical rhetoric [of the INC's campaign] in the end merely alarmed Muslim vested interests without winning over the Muslim masses."⁵⁸⁵

At any rate, the communists' active involvement was not as principally opposed to the recognition of Muslims as a separate and distinct 'national' minority as it may seem. Nor was switching over from one to another hectic, irrational, or arbitrary. After all, both approaches had been attempts to solve the underlying problem: The CPI's identification of political 'backwardness' among Muslims and their accordingly "reactionary communal leadership" had ever hinged primarily not on a lack of unity with Hindus or the mainstream national movement, but on the perceived absence of a strong anti-imperialist current among the Muslim organizations. Unity beyond communal lines was a secondary consideration, not least because the collective practice of anti-imperialism itself promised to provide a firm ground for unity. Therefore, it seems plausible that the CPI would eventually be prepared to campaign in unilateral support of emphatically *Muslim* anti-imperialism—even once it was clear that the INC's inclusive take on national unity had failed.

⁵⁸⁵ Sarkar, *Modern India*, 354 (quote), 361–5. On the involvement of the communists, see Z. A. Ahmad, "The Indian National Congress and the Muslim Masses," *New Age*, August 1937. See also Muzaffar Ahmad, "The Calcutta AICC and After," *New Age*, December 1937, and Habib, "The Left and the National Movement," 24.

Outside the CPI's immediate purview, this transformation of community identity and politics into vehicles of progress had materialized as early as summer 1938. In the midst of the Sino-Japanese war, *New Age* published an article praising "the Chinese Muslims" as a bulwark against Japanese expansionism. It emphasized their full-blooded Muslimness, and raved that they had "been living a life very much unto themselves, preserving intact their customs, traditions and rituals which their ancestors brought with them from the Near East 1,300 years ago." Evidently swayed by collective traditionalism, *New Age* held the fact "noteworthy" that one of Chiang Kai-Shek's generals was a "staunch Mohammedan."⁵⁸⁶

Such assessments form a contrast to the as yet more cautious identitary praise of other indigenous communities, such as the Sikhs. On the occasion of the release of a number of Babbar Akalis from prison in 1938, Sohan Singh Josh hailed their revolt of the early 1920s as "open rebellion against British imperialism" that—as Josh felt the need to emphasize—had had no truck with communalism, particularism, or religious reaction whatsoever.⁵⁸⁷ Yet even if the opposite had been the case: The strand in subcontinental communism that short-circuited manifestations of grass-roots communalism with progressive motives was still very much alive. Ajoy Kumar Ghosh acknowledged that his identification of an "urge for liberty [...] as strong as in [...] British India" in the princely states rested on the activity of "communal movements." Still, he declared them to be basically "economic and political in character," aspirations simply "diverted into communal channels by reactionaries." In contrast, his criticism was directed at Gandhi for hamstringing Congress support to such movements.⁵⁸⁸

IV.3 The Reversal of Communalism

In 1937, a certain M. N. Roy published *The Historical Role of Islam*. The treatise considered Muslims an integral part of the "Indian nation" and Islam itself of "immense revolutionary significance" with "great cultural consequences." Roy's positive assessment rested on the premise that by way of its "irrationalism *par excellence*" it had "destroyed the basis of all

⁵⁸⁶ All quotes in "Islam Fights For China. Sons Of The Khan," *New Age*, May 1938.

⁵⁸⁷ Sohan Singh Josh, "Our Brave Comrades—The Babar Akalis," *National Front*, 4 December 1938.

⁵⁸⁸ Ajoy Kumar Ghosh, "Toy Committees," *New Age*, May 1938 (quotes); see also Stein, *A History of India*, 347–8.

religions,” including its own.⁵⁸⁹ Nevertheless, his attacks on “disgusting” Hinduism coupled with praise of Islam’s tolerance and Muslims’ noble demeanor in conquest went down well with Muslim intellectuals about to politically assert their religious identity.⁵⁹⁰ Following the treatise and his break with the INC in 1939, which he (much like Jinnah) accused of fascism, Roy’s prestige among Muslim intellectuals had risen to considerable levels by the early 1940s. This materialized in frequent invitations to lecture at conferences of Muslim organizations in order to “inspire the Muslims [...] with your inspiring ideals, ideas and personality [...] in the interest of and [sic!] Islam.”⁵⁹¹ It was only consequent, then, for him to consider the League “not a communal but a genuine anti-imperialist organization.”⁵⁹²

To the contemporary communist press, Roy’s appraisals were a testimony to his ongoing betrayal of the revolution.⁵⁹³ This could hardly have been otherwise as Roy had been a renegade to “official” communism for close to a decade. Then again, the transition of the CPI to a thoroughly positive appreciation of Muslim culture and ‘national’ community formation had not yet been completed. For this to happen, four preconditions had to be fulfilled, all but one growing out of the fast-changing constellations on the subcontinent after the 1937 elections: The rise of the Muslim League, the related shift in the communist perception of communalism, the ML’s adaptation of a nationalist agenda, and the sea-change in the CPI’s stance towards the war after Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941. Coupled with the party’s theoretical tradition, these developments would converge in the ‘nationality period’ of the 1940s.

The first precondition was the Muslim League’s rapid increase in membership, organization, and political weight after the 1937 elections. If it had been all but extinct throughout the

⁵⁸⁹ Roy, *The Historical Role of Islam: An Essay on Islamic Culture* (Bombay: Vora 1937), 2–4, 83.

⁵⁹⁰ John Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India: M. N. Roy and Comintern Policy 1920–1939* (Bombay: Oxford University Press 1971), 255 (quote). The extent of Roy’s estrangement from mainstream culture and religion can be gathered from a poignant passage in the prison diaries he wrote while serving his term in the 1930s: “This country needs a Kemal Pasha to chop off the ridiculous tufts on the heads; to make the wearing of moustaches punishable as culpable homicide; to drive pampered, idle, gossiping, but outrageously maltreated women out in the streets to work down their fat or cure their anaemia and to free themselves from the malignant curse of suppressed passion; to prohibit the irritating chanting of rigmarole in a language which few understand; and to do many other similar things”: Roy, *Fragments of a Prisoner’s Diary*, vol. 3 (Calcutta: Renaissance Publ. 1943), 69–70.

⁵⁹¹ *Letter from the Sylhet District Moslem Students’ Federation*, 24 November 1940, NMML, M. N. Roy Papers, First Instalment, Subject Files, SNo. 15; and *Letter from Jalpaiguri District Muslim Students’ League*, 17 May 1939, SNo. 10. Roy obviously could afford to decline such invitations, indicating their numerousness, as he chose not to attend the second conference on the grounds of “ill-health.” For his view of the INC, see *Letter to M. A. Jinnah*, 14 February 1941, SNo. 15; and *Letter to Ramaswamy Naicker*, 17 August 1940, SNo. 14/pt. 1.

⁵⁹² “Current Notes,” *National Front*, 27 March 1938.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

better part of the 1930s with All-India membership at a low four-digit number, and further devastated by a catastrophic performance in the elections, the sustained turn towards assertive Muslim identity politics occasioned an astronomical rise in the League's prestige and following. The All-India 1938 Patna session committed it to independence and introduced a new pitch of far-reaching communal demands coupled with acerbic attacks on the Congress, culminating in the call of "Islam in danger." Soon, Jinnah's public appearances drew more people than even the khilafat campaign at its height, with a procession of four kilometers greeting his arrival at the 1938 ML regional session in Sind. Nehru admitted grudgingly that for the first time in its history, the League had won the support of substantial population segments and developed into a mass organization.⁵⁹⁴

This development attracted the communists' keen interest—not only because it raised concerns about the subcontinent's political future (or rather: augured the failure of the Congress vision of an Indian nation), but also because of the new dimension of mass politicization of Muslims: As the outcast Roy had put it, 'bad' or reactionary philosophy could not give birth to a progressive social program attractive to the broad population.⁵⁹⁵ The increasing support of the "downtrodden masses" signified that the ML's agenda met their needs. Together with the lingering communist attraction to Islam's perceived strand of resistancy, this formed a powerful allure.

The second precondition evolved in response to the ML's phenomenal ascent, which triggered a process of fundamental transformation in the communist assessment of minority communalism and its political agents manifesting in a streak of innovative texts on the matter in the party press of the late 1930s. Initially, the question of cultural consciousness surfaced anew, enabling Ranadive to arrive at a remarkable admission: "The communal outlook cannot be blown up by a mere championing of economic demands." Furthermore, the religious cleavage was centuries old; its legacy went on reproducing itself even without bourgeois interference. As yet convinced of the redeeming, universally secular quality of mainstream nationalism, Ranadive attacked the Congress strategy of limited cession to

⁵⁹⁴ See Ian Talbot, *Freedom's Cry. The Popular Dimension in the Pakistan Movement and Partition Experience in North-West India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996), 8–11, 23–31; and Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936–1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1987), 3–4. For the ML's organizational evolution see Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman. Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985), 40–2. For Nehru's appraisal, see Jawarhalal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London: Meridian Books 1951), 366.

⁵⁹⁵ This tenet had also occasioned Roy's earlier approximation to subcontinental Islam: Roy, *The Historical Role*, 100–1.

communal demands: “The existing policy of communal appeasement only stimulates the disruptive tendencies.”⁵⁹⁶

Yet, the skeptical thrust of Ranadive’s position—echoed in exhortations on the grass-roots level to steer clear from bigots and landowners as assembled in the ML⁵⁹⁷—proved untenable for ‘productive’ policy formation. With the Congress and the League negotiating for an anti-British pact in June 1939, the tenor in *National Front* reflected the fast-changing communist stance towards Muslims. Instead of exclusive community formation on the part of the minority, it was the outlook and “atmosphere” underlying the Congress’s inclusive nationalism that increasingly came under fire: “It cannot be too strongly emphasised that without removing from the Congress its semi-religious ideology and atmosphere, it is not possible to overcome the hostility of a large section of Muslims.”⁵⁹⁸ Now the INC was criticized for not doing enough to remove Muslim anxieties. Just one week later after the breakdown of INC-ML talks, Ghosh pushed the evaluative change further by demanding “a bold declaration by the Congress [...] to concede to the Muslims their communal demands.” It was no longer viable to deny the ascent of the Muslim League, which—purportedly under pressure from its new mass base—was fast becoming an anti-imperialist force, to a crucial factor on the subcontinental political stage. Under these circumstances, a united front with the League could be a “weapon for checking communal disorders and for immediately drawing even those Muslim masses which were still under communal influence into active political struggle.”⁵⁹⁹

Ghosh’s own earlier meditations had spearheaded this shift. Already in September 1938, he had problematized the ML’s “reactionary” character as an ally of imperialism, while the “Muslim masses” had essentially gone over to anti-imperialism. That they had not joined the mainstream national movement was a cultural problem on the INC’s part: Ghosh considered not the INC’s subservience to capitalist interests, but its “communal outlook” the chief obstacle to a rapprochement with Muslims. This outlook manifested in ostensibly degrading practices such as the use of the address “Shri” for Muslims. In this, he demonstrated a degree of cultural sensitivity reminiscent of early 21st-century identity

⁵⁹⁶ All quotes in B. T. Ranadive, “The Communal Problem,” *National Front*, 12 March 1939.

⁵⁹⁷ See Shamsul Huda’s address to the All-India Kisan Conference on 18 May 1938: WBIB File No. 378/28, 60.

⁵⁹⁸ “The Muslim League & Unity,” *National Front*, 12 June 1938.

⁵⁹⁹ All quotes in A. K. Ghosh, “Negotiations Versus Direct Approach,” *National Front*, 19 June 1938.

politics and called for “purging the Congress completely of Hindu atmosphere” and “going more than half way to meet the communal demands of the Muslims.”⁶⁰⁰

The logic of this approach entailed a reconsideration of the principled opposition to those earlier termed “Muslim communalists.” Leaguers increasingly lost their pariah status in communist circles. For instance, Hasrat Mohani, expelled from the CPI in 1927 because of his ML membership, was elected to the Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha’s general council on a communist ticket in 1938—while head of the local League. In the same year, the CPI also endorsed Mohani’s candidature for the Congress Working Committee, and refuted the CSP’s allegations of a “communist-communalist alliance”: Mohani was defended as a veteran trade union activist with a comprehensive record of united working-class organization.⁶⁰¹

In the same proportion as communist perception of communalism changed the need to cater to perceived Muslim group sentiments increased. *National Front* went ahead to demonstrate the latter’s desirable extent: Ghosh’s contribution mentioned above had been furnished with a caricature showing British imperialism setting its Muslim League dog on the Congress cat. A few issues later, the paper supplied a wordy excuse, apologizing for having hurt Muslim religious sentiments by casting “their” political organization into an avatar considered unclean in Islam: “We sincerely regret the pain we may have caused to some of our readers through our ignorance.”⁶⁰² The difference to the mid-1920s is telling: While in the case of religious provocation on the part of Calcutta activist Abdul Kader a public rebuke by a prominent non-communist had been needed to silence him, communism of the late 1930s had acquired a sufficient degree of empathy to indulge in ready self-criticism upon the self-admission of violation of Muslim feelings.

In his 1939 pamphlet *Communal Unity*, Ghosh averred the need for an extensive catering to what he viewed as Muslim interests:

*It must never be forgotten that the Congress has to go out of its way to win the confidence of Muslims. Special efforts must be made to enable the Muslims to grow [!] their cultural and general backwardness. Muslim grievances with regard to cow slaughter, music before mosques, etc. etc., wherever they exist should be immediately remedied.*⁶⁰³

Ghosh’s ambiguous use of “grow” probably revealed more about the thrust of his suggestions than he was aware of. It was only the INC that needed to relinquish its “Hindu

⁶⁰⁰ All quotes in A. K. Ghosh, “Congress and the Muslims,” *National Front*, 18 September 1938.

⁶⁰¹ P. C. Joshi, “Cawnpore Picks Its Pilots,” *National Front*, 4 September 1938. See also *Times of India*, 23 August 1938.

⁶⁰² *National Front*, 9 October 1938.

⁶⁰³ A. K. Ghosh, “Communal Unity,” in A. K. Ghosh, *Marxism and Indian Reality. Selected Speeches and Writings* (Delhi: Patriot Publishers 1989), 362.

outlook” and abandon all “semi-religious ceremonies at Congress functions. [...] Nothing must be done which in any way hurts the sentiments of the Muslims.” All INC publications ought to appear in Hindi and Urdu alike, indicating that the communists had grasped that the issue had long outgrown its religious limits and developed into a culturally comprehensive confrontation. Yet, even such a “correct approach [...] is not enough.” It was to be complemented by the consequent implementation of a pro-peasant program convincing the Muslim farmers of their economic and political congruence with their “Hindu brothers.”⁶⁰⁴

Ghosh has to be credited with at all reiterating the communist materialist agenda. Even so, the hierarchical inversion in his line of argument is significant. Materialist criticism no longer formed the starting point; it had become an adjunct to a policy of communal placation. It further unfolded as the frame of reference of communist campaign politics gradually shifted towards an emphasis on collectives defined by culture (as in ‘nationality’) as against those of class. In the process of theoretical churning occasioned by the rapid developments on the political stage, the sustained discovery of Muslim politics also worked to erode the classical dichotomy between (the League) leadership and mass following. Even while the former was under the sway of groups “afraid of democracy, afraid of mass organization, afraid of mass struggle,” guest contributor S. Mahmudazaffar urged in *National Front* that it was high time the communists took the League seriously:

As a matter of fact it is patently wrong to characterize the League to-day as a reactionary organisation. And the more we do so, the more we shall drive the Muslim masses away from the anti-imperialist struggle. **The Muslim League is to-day a genuine mass organisation. The Muslim masses believe that they have to win their independence from British Imperialism and from Hindu capitalism. It is our job to draw them into our struggle and clarify their political formulation. This cannot be done if we continue to insult the Muslim masses by calling them reactionaries, [...] if we continue to deny them the right to organise, if we continue to neglect their livelihood, their languages, their education, their culture.**⁶⁰⁵

This was a far cry from the long-time derogatory stance that had brushed aside the League as having been founded “on the advice of government,”⁶⁰⁶ and until recently attacked it for its “openly and aggressively splitting tactics.”⁶⁰⁷ Then again, the ML had not yet disposed over a mass following, which changed only with the shift to aggressive communal assertion in its politics. Nevertheless, in communist eyes the sheer size of its flock ennobled the League—reactionary as it might appear upon first glance—to the rightful representative of “true” mass aspirations. The space for its criticism shrank in proportion as the

⁶⁰⁴ Ghosh, “Communal Unity,” 362–3.

⁶⁰⁵ S. Mahmudazaffar, “The Communal Boulder,” *New Age* VI/1, June 1939.

⁶⁰⁶ Roy, “The Communal Strife,” *Masses of India*, October 1926.

⁶⁰⁷ Muzaffar Ahmad, “The Calcutta AICC And After,” *New Age* IV/7, December 1937. The CPI’s mentor, the CPGB, stuck to its skeptic stance: see D. N. Pritt, “India,” *Labour Monthly* 24 (1942):107.

accommodation of political, cultural, and downright communal expressions of the “Muslim masses” successively became part of the communist project responding not to subjective willfulness, but to the objective compulsions of history.

Alongside the League’s reevaluation, the emphasis on “culture” formed the most striking feature of Mahmudazaffar’s contribution. It explicated what had so far been only implicit: An affirmative approach to Muslim culture as a factor in its own right; and it was not a coincidence that it was Mahmudazaffar who went ahead with its formulation. He had been a founding member of the Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA), set up in 1936 as a literary organization of writers and poets with socialist and communist leanings. Many of its members were sympathetic towards or active in the CPI, most prominently Sajjad Zaheer (1905–1973), who rose to eminent positions in both bodies. Like Zaheer, Mahmudazaffar hailed from the upper strata of Lucknow’s respectable ashraf community, but while he didn’t immerse himself in party politics, both ultimately converged in their interpretation of the PWA’s cultural agenda.⁶⁰⁸

Superficially, the latter seemed unfit to relate to collective religious revivalism in any sympathetic way. On the contrary, unlike much of mainstream nationalism and its socialist and communist incarnations the PWA didn’t content itself with the simple Manicheism of a struggle between a ‘good’ suppressed nation and exploited ‘masses’ on the one hand and ‘evil’ foreign oppressors, landlords, and capitalists on the other. The progressive writers’ horizon recognized the need to counter “reactionary and revivalist tendencies on questions like family, religion, sex, war and society.”⁶⁰⁹ The criticism of colonialists and exploiters was to be matched by a cultural critique of indigenous society.

This approach has led some to stipulate that at its heart the PWA was not just areligious, but bitterly opposed to every form and practice of religion, let alone politicized one, as an effluence of superstition and backwardness.⁶¹⁰ Yet, the founding manifesto’s definition of “progress” contained loopholes for modernized communal mass formations. Even though writers were to wage a literary struggle against “social backwardness,” their prime task consisted in expressing “the changes taking place in Indian life.” The elaboration of this statement emphasized its vitalist and even decisionist connotations: “All that drags us

⁶⁰⁸ On the background of the PWA, see Priyamvada Gopal, “Literary Radicalism in India: The Meanings of Decolonization” (Occasional paper 2, Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, 2003), 3–7.

⁶⁰⁹ Mulk Raj Anand, “On the Progressive Writers’ Movement,” in Sudhi Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents (1936–1947)* (Calcutta: National Book Agency 1979), 20.

⁶¹⁰ See, for example, Geeta Patel, who on these grounds accuses the PWA of subscribing to Western superiority and the colonial discourse: Geeta Patel, *Lyrical Movements, Historical Hauntings: On Gender, Colonialism, and Desire in Miraji’s Urdu Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002), 97–102.

down to passivity, inaction and unreason we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organise ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive.”⁶¹¹

To what extent these formulations lent themselves to their apparent antithesis—a separatist mass movement based on communal identity—, Mahmudazaffar and, later, Zaheer would demonstrate themselves. In line with the communist editors, the former’s contribution to *National Front* deemed it self-evident to bless the actual political “changes [...] in Indian life” with the “light of reason,” with the object in question being an appreciably active, self-organized movement of Muslim religious and ‘national’ awakening. On the same token, he paid homage to the “customs” of Islam and to the creed as an “institution.” It was precisely the left’s vanguard on the literary and cultural front that supplied the CPI’s vocabulary for its looming plunge into full-blooded religio-cultural affirmation.

Again, in order to integrate assertions of Muslimness into the political discourse and soften their edge, concessions on the INC’s part were the way to go. The rationale behind this approach was intriguing and revealed a peculiar adaptation of Hegelian dialectics: Mahmudazaffar stipulated that the League would abandon its communal stance only if its mass base grasped its erroneousness—a development apparently best fostered by prodding the INC to placate the ML, that is, convincing Muslims of the falseness of their leaders’ demands by supporting them.⁶¹²

The third major prerequisite for the transformation of the communist perception of communalism was the adoption of a nationalist paradigm by the ML in 1940. While undeniably also a “bargaining chip” in the League’s struggle for the recognition as representative of collective Muslim interests on an All-India level, the notion of a separate “national” Muslim identity was not an opportunist ad-hoc invention. On the contrary, different versions had long enjoyed a measure of popularity among Muslim intellectuals. Eminent among them was the poet Mohammed Iqbal, who as president of the ML’s 1930 session had first articulated the idea that the “life of Islam as a cultural force [...] largely depends on its centralisation in a specified territory.”⁶¹³

However, it was only in the wake of the 1937 provincial elections that Muslim separatism could assume a concrete political shape. Still from a position of marginality, the

⁶¹¹ Anand, “On the Progressive Writers’ Movement,” 20–1.

⁶¹² Mahmudazaffar, “The Communal Boulder.”

⁶¹³ Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, 12; see also Singh, *The Origins of the Partition*, 57–8.

League's 1937 Patna session had sounded the attack on the INC, with Jinnah accusing the Congress of systematically destroying Muslim culture wherever it formed the government.⁶¹⁴ This new pitch reflected vigorous contemporary discussions among the Muslim elites on questions of federation and separatism. In March 1939, Liaquat Ali Khan, one of Jinnah's lieutenants, voiced the opinion that British India could be divided "in a suitable manner" if "Hindus and Moslems cannot live amicably in any other way."⁶¹⁵ Abetted by the INC's failure to implement an egalitarian social agenda, the identitary and radically anti-Congress slogans considerably enhanced the League's standing beyond its traditional upper-class constituency. Its position further improved after the outbreak of the war, when it signaled to the government its readiness to maintain peace and stability if Muslim demands were met. Viceroy Linlithgow accordingly declared that "full weight would be given to [the Muslims'] views and interests" in any negotiations on the subcontinent's political future.⁶¹⁶

Whatever Jinnah's motives were: Before the background of British support and the Congress's refusal to negotiate on his terms he decided to push ahead by expounding the "two-nation-theory" at the League's Lahore session in March 1940: "It has always been taken for granted mistakenly that the Musalmans are a minority [...] The Musalmans are not a minority. The Musalmans are a nation by any definition."⁶¹⁷ Hinduism and Islam were not so much religions as different models of social organization. The resolution demanded the constitution of "geographically contiguous units" to be

demarcated into regions which should be so constituted [...] that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the North-Western and Eastern zones of India, should be grouped to constitute 'Independent States' in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign.⁶¹⁸

As against a politically centralized India, this solution would enable both communities to live each according to their ways. Even though the resolution made no mention of religion (or Islamic law for that matter), and fundamentalist Muslims continued to attack Jinnah and the League as irreligious, its identitary tenor left few doubts about its inclination. Jinnah called on Muslims to organize "as servants of Islam," had reiterated the importance of Islamic law back at Patna, and exhorted them to "observe Islamic simplicity on all social

⁶¹⁴ Pirzada, *Foundations of Pakistan* 2:17–35.

⁶¹⁵ Quoted in Saad, *Jinnah Reinterpreted*, 360.

⁶¹⁶ Quoted in Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, 48.

⁶¹⁷ Pirzada, *Foundations of Pakistan* 2:335.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 336 (quote); see also Saad, *Jinnah Reinterpreted*, 376–8.

occasions, and to abandon all un-Islamic ceremonies and customs.”⁶¹⁹ Even so, this was a significant approximation to a communist system of coordinates. The articulation of religious identity in national (and, therefore, anti-imperialist) terms not only connected to the CPI’s united front line, but also to the strand in South Asian communist thought that long—and with increased vigor since the late 1930s—had viewed inter-communal conflicts as a problem of “national minorities.”

Typically for the odd game of contrasts characterizing much of the political activity of the Congress and the CPI since the civil disobedience movements, the INC’s response went down an entirely different path. It refused to take Jinnah and the Muslim League seriously—Nehru deemed the communal cleavage “a side issue [that] can have no real meaning in the larger scheme of things.”⁶²⁰ Hence, the ML’s political project asserted itself outside the Congress grasp. During the war, the League formed ministries in a number of provinces where INC-led governments had resigned, and kept on winning by-elections for Muslim seats. The persistent increase in the League’s standing among Muslims embarrassed the Congress approach and revealed that it had no recipe to address the challenge.

The last piece in the mosaic that completed the transformation in the communist perception of communalism was provided by the fundamental change in the evaluation of WWII after Nazi Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union. In the first war years, the CPI had staunchly opposed the “second imperialist war” (Molotov).⁶²¹ Capitalizing on Linlithgow’s “tactless obstinacy [sic!]”⁶²² of slighting the Congress upon bringing India into the war, the CPI severely criticized the INC’s initial line of extending moderate support to the war effort even while its provincial ministries had resigned in protest. The confirmation of the Congress position in the March 1940 Ramgarh resolution met with vocal resistance from the communists, who called for an immediate mass upheaval against British rule. Accordingly, Ramgarh initiated a period of repression of the CPI under the Defence of India Rules.⁶²³

Although once again exposed to a government clampdown, the party’s consistent call to utilize the war crisis for national independence won it a measure of sympathy in wider

⁶¹⁹ Pirzada, *Foundations of Pakistan* 2:324, 339 (quotes); see also Patrick French, *Liberty or Death. India’s Journey to Independence and Division* (London: HarperCollins 1997), 125.

⁶²⁰ Singh, *The Origins of the Partition*, 1. On the incompatibility of the INC’s and ML’s visions for an independent subcontinent, see French, *Liberty or Death*, 112–13, 134, 223; Sarkar, *Modern India*, 408; see also Chandra, *History of Modern India*, 319.

⁶²¹ Quoted in Roy, *The Communist International* (Bombay: 1943), 59–60.

⁶²² Sarkar, *Modern India*, 375.

⁶²³ *Party Organiser*, March 1941, CPIL-AB. See also D. N. Gupta, *Communism and Nationalism in India, 1939–45* (Delhi: Sage Publ. 2008), 261–3; and Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 185–7.

nationalist circles. However, this was to undergo a sustained change in the wake of the 1941 Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Contrary to its earlier advice to sabotage war efforts, the Comintern now called on its affiliate parties to help increase war production of the Allies. This was a tough nut to swallow for many communists, especially in the colonies. Under pressure from both the Comintern and its ‘mentor,’ the CPGB, the CPI could not maintain its anti-war stance for long.⁶²⁴

Accordingly, the Politbureau’s December 1941 resolution initiated a U-turn and heralded a phase of communist efforts to maintain political and industrial peace, for which the CPI was rewarded with legalization in July 1942. Notwithstanding the comrades’ considerable agony, the party’s commitment was now unequivocal: The war had become a “people’s war” against fascism, the “worst form of imperialism.” The subcontinent would liberate itself by participating in and helping win the war. National unity was the need of the hour; the CPI exhorted the Congress to resume the provincial ministries and form a united front with the League.⁶²⁵ This latter provision contained the missing piece in the rebranding of communal particularism as ‘Muslim nationalism’: The CPI could hardly prod the INC to recognize the League as an equal if it did not do so itself, and if the Congress counted as a movement with legitimate national aspirations, so did the League. Thus, the peculiar post-1941 constellation made it plausible for the party to acknowledge programmatically what had dominated communist meditations on the communal question since the late 1930s.

Synopsis of Chapter IV

The period from 1928 to the late 1930s witnessed a profound change in the CPI’s political and cultural situatedness. The party’s political language became current in the idioms of (religious) ‘community’ alongside, and even superseding, those of ‘class.’ A number of factors had fueled the transition. First, the realization that an exclusive focus on the categories of class and even nation had failed to resonate on a sufficient scale. This was the case especially in the countryside: The Workers’ and Peasants’ Parties had been virtually eclipsed by the time of their dissolution in the wake of the VI Comintern congress. Second,

⁶²⁴ In September 1941, Dutt had plainly instructed the CPI to support the war effort unconditionally, without any link to independence: Dutt, “Notes of the Month,” *Labour Monthly*, September 1941.

⁶²⁵ “Resolution of the Polit-Bureau,” in *Party Letter*, 15 December 1941, CPIL-AB. On the CPI’s internal disunity on the matter, see Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 191–3.

the communist approach to religion had proven out of congruence with subcontinental society. The programmatic Western failure to acknowledge the formative influence of religious ideologemes seemed at odds with the established modes of policy articulation. And third, the Comintern's 1935 shift to the united front line had opened up avenues for substantiating these insights politically. The Congress Socialist Party, an important host organization for the communists, set examples for the amalgamation of religious and radical left-wing ideologemes—tendencies reciprocated in the CPI by the meditations of K.B. Krishna and others.

The 1937 elections resulted in efforts by the Muslim League to rally Muslims under the banner of an increasingly 'nationalized' separate Muslim identity. The CPI responded with a fundamental reappraisal of the communal problem as a nationality problem. Under the "people's war" line from 1941 onwards, new political imperatives (namely inner peace to help the war effort) finalized this shift. Therefore, the transformation in the CPI's appraisal of communalism—now an essentially justified proto-nationalist sentiment—constituted a situated response to domestic and international developments. The latter converged with inner-party strands of thought and theory traditions committed to acknowledging and accommodating existing patterns of 'mass' outlook. The result was by no means illogical within a subcontinental communist universe. This turn substantially affected and simultaneously explicated what communism was to mean in a subcontinental context: The resolution of the tension between Eastern accommodation and Western rejection of religious categories as authoritative instances of community formation in favor of the former. This implicated abandoning a culturally transformative social vision.

V The Communist French New Wave. Nationality, Community, and Culture

V.1 Integral Revolution

No Muslim can look us in the face and say that we have not suffered and fought for his cause more than he has himself.
—P. C. Joshi⁶²⁶

V.1.1 Pakistan and Indian National Disunity

The release of communist cadres in May 1942 and the party's legalization two months later profoundly enhanced its scope for intervention and political activism, even if only under the self-ordained restriction of supporting the war effort. Nevertheless, CPI membership rose sharply—from a low four-digit number in 1942 to several tens of thousands five years later, excluding front organizations.⁶²⁷ Communist fortunes also profited from the INC's disappearance from the political stage for the remainder of the war after its ban following the August 1942 "Quit India" resolution. The communists opposed it tooth and nail, claiming that the movement was "NOT a struggle for National Govt. or for freedom. It is a provocative attempt by the bureaucracy to plunge the country into an orgy violence, lawlessness, and anarchy."⁶²⁸ Statements along these lines created wide-spread hostility among Congressites and contributed to the post-war rupture between INC and CPI.

For the time being, the CPI did its best to fill the resulting gap with its own brand of nationalist politics: The first ever spell of legal communist activity on subcontinental soil was also the first period marked by a self-confidently "indigenous" policy under the prevailing "people's war" line. More precisely, the groundwork done on the acceptability of collective Muslim religious and cultural demands in the late 1930s could now blossom into the sustained short-circuiting of all sorts of national and religious aspirations in the 1940s. The cornerstones of the new line, officially enacted in September 1942, had already been

⁶²⁶ P. C. Joshi, "For the Final Bid for Power. The Communist Plan Explained," in *Documents* 5:197.

⁶²⁷ Available studies differ considerably. Franda's estimate is among the most conservative ones with 1,000 in 1942 and 20,000 five years later: Franda, "Radical Policies in West Bengal," 190–1. Gopal Singh goes with the CPI's own claim to 25,000 members in 1944: Singh, *Politics of Sikh Homeland*, 124. Maitra puts membership at 15,000 by 1943 and 30,000 at the end of the war: Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 198. On the upper end of the spectrum, Kutsobin sees the membership rise from 4,000 in 1940 to 80,000 in 1945: Kutsobin, *Ajoy Kumar Ghosh*, 41, 55.

⁶²⁸ *Fight Anarchy Rally the People*, WBIB File 854/36 SL 213/1936, 132. An overview of the movement and its repression is provided by Sarkar, *Modern India*, 388–405.

laid down during illegality. An October 1940 conference of leftist students imagined independent India as a “voluntary association of regional states.”⁶²⁹ The October 1941 *Party Letter* envisaged that in a free India, all nationalities (15 were explicitly mentioned, among them Tamils, Oriyas, Gujaratis, and Western and Eastern Punjabis) were to be guaranteed equal linguistic, cultural, educational, and educative rights. The subcontinent was going through a process of awakening of nationalities; this was “the essence of the communal problem in its new form.”⁶³⁰

This insight provided the rationale for the accommodation of religious identity formation under the rubric of nationalism—however, a combination as yet unsavory to communist tastes: The document ostracized the “reactionary leadership of the minority nationalities” for demanding “separation on the basis of religion” as in the campaigns for Pakistan and, interestingly, Dravidistan. Instead, the CPI envisaged granting the right to “free and independent development” to every nationality.⁶³¹ Clearly, while the communists grappled with the articulation of communal demands in the framework of religious politics, their version of ‘scientific’ Marxism enabled them to differentiate between essence and appearance, and view the aspirations as justified by rejecting only their ‘wrong’ communal expression.

Equally importantly, the need for broad-based national unity under the “people’s war” line rendered the ML an indispensable ingredient to the communist national stew from 1942 onwards: The call for unity of INC and ML—remarkably, not of Hindus and Muslims—became the CPI’s mantra until the end of the war. To achieve it, the League’s demands, technically viewed as the “distorted” expression of the Pakistan campaign’s “healthy” essence, were to be met in order to form a sustained national coalition.⁶³² It would not merely increase war production but also, despite the separatist gist of Jinnah’s demands, go a long way towards demonstrating unity and political firmness—against Great Britain as much as against Japan, which by mid-1942 had perceptibly knocked at the subcontinent’s doorstep.

Moreover, notwithstanding its dubious concept of Pakistan the Muslim League was the only organization other than the CPI voicing the perceived aspirations of Muslim ‘nationalities.’ By spring 1942, it was well on its way to being elevated into the Muslim counterpart of the Congress, such as when General Secretary P. C. Joshi called for the

⁶²⁹ Mitra, *Indian Annual Register*, vol. 22/2, 1940 (Sibpur: Annual Register Office 1940), 415.

⁶³⁰ *Party Letter*, 5 October 1941, CPIL-AB.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Ganghadar Adhikari, “National Unity Now,” *People’s War*, 8 August 1942.

formation of Congress-League coalition ministries in the provinces. They would symbolize Hindu-Muslim unity and, of all things, defeat the “communal reactionaries who disturb communal harmony.”⁶³³ Consequently, it would be “wrong and unrealistic [!]” to dismiss the League, the “political organisation of the second largest community in our country [...] as a ‘reactionary, communal organisation’.”⁶³⁴

Joshi’s above comment had referred to the INC, which was doing just that: In the same measure that the CPI gathered momentum in its bid to devise a national solution to the communal problem, the INC refused to countenance negotiations with the League. Particularly Gandhi had given up the idea of a settlement before independence, reasoning that unity would not proceed but succeed freedom. This was quite a departure from his earlier position, continuing the game of contrasts between INC and CPI: If Roy had rejected Gandhi’s insistence on communal unity as a prerequisite for independence as over-emphasizing an artificial conflict in the 1920s, Gandhi’s resignation was now considered an “admission of bankruptcy, [...] a complete lack of faith in the people and their healthy patriotic instincts” by Ganghadar Moreshwar Adhikari, the architect of the CPI’s ‘nationality line.’⁶³⁵

On his part, Adhikari exhibited remarkable views of these “healthy [...] instincts.” In sharp contrast to established communist tradition, he came round to acknowledge that regionally, ethnically, and religiously divisive ideologies were part of the prospective revolutionary subject’s political self-assertion: “It is often stated that the masses have no communalism [...] But in actual practice, as the general national anti-imperialist upsurge spreads deeper into the masses, it finds an echo in the growing up of sectional, communal, and provincial patriotism.” However, this manifestation was mere appearance, “a distorted expression of an otherwise healthy growth, viz. the masses of the individual nationalities awakening to all-India anti-imperialist national consciousness.”⁶³⁶

In other words, what had counted as reactionary ideologies as long as their proponents could be confined to the bourgeois camp, at least in communist theorizing, grew into a matter of urgency for the vanguard of progress when it finally came round to admit that broad strata of the population were involved. Adhikari, consequential in judging phenomena according to their social location, identified two fundamentally different issues: While the ever-greedy bourgeoisie had merely been divided by growing competition for jobs and had

⁶³³ P. C. Joshi, *The Indian Communist Party. Its Policy and Work in the War of Liberation*, PCJ 1942/29-A, 18.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16, 27.

⁶³⁵ Adhikari, “National Unity Now,” *People’s War*, 8 August 1942.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*

devised communalism as a means of struggle, the spread of the national movement had politicized even the “peasant masses of the most backward nationalities and communities,” rendering the movement for independence a “rich pattern of a multinational movement.”⁶³⁷ For theoretical support, Adhikari referred back to a 1925 speech by Stalin that had predicted the emergence of a plethora of hitherto unidentified national communities in the event of a “‘revolutionary upheaval’ in India.”⁶³⁸

The extension of equal support to Congress and League therefore transcended political imperatives of “people’s war” in that it corresponded to sociological parallels: The League was “to the Muslim petty-bourgeois mass what the Indian National Congress is to the Indian masses in general.” Since both embodied the political expression of the same social forces, their aspirations had to be on the same footing:

To the Muslim masses, therefore, it appears that the Muslim League leadership is fighting not only for the complete independence of India from imperialist rule but also for freedom and equality to territorial units which are predominantly Muslim and for the protection of the rights of Muslim minorities in other provinces in relation to culture, education and language. Thus [!] the rise of the Muslim League influence cannot be regarded as a reactionary phenomenon.⁶³⁹

Therefore, Adhikari rejected the view that religious differences, or “irrational, obscurantist and fanatical elements” among Muslims were responsible for the deadlock between Congress and League. Instead, a perception of the League leadership as bourgeois and of its role towards imperialism as “somewhat analogous” to the one of the Congress would allow for a “very simple solution to the communal problem in its new phase [....] We must put before each Muslim nationalist [!] a picture of free life [!] in his homeland, in the land of his forefathers, among his fellow-nationalists.”⁶⁴⁰

Thus, the awakening community consciousness among the subcontinent’s Muslim population was not a sign of its backwardness, but of its avant-garde position, which could be welded into a “firm anti-imperialist unity” with likewise developments in other communities.⁶⁴¹

The translation of the League’s slogan into communist vocabulary occasioned several remarkably honest realizations. Adhikari’s concession that Muslims had participated in the khilafat movement largely due to the “religious pull,” and that on a general plane it had not been “the concrete democratic demands of the masses that united them in the [non-

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Quoted in *Documents* 4:485.

⁶³⁹ Adhikari, “National Unity Now,” *People’s War*, 8 August 1942.

⁶⁴⁰ “Report by G. Adhikari to the First Party Congress,” in *Documents* 4:490–1.

⁶⁴¹ Adhikari, *Pakistan and Indian National Unity. With a Foreword by Ben Bradley* (London: Labour Monthly 1942), 16.

cooperation and khilafat] struggle, but [religious] demands of the leaders” entailed dismissing as the “vulgar economic way” the classical communist view of the matter.⁶⁴² The spread of nationalism to the peasantry then had “necessarily” obsolesced overarching unity. It was arguably a related kind of necessity that channeled Adhikari’s recognition, that Muslims demanded “full and unfettered political and economic existence,” into his reassurance to Muslim communities that there would be guarantees for their “cultural rights.”⁶⁴³ The communo-national question inevitably reared its cultural head. Consequently, the resolution *On Pakistan And National Unity*, passed at the plenum of the enlarged Central Committee in September 1942 and confirmed at the 1943 I party congress, committed itself to multiculturalism by declaring that the “basic rights of the communities and [!] nationalities must be an essential part of the united national front”.⁶⁴⁴

Every section of the Indian people which has a contiguous territory as its homeland, common historical tradition, common language, culture, psychological make-up [!] and common economic life would be recognised as a distinct nationality with the right to exits [sic!] as an autonomous state within the free Indian union or federation and will have the right secede from it if it may so desire.⁶⁴⁵

Adhikari justly asserted a “radically revolutionary turn to the whole problem of communal unity.”⁶⁴⁶ The thrust to fundamentally reconfigure the communist approach to questions of community and nation in terms of culture operated even under the unitary locutionary surface of the relevant documents, which were generally far from acknowledging the Pakistan movement’s religious and separatist agenda. A rigid façade of nationality vocabulary concealed the actual dynamism and adaptability of contemporary communist theorizing on the ‘nationality question,’ which actually was very much tailored to respond to what were deemed concrete manifestations of national consciousness, and rejected “static, non-historical” points of view.⁶⁴⁷ If anything, the problem is that these new developments were welcomed and embraced rather than criticized.

To be fair to the CPI’s transformation, it needs to be emphasized that it wasn’t designed exclusively to accommodate Muslim sentiments. Even as the League’s Pakistan demand presented the most glaring manifestation of collective separatism, the communist perspective identified numerous related developments. With the spread of political consciousness to all parts of the country, the peasantry everywhere went with the (regional,

⁶⁴² Ibid., 9–10.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 13–14.

⁶⁴⁴ “On Pakistan and National Unity,” in *Documents* 4:462.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 463.

⁶⁴⁶ “Report by G. Adhikari,” 472–3.

⁶⁴⁷ Adhikari, *Pakistan and Indian National Unity*, 16.

communal, religious) bourgeoisie and supported their demand for linguistic and cultural rights. Examples “deeply rooted in the masses of the peasantry and the people” included the campaign for a separate Andhra province, for a Samyukta Karnatak, and the movement of the Oriyas.⁶⁴⁸

In his report to the 1943 I party congress in Bombay, Adhikari reiterated the core principle at work by averring that “to ignore this pride and love [for one’s own culture and language], this aspiration, of the various sections of our people, to brush them aside saying these are provincial prejudices or communal demands, is to ignore a growing reality.”⁶⁴⁹ Put differently, parochial communal demands could not be ‘real,’ and historically formative processes could not be communal prejudices. In the effort to wrest progressive surplus value from the current of history, Adhikari saw the main task in demonstrating the “outmoded ways of thinking” of traditional Congress notions of national unity and conveying these prophetic insights to the intractable “ordinary patriot.”⁶⁵⁰ “We, the Communists, are able to see our way into the future by means of our theory and ideology. [...] The slogans of our national movement [...] should be such as will take us on along with the stream of future historical development and will assist such development.”⁶⁵¹ This assertion articulated the primal communist endeavor to gain sovereignty over history by keeping up with the times and passing off its results as conforming to the communist vision.

Of course, this affected the very vision itself, and the measures to be taken to attain it. Adhikari insisted that the self-determination of nationalities be looked upon as a “political-revolutionary question, not a constitutional question.” In other words, rather than as a danger to unity the communists viewed the right of separation as the strongest “unifying bond.” There was a historical misperception behind this concept: Although the traditional (Congress) approach to prevent the subcontinent from being partitioned on religious lines had indeed proven inadequate, by acknowledging both separate identity and possible secession the communists promoted the very differences that were to lose their potential for conflict in a better society according to their own tenets.⁶⁵²

On the other hand, the allegations often leveled at the CPI’s stance *ex posteriori*—that it had misimplemented Leninist nationality policy and fueled divisive sentiments, that it was

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁴⁹ “Report by G. Adhikari,” 474–5.

⁶⁵⁰ Adhikari, *Pakistan and Indian National Unity*, 5.

⁶⁵¹ “Report by G. Adhikari,” 476.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 498; see also Modak, *Dynamics of the National Question*, 31.

guilty of a “mechanical” transfer of Soviet theorems,⁶⁵³ which had been “of course wrong”⁶⁵⁴ and in “total disregard of Marxism-Leninism”⁶⁵⁵—tend to ignore the contemporary setting. Notably the short-circuiting of communal and national aspirations was not necessarily *wrong*. Lenin had time and again insisted on pondering the “concrete, historical, specific features of the national movements.” This the CPI had assiduously done when the League adopted the two-nation-theory. In view of the Pakistan campaign’s “multi-class character,” marked by a “heightened consciousness of Islamic brotherhood” in which, in Ian Talbot’s words, “individuals thought of them as Muslims first and then Punjabis, Pathans and Bengalis,” their conclusions were not unrealistic.⁶⁵⁶ Furthermore, subcontinental communists were not the only ones to subscribe to dubious concepts of nationality. In 1948, long after the end of the CPI’s ‘nationality period,’ the Soviet journal *Bolshevik* endorsed the struggle of Kashmiri Muslims against the Hindu maharaja on the grounds that they were “an oppressed nation in their own country.”⁶⁵⁷

Before this background, British assessments of the communists as “first and last opportunists,”⁶⁵⁸ whose advances towards the ML were “little more than a temporary expedient to sustain the smokescreen of the ‘unity campaign’,” demonstrate the low degree of understanding of the modalities of communist policy formulation.⁶⁵⁹ Rather than grasping for every straw, communist dedication to apparently quaint “national” movements derived from the conviction to execute the laws of history, and hence to advance their own cause together with the one they championed.

⁶⁵³ Ghosh, *The Communist Party*, 209.

⁶⁵⁴ “An Interview with B.T. Ranadive,” in Chandra, *Essays on Indian Nationalism*, 215.

⁶⁵⁵ Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 271; for communist regrets, see Ghate (interviewee), 212–16; and Surjeet, “Introduction,” in *Documents* 1:LIH. Yet, there are also voices justifying the party’s line; see Ranadive, “The Role Played by Communists,” 26–8, and Namboodiripad, *The Communist Party in Kerala: Six Decades of Struggle and Advance* (Delhi: National Book Center 1994), 86–8.

⁶⁵⁶ Talbot, *Freedom’s Cry*, 51. The communists could even bank on an old remark by Lenin that linked the “awakening of nationalism among the oppressed nations” in Asia to the growth of the “Mohammedan movement”: Lenin, “On the Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” 495.

⁶⁵⁷ M. Alexeyev, “The Indian Union and Pakistan after the Partition of India,” *Bolshevik*, 15 June 1948, PCJ 1949/23, 8.

⁶⁵⁸ Home/Poll/1944 Nr. 7/5 K.W., 59–60.

⁶⁵⁹ *Communist Survey—January–March, 1943*, WBIB File 573/37 SL 140/1937, 239.

V.1.2 Celebrating Muslimness

While the subcontinent's Muslims were not alone in being embraced by the communists, it was what was deemed the awakening of "Muslim nationalities" where communist communophilic euphoria really came into its own. 'Euphoria,' because the party's commitment underwent a qualitative change around 1943, when the task to expound the position on Pakistan and self-determination passed from Adhikari to Sajjad Zaheer, an accomplished Urdu writer, founder member of the left-wing Progressive Writers' Association, and the most outstanding Muslim intellectual in the party.⁶⁶⁰ It was under his guidance that the acculturation of communism to the subcontinent's Islam reached its apex.

Zaheer expanded Adhikari's approach in two ways: First, by clarifying the communist stance on Pakistan—the "demand for self-determination" of which was "a just, progressive and national demand," and even "the positive expression of [...] freedom and democracy."⁶⁶¹ Second, he channeled this unequivocal political commitment into a comprehensive turn towards Muslim culture and religion. This was in unison with General Secretary Joshi's simultaneously implemented (see chapter V.1.4) vision of an *integral revolution*.⁶⁶² It constituted an undertaking to achieve communist hegemony over, and hence necessitated acculturation to, the social and cultural dimensions of the subalterns' life in preparation of the final take-over. Along with Joshi, Zaheer went about to rethink and overhaul traditional political and social commitments by fashioning the communist course of action in analogy to Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' (although they were in all probability ignorant of it). Gramsci had polemicized that in advanced capitalist societies, communists could not achieve victory by clinging to the "fatalism" and "economism" of Marxist historical materialism. Unable to revolutionize society through a quick strike in a "war of maneuver," they needed to entrench themselves in civil (as against bourgeois political) society and conduct a "war of position."⁶⁶³ This required that the communist analysis and message conformed to the non-economic life-world of the revolutionary subject, too. Yet, while for Gramsci the latter had been the proletariat, on the subcontinent

⁶⁶⁰ See Gupta, *Communism and Nationalism*, 241.

⁶⁶¹ Zaheer, *A Case for Congress League Unity* (Bombay: People's Publishing House 1944), I.

⁶⁶² See Bipan Chandra, "P. C. Joshi: A Political Journey," *Mainstream* 46, no. 1 (2007): 2–3

⁶⁶³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1971), 235–9. For representative references to "hegemony," which encompass the varying meanings of the term as used by Gramsci throughout his writings, see *ibid.*, 57, 106, 239, and 263. On the peculiarities of the CPI's approach, see Chandra, "P. C. Joshi"; and Anil Rajimwale, "P. C. Joshi and Indian Cultural Renaissance," *Mainstream* 45, no. 25 (2007), on <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article157.html> (last checked on 14 December 2014).

the only eligible population segment with appreciable clout were the ‘masses.’ Their politicization along communal lines henceforth manifested itself not only in political demands, but also in direct religio-cultural accommodation and affirmation. Zaheer’s task consisted in growing “the seed of a genuine urge” recognized by Adhikari.⁶⁶⁴

Therefore, he first operationalized Adhikari’s discovery of a ‘national’ content of communalism as an apology of much of subcontinental Muslims’ recent political history. Already the formation of the League early in the 20th century had been a reflection of the fact that the Hindu-Muslim problem was “not the creation of imperialism.” Consequently, Zaheer traced the ML’s demand for separate representation to the ever “backward and undeveloped” condition of the Muslim community as a whole.⁶⁶⁵ In the khilafat movement, “the Muslims” had fought, “though in a vague and still undefined manner, for the freedom of the Muslim peoples.” While Adhikari’s account had admitted rather than celebrated the preponderance of religious motivations, Zaheer went a step further by connecting past political assertions of Muslims directly to the millenarian goal of national freedom. He concluded that the “progress of the Muslims and the Muslim League, from separate electorates [...] to self-determination and Pakistan, is [...] the growing expression of the various stages of national, democratic and anti-imperialist urge” of India’s “Muslim peoples.”⁶⁶⁶

Constructing and identifying with a glorious Muslim past chimed with long-standing traditions in parts of the CPI. Under the auspices of the East Pakistan Renaissance Society, an inter-party meeting including Congressites, Leaguers, and communists was held at Calcutta to debate the question of Pakistan in September 1943. Muzaffar Ahmad’s “most inspiring contribution” unequivocally extolled “the old and brave fights waged and led by Muslims against imperialism, their sacrifice, courage, suffering in the Wahabi, Moplah and *Khilafat* movements and called on those present to live up to these traditions.”⁶⁶⁷ The pronounced religious character of their anti-imperialist militancy either did not disturb Ahmad’s appraisal, or—more probably—even was at the very heart of his embrace. Typically for Ahmad’s perception of Muslim resistancy, its most assertive manifestations were unfit for adversely affecting inter-communal relations.

On his part, Zaheer cemented the link between a Muslim identity and anti-imperialist resistancy by considering the execution of their subversive national destiny a duty of all

⁶⁶⁴ Adhikari, *Pakistan and Indian National Unity*, 22, 27 (quotes).

⁶⁶⁵ All quotes in Zaheer, “Muslim League and Indian Freedom,” *People’s War*, 23 January 1944.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁷ All quotes in *People’s War*, 7 November 1943.

Muslims worth their salt. In a commemoration of the passing of the Pakistan resolution, Zaheer decreed that “the slogan of Pakistan is as dear to the heart of a Muslim, as that of Swaraj to those under Congress influence.”⁶⁶⁸ Not even the League’s view of the CPI as just another Hindu party could disquiet communist dedication. In July 1943, *People’s War* proudly printed a statement of ML leader Liaqat Ali Khan (whom the paper invariably referred to with his honorary title, “Nawabzada”) commending the CPI for “trying to convince the Hindu masses of the justness of the Muslim demand of Pakistan” and hoping that it would succeed in converting “the Hindus” to their views.⁶⁶⁹ Earlier in the same year, *People’s War* had printed a letter to the editors encouraging both “Muslim patriots” and communists to persist against hostile feelings between the communities and continue the campaign for unity—“you work in the Hindu masses [...] and we will also fight among the Muslim masses for the same cause.” The paper urged “all patriots to read the letter over and over again.”⁶⁷⁰

To be sure, characterizations of the CPI as a Hindu party were not unfounded. The first post-legalization *Party Letter* had contained a questionnaire intended to apprise the upper echelons about the local units’ activities and composition. Apart from women, students, and youths, Muslims also were a category of interest. The results were sobering: Only five per cent of party members were Muslim—even less than in the INC.⁶⁷¹ Simultaneously, the party undertook to expand its constituency among Muslims active in the League, such as by setting up a communist-inspired “Progressive League” with a socialist agenda inside the ML. However, as the latter largely resisted infiltration attempts even as the deputed communists ardently subscribed to the League’s identitary thrust, in the process becoming “more Muslim than the Muslims themselves,” by 1945 all the CPI had to show were a few sympathizers and scattered local cells within the League.⁶⁷²

As if to compensate for these deficits, the party responded with heightened appeals to the religious and cultural aspects of Muslim political aspirations and by approximating them to the communist project. On the occasion of the League’s Karachi session in December 1943, the CPI asserted that Muslims had “every right to demand” from the League, “on the

⁶⁶⁸ Zaheer, “Pakistan: Child Of India’s Freedom Urge,” *People’s War*, 19 March 1944.

⁶⁶⁹ “All-India Muslim League Secretary Wishes Success To The Communist Party,” *People’s War*, 4 July 1943.

⁶⁷⁰ “Letter To Communists From A Muslim Patriot,” *People’s War*, 28 February 1943.

⁶⁷¹ *Communist Survey—July-October, 1943*, WBIB File 573/37 SL 140/1937, 255; see also *Party Letter*, 4 July 1943, CPIL-AB.

⁶⁷² Ghate (interviewee), 214 (quote). On CPI successes inside the ML, see *A Note on the Punjab Communist Party and Its Allied Bodies from April, 1944, to March, 1945*, Home/Poll/1945 Nr. 7/1 & K.W., 5–6; see also Home/Poll/1944 Nr. 7/5 K.W., 25; and *Party Letter*, 27 November 1943, 1, CPIL-AB.

basis of the very Islamic traditions of which you are rightly [!] proud,” that “rich and poor be treated alike.”⁶⁷³ The communists had even more ontologizing clichés in store, which came remarkably close to ideologemes of the colonial order: In the runner-up to the 1944 talks between Gandhi and Jinnah, Joshi averred that the acceptance of Pakistan would make India stronger, as independent and strong Muslim states on the frontiers would constitute its “best defence.”⁶⁷⁴ Apparently, the party had discovered its pet ‘martial race,’ whose allegedly superior militancy would translate into fierce determination to keep the subcontinent safe from outsiders.

Communist empathy, however, did not remain confined to the level of declarations. In mid-1943, *People's War* made concrete plans for an Urdu edition of the paper to meet the needs of the “Muslim patriots”; in 1944, it introduced a weekly rubric, “Muslim World,” under which news items from Muslims politics and culture were published for the better part of the ensuing two years.⁶⁷⁵ *People's War* itself turned towards promoting Muslim culture. The editorial of the 17 September 1944 issue consisted of a kitschy poem-pledge vowing to build “a new heaven in a new India” under the heading “I'D Mubarak.” Next to the piece were printed pictures of Muslims in traditional attire with captions along the lines of “heritage of beauty from the Muslim past.” The poem's author was Kaifi Aimi, a young poet with strong left leanings who had undertaken to convey the paper's Eid greetings to its Muslim readers. Furthering the communists' heady identification with everything Muslim, he wrote of the “Crescent” that would soon rise over the “minarets of Victory and Liberty,” and looked forward to the celebration of next year's Eid in Pakistan, a “land of good omen.”⁶⁷⁶

The communists themselves certainly did their part to actively ensure the realization of this “omen”—which was an affair of the League, not the CPI, and had been termed misguided at the 1943 party congress. Yet, communists prominently participated at the 1944 Pakistan Day celebrations, conveyed fraternal greetings at rallies, and even staged them on their own: The CPI's Bombay unit, not satisfied with the ML's efforts, organized several gatherings on Pakistan Day, inviting veterans of the khilafat movement (who duly emphasized the glory of past Muslim struggles), and called on the audience to buy Muslim

⁶⁷³ “Patriots of the Muslim League!,” *People's War*, 19 December 1943, 8.

⁶⁷⁴ Joshi, “They Must Not Fail,” *People's War*, 20 August 1944.

⁶⁷⁵ *Communist Survey—July-October, 1943*, WBIB File 573/37 SL 140/1937, 255. Neglect on the CPI's part and wartime paper shortages eventually combined to scrap the plans for an Urdu edition of *People's War*.

⁶⁷⁶ All quotes in “I'D Mubarak,” *People's War*, 17 September 1944. Aimi was a favorite with the communists, regularly appearing in *People's War*.

League flags from League volunteers at the venue.⁶⁷⁷ In the spirit of the Central Committee's injunction to party members to "unite all the Muslims in the Muslim League," in some instances support for the ML went as far as encouraging involvement where its organization was weak or missing.⁶⁷⁸ Thus, in October 1944 a Juku from Bankura wrote to Niru Banerjee in Calcutta, reporting that there was "nothing known as 'League'" in his district. However, he was in the process of setting up contact with "some Muslim youths," presumably in order to awaken them to the ML's campaign, or even to organize them himself.⁶⁷⁹

Such episodes from the party base rather render it difficult to conceive that advances towards the League could also go too far for the taste of the CPI leadership.⁶⁸⁰ Yet, in a rare case of excessive zeal, the communist All-India Student Federation's (AISF) Punjab section managed to achieve just that in its cooperation with the League's student wing, the Muslim Student Federation (MSF). For the provision of food relief for famine-stricken Bengal, both bodies had edged closer in 1944, which had required "utmost tact" on the part of the AISF. However, its leadership exceeded its measure of discreteness when it struck a secret deal with the MSF in November 1944, recognizing it as the sole representative of Muslim students and being recognized vice versa as the sole representative of "nationalist" ones. This caused some uproar in the AISF and the parent party because of both excessive secrecy and the implied unconditional support for Pakistan—which, however, was considered problematic only insofar as it would alienate many Hindu students.⁶⁸¹

Support of the MSF persisted as it engaged in increasingly violent altercations with the INC-affiliated All-India Student Congress (AISC) towards the end of 1945. With the AISF's helpless calls to conduct discussions on Pakistan "subject to the elementary rules of decency and democracy"⁶⁸² going unheeded, neither a "rowdy demonstration" against nationalist Muslims in the INC on the part of the Aligarh MSF nor even "crudest anti-Hindu speeches" of League politicians at MSF gatherings could elicit communist criticism. Conversely, Nehru alone was attacked for labeling the MSF "communalist."⁶⁸³

⁶⁷⁷ "Pakistan Day Reports," *People's War*, 26 March 1944.

⁶⁷⁸ "On Our Tasks on the Muslim Front," in *Party Letter*, 27 November 1943, 1, CPIL-AB.

⁶⁷⁹ *Letter from "Juku" to Niru Banerjee*, 29 October 1944, WBIB File 35/26 SL 266/1926, 64–5.

⁶⁸⁰ Jyoti Basu (interviewee), recorded by Shikha Mukherjee and Usha Prasad (interviewers) 2003, 44.

⁶⁸¹ *A Note on the Punjab Communist Party and Its Allied Bodies from April, 1944, to March, 1945*, Home/Poll/1945 Nr. 7/I & K.W., 14 (quote); see also *Communist Survey—July–October, 1943*, WBIB File 573/37 SL 140/1937, 255; and Stein, *A History of India*, 348.

⁶⁸² WBIB File 35/26(i) Nadia SL 328/1926, 118–20.

⁶⁸³ All quotes in "Communist Students and Elections," in *Party Letter*, 4 December 1945, CPIL-AB.

In such an atmosphere, it was not surprising to see the Moplah rebellion reappear as well. On the occasion of the uprising's impending 25th anniversary, P. C. Joshi paid tribute to the courage and determination of the 1921 rebels during a tour in Malabar in March 1946.⁶⁸⁴ A couple of months later, Namboodiripad authored a commemorating article in *Deshabhimani*, the local communist organ: The CPI remembered "wholeheartedly and respectfully the great bravery and revolutionary skill" of the insurgents, who had risen against the "Satanic rule" (!) of the British. Namboodiripad reserved his "utter endless disgust" for the reprisals during the British counter-insurgency campaign, which could be compared to only "the bestiality of fascism." The Congress's allegation of religious fanaticism had been motivated by cowardice and the desire to stay aloof.⁶⁸⁵ While Namboodiripad had remained conspicuously silent on the motives or deeds of the rebels, his general secretary later filled the gap: The "Moplah peasants of Malabar, rising spontaneously against landlord and imperialist oppression battled fearlessly showing marvels of heroism, capacity for struggle and sacrifice."⁶⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the rebellion ought to be called not "Moplah rebellion," but "Malabar rebellion," since "the glories of 1921 were not the property of the Moplahs alone but of the district." All Keralites ought to study the "historical lessons" of the great struggle.⁶⁸⁷

Heretics

The enthusiastic embrace of Muslim League politics and cultural themes of collective Muslimness naturally affected communist stances towards other politically active Muslims. The ML's line, identified as the 'correct' one, became the be-all and end-all for other Muslims, even those whose articulation of anti-imperialism had earlier attracted communist sympathy. The Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam was a case in point. Their 1944 reappraisal by Zaheer, and his labeling of them as "progressive," reaffirmed that communist benevolence extended to sectarian strife and religious persecution in the 'correct,' that is, anti-imperialist political context.⁶⁸⁸

What wrought disfavor upon the Ahrars, however, was their reluctance to subscribe to Muslim nationalism, and their opposition towards the ML. When the Ahrars joined an anti-League (that held the ministry) block in Bengal in early 1944, the communist pitch shifted

⁶⁸⁴ Home/Poll/1946 Nr. 5/40, 2, 15.

⁶⁸⁵ All quotes in Namboodiripad, "Call of 1921 and the Warning," Home/Poll/1946 Nr. 5/40, 17–18.

⁶⁸⁶ Joshi, "For the Final Bid for Power," 147–8.

⁶⁸⁷ Namboodiripad, "Call of 1921 and the Warning," 18.

⁶⁸⁸ Zaheer, *Light on League-Unionist Conflict*, PCJ CPI 50, 15–6, 38.

perceptibly: They preferred Fascist powers to colonial rule, and instead of supporting the League's demand for self-determination they advocated an obscure "divine kingdom."⁶⁸⁹ Things became worse when Ahrar leader Hafiz Ali Bahadur Khan labeled the League "un-Islamic." Determined to ward off such allegations, *People's War* responded not by asserting the merits of the ML's agenda, but by accusing the Ahrars of themselves betraying their vision of a "divine kingdom of Islam." In addition, the paper assuagingly printed statements from high-ranking Muslim Leaguers denying their stance being un-Islamic by referring to rulings of the ulema.⁶⁹⁰ This episode closed the Ahrar chapter for the CPI.

As only "the growing influence of the League means growth of democracy among the Muslims," it was not surprising that the CPI was just as reserved towards organized nationalist Muslims as the ML.⁶⁹¹ A report on the 1944 Delhi Muslim Nationalist Conference, a gathering of nationalist (that is, non-separatist) Muslims of all shades, criticized the proceedings as "vitiating in as much as [the conference] distrusted Jinnah and was biased [sic!] against the League." The Muslim Majlis, constituted at the gathering to arrive at a settlement with the Congress on its own if Jinnah failed, met with communist rejection. Its approach fostered disunity and "reaction" (!) within the Muslim camp.⁶⁹²

Instead, Muslim nationalists were urged to be "realists" in the same fatalist way as the CPI: "They must see that the great majority of the Muslims of India are rallied under the leadership of the Muslim League [that] has come forward as the champion of the anti-imperialist aspirations of the Muslim people."⁶⁹³ Note the singular. Accordingly, the Azad Muslim Board, formed out of the ranks of Congress Muslims and independent Muslim nationalists whose avowed objectives was to counter separatist Muslim League propaganda among Muslims, met with communist condemnation. Adhikari echoed the League paper *Dawn's* interpretation by labeling the undertaking a disruptive and "provocative form of anti-League 'mass contact'."⁶⁹⁴ Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's initiative for a movement of nationalist Muslims in mid-1945 was likewise greeted with skepticism as it would be a step towards an "anti-League Muslim front." The nationalist Muslims' efforts would be better directed towards explaining the League's position to Congressites.⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁸⁹ "Ahrars Join Up with Huque," *People's War*, 23 April 1944.

⁶⁹⁰ Girish Mathur, "Pan-Islam Bogey, Who Raises It?," *People's War*, 5 November 1944.

⁶⁹¹ Zaheer, *Light on League-Unionist Conflict*, 25.

⁶⁹² "Azad Muslims at the Cross-Roads," *People's War*, 21 May 1944; see also Zaheer, "I Meet Muslim Patriots," *People's War*, 12 December 1943.

⁶⁹³ "Whither Muslim Majlis?," *People's War*, 9 July 1944.

⁶⁹⁴ Adhikari, "Week in Review," *People's War*, 4 February 1945.

⁶⁹⁵ *People's War*, 5 August 1945.

Mock Debates

Considerations of pro-League loyalty dominated even the CPI's reactions to the most glaring administrative outrage of the League during the Second World War: The Bengal ministry's failure to implement effective anti-famine measures as the disaster unfolded from summer 1943 onwards.⁶⁹⁶ At the grass-roots level at least, criticism had been quite outspoken, with an activist from Bankura confessing to a comrade in Calcutta in September 1943 that "I think we are supporting the League blindly."⁶⁹⁷ Another party worker vented her conviction that "the Muslim League will do nothing for the country," indicting a measure of disillusionment with the League and skepticism towards the CPI's leniency towards it.⁶⁹⁸ Yet, even grass-roots criticism pertained to the question of supporting an obviously incapable administration rather than to the issues of religion and nationality.

Conversely, the latter pervaded—and tempered—even managerial criticisms from upper party ranks. B. T. Ranadive commented that the League ministry's inability to provide relief to the "death-stricken sons of Bengal" was even less comprehensible because of the "millions of Muslims" affected.⁶⁹⁹ This allows the suspicion that he might have been more sympathetic if the government had concentrated its efforts on starving Muslims. Zaheer opposed the central government's intention to send officials to take matters in their own hands as illegitimate encroachment on indigenous self-government. Instead, he contented himself with bemoaning that the good name of the League was "dragged into the mire."⁷⁰⁰ After all, the crucial matters in a communist universe were self-determination and national unity, for the attainment of which even a veritable cataclysm could be countenanced. Although overcoming the famine through the combined efforts of INC and ML was desirable, S. G. Sardesai cynically reckoned that in doubt a couple of million fatalities would achieve the same result: "Through the common suffering of the Hindu and Muslim masses of Bengal will emerge an all-India Hindu-Muslim unity which so many other issues have till now failed to bring."⁷⁰¹

⁶⁹⁶ The famine has been diligently researched in J. N. Uppal, *Bengal Famine of 1943. A Man-Made Tragedy* (Delhi: Atma Ram 1984); for a recent study of the contribution of colonial policies to the disaster, see Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York: Basic Books 2010).

⁶⁹⁷ Letter from S. K. Mukherjee (Bankura) to Ramani Sirkai (Calcutta), 6 September 1943, WBIB File 35/26 SL 266/1926, 23.

⁶⁹⁸ Letter from Salima Babu (Calcutta) to Salima Khan Panni (Mymensingh), 5 October 1943, WBIB File 35/26(i) Mymensingh SL 317/1926, 120.

⁶⁹⁹ Ranadive, "Notes," *People's War*, 19 September 1943, 2.

⁷⁰⁰ Zaheer, "League Ministries—Whither?," *People's War*, 10 October 1943.

⁷⁰¹ S. G. Sardesai, "Notes," *People's War*, 5 September 1943.

It was not until 1946, when communal tensions were building up to a dangerous level, that an apparently serious challenge to the CPI's approach to the 'nationality question' emerged. Significantly, it emanated not from party ranks, but from CPGB theoretician Rajani Palme Dutt. His most recent oeuvre on the subcontinent, 1940's *India Today*, had indicated the low impact he attributed to "Communal Divisions" by dedicating not even 20 pages (out of over 500) to the issue. Dutt reiterated the classic Marxist view: The "so-called 'communal organisations' are in reality small ultra-reactionary groups, dominated by large landlord and banker interests playing for the support of the British Government."⁷⁰² While joining in the criticism of the INC's Hindu tinge, Dutt deprecated the "artificial division of the single Indian people into two 'nations'".⁷⁰³

Skeptical towards Adhikari's brand of nationality politics all along, he had temporarily acquiesced to the CPI's line and urged the British government to negotiate with "all political sections and leaders" on the subcontinent instead of only the Congress.⁷⁰⁴ Yet, Adhikari's meditations had been considerably radicalized by Zaheer; emergency "people's war" policies were not supposed to continue after the war; and finally, alarmed by a bitter letter from Nehru complaining that the communists had become "full blooded supporters of Jinnah's demands," Dutt came out in 1946 to accuse Jinnah (who had rejected a plebiscite on Pakistan in Muslim majority areas) of pursuing "a reactionary obstructive tactic which plays into the hands of imperialism to [...] prevent a democratic solution of the Indian question."⁷⁰⁵ This was coined on the CPI, for which Z. A. Ahmad had insisted on terming a plebiscite "undemocratic" in a discussion with a consternated Nehru, who thereupon had written to Dutt.⁷⁰⁶

However, even while attacking the CPI's nationality policy Dutt underlined his own agreement with the communist take on emancipation. He himself subscribed to the "genuine *national*"—not just anti-imperialist—"content concealed behind the Pakistan demand."⁷⁰⁷ (emphasis added) His dismissal of the League's separatist campaign as "basically opposed to the programme of national self-determination" directly challenged Zaheer's obverse

⁷⁰² Dutt, *Modern India* (London: Victor Gollancz 1940), 413–14.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, 422.

⁷⁰⁴ Rajani Palme Dutt, "Notes of the Month," *Labour Monthly* 24/September (1942): 266.

⁷⁰⁵ Rajani Palme Dutt, "India and Pakistan," *Labour Monthly* 28/March (1946): 86. On Dutt's stance to the CPI's nationality policy see also Callaghan, "The Heart of Darkness," 271; for Nehru's letter, see Vinita Damodaran, *Broken Promises. Popular Protest, Indian Nationalism and the Congress Party in Bihar, 1935–1946* (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1992), 311.

⁷⁰⁶ *Interview of Jawarhalal Nehru by Z. A. Ahmad*, 28 June 1945, PCJ 1945/9, 4.

⁷⁰⁷ All quotes in Dutt, "India and Pakistan," 87–9. For the 1945 discussion with Nehru see *Interview of Jawarhalal Nehru by Z. A. Ahmad*, 4.

appraisal, but otherwise merely rephrased the CPI's technically still authoritative 1943 resolution on Pakistan. Both agreed that the ML's theme was religious, not nationalist, and as a "communal organisation" it emphasized the "political backwardness" of Muslims. Even Dutt's concrete recommendation was similar to Adhikari's: A "broad united national front for Indian independence" with "wide sections of the Moslem League."⁷⁰⁸

His intervention caused considerable uproar among subcontinental communists, many among whom felt relegated to the receiving end of colonial relations of dominance. This testifies to the degree to which the CPI had become immersed in and convinced of its culturally situated implementation of the "nationality policy." In its course, the avowed intention to steer clear of cultural matters as impartial midwife of an 'objective' process of history had been transformed into heady alignment with a communal awakening 'from below.'

To an extent, this was true even for the accuser. The CPI's reply that Dutt had overemphasized both the ML's "communal and un-democratic aspect" and ignored that the "freedom-loving Muslims are behind the League" on the one hand illustrated the party's firm commitment. On the other, it preached to the converted: Dutt himself agreed that the League was the "main **freedom** organization of the Muslims."⁷⁰⁹ Accordingly, he identified "strong popular democratic currents" within its fold following the ML's sweep of the 1946 polls (in which it won 76 percent of the Muslim vote and almost 90 percent of the Muslim seats).⁷¹⁰ And eventually, Dutt demonstrated his own consonance with the CPI's nationality concept by admitting the "*multi-national* character of the Indian people," which made for great differences between "a Pathan, a Bengali and a Sikh [!]."⁷¹¹

V.1.3 The "Sikh People"

In fact, by 1946 Muslims were not the only religious collective sanctified with a national aura anymore. It was only consequential that the rationale that had led the CPI to refashion

⁷⁰⁸ All quotes in Dutt, "India and Pakistan," 89–90.

⁷⁰⁹ "On Palme Dutt's Article 'India and Pakistan' in the LABOUR MONTHLY, March 1946," in *Party Letter*, 12 May 1946, PCJ 1946/5. The same piece also contained efforts of the CPI's leadership to pour oil on troubled water by underlining that Dutt had only written for the British public. The call to observe "comradely" standards of discussion indicated that feelings ran high and also pointed to a degree of rudeness in the party's debating culture.

⁷¹⁰ Rajani Palme Dutt, "A New Chapter in Divide and Rule," in *Documents* 5:246.

⁷¹¹ Rajani Palme Dutt, *Freedom for India: The Truth about the Cabinet Mission's Visit*, PCJ 1946/1, 16.

Muslim communal separatism into the right of “Muslim nationalities” to self-determination manifested itself in other instances as well. Taking up demands voiced notably by the Shiromani Akali Dal, the 1942 resolution *On Pakistan and Indian National Unity* had also counted the Sikhs among the diverse nationalities constituting India.⁷¹²

The dynamic unfolded by the Pakistan campaign had awoken fears of Muslim domination in the Punjab (a Muslim majority province) in some Sikh quarters. The SAD, the well-established political arm of institutionalized Sikhdom hitherto representing standard communalist politics centering on “adequate representation” for Sikhs, responded by reformulating its agenda in terms of nationhood similar to those of the ML.⁷¹³ Alarmed especially by Sir Stafford Cripps’s readiness to consider the League’s demands during his 1942 mission to British India, and lest the Sikhs receive the short end of the stick in the conflict between Muslim League and Congress, the SAD raised the demand for “Azad Punjab,” or “Khalistan”—a Sikh state in central Punjab. In case Pakistan materialized, the Punjab was to be partitioned in such a way that districts where the Sikh population was concentrated were to come under a separate administrative unit. For the achievement of a Sikh majority, the scheme envisaged large-scale population transfers.⁷¹⁴

It was in response to this plan that Adhikari’s resolution had elevated Sikhs into a nationality. Yet, in view of the fierce hostilities between SAD and ML the question remained how this provision was to be realized together with the League’s Pakistan demand. Moreover, the problem already began with the CPI’s Punjab unit, whose sorry state did not allow for an effective implementation of this (or any other) policy. Reflecting the province’s make-up, the rural-urban divide also exacted its toll on the communist movement. Whereas the “official” CPI cells had been “largely urban, industrial and intellectual,” the Ghadr-based KKP, eventually forced to merge with the CPI in a “shot-gun marriage” under Comintern pressure in 1942, was “essentially rural, peasant-based and anti-intellectual.”⁷¹⁵

Under these circumstances, implementing the political strategy for the Punjab—replacing the loyalist, agriculturalist, but supra-communal Unionist Party government with a united front of the INC, the CPI, the League, and the SAD—became even more difficult. To

⁷¹² “On Pakistan and National Unity,” 463.

⁷¹³ See Gulati, *The Akalis: Past and Present*, 50–6, and Singh, *Akali Movement (1926–1947)*, 118, 234–6.

⁷¹⁴ Hari Singh, *Agrarian Scene in British Punjab*, vol. 2, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle* (Delhi: People’s Publishing House 1984), 7–10; see also Kirpal Singh, “The Cripps Mission of 1942 First Perception of Sikh State,” *Sikh Review*, no. 369 (1984): 9–10.

⁷¹⁵ Singh, *Politics of Sikh Homeland*, 57 (quotes), 70; Home/Poll/1945 Nr. 7/I & K.W. *A Note on the Punjab Communist Party and its Allied Bodies from April, 1944, to March, 1945*, 2–3. On the headaches this caused the CPI leadership, see “Open Letter to all Party Members in the Punjab,” in *Party Letter*, 12 July 1943, CPIL-AB; see also Home/Poll/1940 Nr. 216.

begin with, the many quarrels and conflicting tendencies inside the Punjab CPI made for a heterogeneous show of the party. Cooperation with and antagonism towards the Akalis were never far apart, and often determined by the CPI-KKP rift. Matters were further complicated by the SAD's preference of the Unionists over the ML, and the CPI's support for the Pakistan demand (coupled with the rejection of Khalistan by leading Punjabi communists such as Harkishan Singh Surjeet) didn't help in winning over the Akalis, either. Communist involvement in intrigues against the SAD leadership ultimately prompted the latter to declare the CPI enemies of the Sikhs out to destroy their community and culture.⁷¹⁶

Yet, on this point the Akalis erred profoundly. It was not just that the CPI could not afford to antagonize the Sikhs as a whole given its persistent lack of success in the organization of Muslim peasants as compared to Sikh Jats. The party itself had nothing to do with an anti-Sikh outlook, rather the contrary, as is borne out by the gradual conversion of the Punjab Kisan Sabha into a Sikh-only body.⁷¹⁷ Notwithstanding political differences inside the party there was unity on at least one point:

That they should cease to offend Sikh religious susceptibilities [...] [and] do anything possible to show their devotion to the Panth. The result was that no [...] unreligious speeches were made, [...] religious festivals were celebrated and religious articles published in Communist papers.⁷¹⁸

Rather than a consensus enforced by central party directives, this was part of Punjab communism's heritage, most pronounced in its rural wing. The old KKP had from an early stage fused socialist ideas with an egalitarianism articulated in Sikh terms, and succeeded to a certain degree in creating a symbiotic relationship between both. The free use of Sikh symbols in KKP contexts bore testimony to this. For Santokh Singh, an old Ghadrte and the Moscow-trained first editor of *Kirti*, there had been no contradiction between daily prayer and a religious outlook on the one hand and the practice of Marxism on the other. The urban comrades distinguished themselves by a similarly empathic strand. For example, their leader Sohan Singh Josh was the first to publicly advocate the Azad Punjab scheme at a rally in February 1943.⁷¹⁹

Yet, the deadlock over Pakistan convinced Adhikari (tasked with sorting out the Punjab mess) that more tangible concessions were needed. In 1944, he wooed—if unsuccessfully—

⁷¹⁶ Home/Poll/1944 Nr. 7/5 K.W.; see also Javed, *Left Politics in Punjab*, 191–2, and Sunanda and Basu, *The Sickie and the Crescent*, 89.

⁷¹⁷ This confirms Shalini Sharma's verdict that cultural-communal reformulations of originally class-based communist policies were most successful with the Sikhs: Sharma, "Communism and 'Democracy'," 458. On the communist-led and Sikh-dominated Punjab Kisan Sabha, see also Home/Poll/1944 Nr. 7/5 K.W., 62–3; and Home/Poll/1945 Nr. 7/I & K.W., 10.

⁷¹⁸ Home/Poll/1944 Nr. 7/5 K.W., 7–8.

⁷¹⁹ "Assure Right Of Self-Determination," *People's War*, 28 February 1943. On Santokh Singh, see Bhagwan Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab (1926–1947)* (Lahore: Book Traders 1979), 77.

for Akali consent to a possible Congress-League agreement that provided for “adequate representation” of Sikhs in Pakistan and veto rights in legislation concerning them.⁷²⁰ A year later, his programmatic pamphlet *Sikh Homeland through Hindu-Muslim-Sikh Unity* went the decisive step and translated the matter into communist vocabulary of the day: Whereas Sikhism’s rise had often been written as religious history,

in reality it was the birth of a people—peasant tribes uniting themselves into a people—shaping their language—creating their first inspiring folk-literature—fighting to defend their way of life in their homelands. This popular upheaval, led by the Sikh Gurus, [...] culminated in the emergence of the *Sikh people*.⁷²¹ (emphasis added)

Even as he deemed the demand for Azad Punjab “unjust” as it would comprise parts of the Muslim majority area, Adhikari envisaged a constituent assembly for the Central Punjab that was to decide on joining a “Pakistan Federation” or a “Hindustan Union.” In the zoo-fied communist diction, this plan would provide for freedom for Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs “in their respective regions.”⁷²²

However, the scheme exhibited few inclinations towards emancipation *from* a community, as it declared the attainment of collective “freedom” a mandatory task for all members of the community in question. Much like in the case of non-League Muslims, the nationality mania’s intolerant flipside came down heavily on those Sikhs that had no truck with collective, “national” Sikh demands.⁷²³ With the Akali Dal patching up its differences with the Congress, Adhikari seized the opportunity to portray the CPI as the true champion of the demand for a Sikh state and the preservation of the rights, language, culture, and traditions of the “great Sikh people.” Hence, the slogan was to “Re-unite the Sikh National Movement,” a task the communist Sikhs alone could achieve, as they ostensibly continued the best traditions of the old Akali movement.⁷²⁴ This was remarkable as Adhikari went to the extent of pushing the demand for a Sikh nation-state unilaterally. The CPI itself had become the guardian of ‘proper’ Sikh nationalism.

The demands of the “Unity Platform” phrased Sikh aspirations in the unique blend of cultural, religious, and national idioms characteristic of subcontinental communism’s nationality vocabulary: Punjabi was to be an official language in Central and Western Punjab, and educational institutions in Sikh localities were to teach the Gurumukhi script

⁷²⁰ Home/Poll/1944 Nr. 7/5 K.W., 8.

⁷²¹ Adhikari, *Sikh Homeland through Hindu-Muslim-Sikh Unity*, PCJ CPI 61, 6.

⁷²² Ibid., 5, 8, 11.

⁷²³ Ibid., 9–10.

⁷²⁴ Ibid., 12–16. Certainly, these postulates also have to be seen in the context of Adhikari’s bid to dissuade the SAD from teaming up with the increasingly anti-League INC against the ML, a scenario which had to be prevented in the communist plan; still, the commitment to the preservation of the “Sikh people” is too spirited, and too plausible in the larger scheme of communist things, to be an entirely strategic move.

(which was the best available approximation to an independent Sikh language). “Complete freedom of religious worship” and “complete freedom to administer their Gurdwaras as religious, cultural institutions” were to be guaranteed to Sikhs.⁷²⁵ The programmatic text *The New Situation and Our Tasks* from late 1945 envisioned “self-determination” for Sikhs in “the territories in which their historic homelands lie.”⁷²⁶

However, there was a lot more open dissent on the matter in the party than in the case of Muslim separatism. CPI leaders such as Surjeet and Sajjad Zaheer opposed the “Azad Punjab” scheme, and a couple of months before the publication of *Sikh Homeland*, General Secretary P. C. Joshi had himself admitted that the Sikh issue illustrated the communist troubles to come to grips with the concept of nationalities. Still, he admired the ‘cultural’ status of Sikhism as a community with great historical traditions.⁷²⁷ On this point, at least, there was a consensus that conserved the key components of Adhikari’s contentious Sikh policy beyond the demise of the nationality line in 1946. Transcending the turn away from Sikh statehood, they resurfaced in the context of the CPI’s involvement in the movement for a Punjabi Suba from the 1950s. If communists eyed the SAD suspiciously, ‘original’ assertions of “Sikh culture” had never borne the smell of communalism.

The logic applied in the elevation of Muslims and Sikhs to nationality status erased the boundaries between the national and the religious. It went to the effect that separatist religio-cultural aspirations constituted a strong case for considering the groups in question nationalities. However, there were also limits to such ‘national’ elevation. For once, the subcontinent’s Christian population, small in number and suspiciously sharing the colonialists’ creed, continued to exist outside the premises of nationally sanctified collective religiosity. To be sure, there existed no Christian bodies putting up such a demand. Then again, political positioning on communal grounds apparently was too much en vogue to ignore the minor protagonists, even if they didn’t rise to the same status as Muslims or Sikhs. Thus, *People’s War* published an anti-imperialist appeal of the Travancore state National Christian Youth Council for India’s freedom and self-determination, even casting the text in the shape of an oriental orthodox cross. Yet, Joshi countered the council’s regret that universal freedom for religious communities had not been explicitly acknowledged at the CPI’s 1943 party congress by outlining that the convention had not been concerned with

⁷²⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁷²⁶ “The New Situation and Our Tasks,” 83–4.

⁷²⁷ P. C. Joshi, “They Must not Fail,” *People’s War*, 20 August 1944.

individual citizens' rights.⁷²⁸ Evidently, there was no question of regarding Christians as a 'national' factor, or as a distinct, culturally noteworthy collective deserving recognition and support. Instead, Christians continued to be eyed warily well into the 1950s.⁷²⁹

Another group remaining outside of communist collective-mongering were untouchables—which is striking as their social position would have warranted affirmative action most. In fact, the party had mulled a more inclusive approach towards untouchables, substantialized in Ranadive's call for a "Special Charter of Political and Economic Demands of the Untouchables" providing for separate electorates and even special educational facilities. Ranadive emphasized that these "just and adequate" demands had grown out of the "inhuman treatment" of the scheduled castes by Hindu society. Bearing out the contemporary priorities of the CPI, his approach didn't even mention economic reform, let alone class struggle, as a solution to the problem.⁷³⁰ However, a combination of constituency overlap and a lack of anti-imperialist commitment in the most important political body representing untouchable demands—Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF)—led the CPI to discard advances to untouchables on a group level. Untouchability was to be overcome in the framework of existing (communist) institutions. Accordingly, the 1945 election manifesto all but ignored the matter.⁷³¹

V.1.4 From Communism to Culture

It has become clear that steering clear of cultural awakenings was no feature of a communist war-time policy framed by the "people's war" line and the connected imperative of national unity. According to its own logic, it was only consequential that communism's cultural turn extended beyond minority domains. Just as the CPI's grand policy bore most trademarks of

⁷²⁸ "Christian Youth's Appeal to Co-Religionists," *People's War*, 25 July 1943.

⁷²⁹ In 1939, Ghosh had castigated missionaries as the "true oppressors": see Ghosh, "Assam Congress Ministry," *New Age*, February 1939. *New Age* would still opine in the mid-1950s that "conversion [to Christianity] endangers the convert's loyalty to his country and the state": "Notes of the Week," *New Age*, 29 July 1956.

⁷³⁰ Ranadive, "Six Crore Untouchables," *People's War*, 3 December 1944.

⁷³¹ P. C. Joshi, *A Free and Happy India. Election Policy of Indian Communists* (Bombay: People's Publishing House 1945), 15. See also "For the Final Bid for Power," 216. The urban workforce contained a substantial outcaste element, which hence already formed a target audience for communist class politics: Krüger, *Die Internationale Arbeiterbewegung* 1:58–9. Debates on the approach to untouchability continued inside the party; see, for example, the petition "New Awakening among the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Caste Federation," which called for quotas or separate electorates "in the best tradition of the world democratic movement": *Party Letter*, 20 May 1946, CPIL-AB, 9 (quote).

a Gramscian ‘integral revolution,’ it was situated ‘organic intellectualism’ that governed communist efforts at acculturation to and self-localization in their environment, blossoming into a communist-influenced cultural movement from below. Its two main pillars were the encouragement and promotion of native culture (including religious themes) and the active dissemination of communist-informed folk art through the medium of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). Growing out of a tradition commenced by the Progressive Writers’ Association, the IPTA’s foundations had been laid at the CPI Congress at Bombay in May 1943. From the metropolitan centers, the IPTA fanned out in the countryside through touring theater groups. Soon, branches existed in most parts of the subcontinent.⁷³²

As the “cultural wing of the Communist Party” and to a large degree made up of party activists and sympathizers, its agenda consisted in “taking theatre to the masses.”⁷³³ It was not to be “a movement which discards our rich cultural heritage, but one which seeks to revive the lost in that heritage by reinterpreting, adopting and integrating it with [...] our people’s lives and aspirations.”⁷³⁴ Hence, the IPTA’s efforts brought about a “new emphasis on Indianness, a new enthusiasm for the culture of the people.” While it developed different strands in its artistic formats, their common ground was the “express aspiration of reaching out to the people.”⁷³⁵

Tailored mostly to a rural audience, the common approach consisted of remolding traditional folk theatre for purposes of political mobilization. Other occasions witnessed the adaptation of ‘naturalistic’ forms modeled on European lines and the beginnings of a subcontinental variety of epic theatre in the vein of Brecht.⁷³⁶ Condemnation of alien rule—couched in anti-Axis propaganda during the war—complemented the wholesome praise of native culture. The IPTA’s legacy hugely influenced post-independence folk theatre, even though the All-India unit disintegrated in the mid-1950s—partly due to ideological fragmentation, partly due to government repression.⁷³⁷

The communist press, spearheaded by General Secretary P. C. Joshi, supported the IPTA’s efforts by benevolently featuring manifestations of folk culture. In his report on the

⁷³² See Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement*, 132–4.

⁷³³ Vasudha Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre* (Delhi: Oxford University Press 2006), 16, 253.

⁷³⁴ Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement*, quoted in Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances*, 161.

⁷³⁵ Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances*, 161–3.

⁷³⁶ *Ibid.*, 163–7.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*, 169–79, 253. Nevertheless, regional units are active to the present day, among others in West Bengal, the Punjab, and Bombay. See Suhridd Chattopadhyay, “A Stage for Social Commitment,” *Frontline* 22, no. 13 (2005), on <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2213/stories/20050701001708800.htm> (last checked 14 December 2014).

All-India Kisan Sabha's March 1944 session, Joshi almost exclusively featured the accompanying cultural festival organized by the CPI. The performances were important for the dissemination of propaganda: Their "effect on the peasant would be more than anything else that was said or done at the session." The recipe was to employ the traditional forms of folk art—dances, songs and plays—"to which the peasant is traditionally used," and fill them with a new content: "patriotic instead of religious themes."⁷³⁸

Thereby, Joshi acknowledged the origin and function of art in a traditional context. The principled affirmation of peasant life and outlook granted established and time-honored customs a new lease of life within the framework of communism. This was not a coincidence, nor was it a makeshift solution. Joshi, obviously fascinated by the spectacle and a soon-to-be expert, sharpened his skill for artistic criticism on the performances of the various folk art groups. For example, he commended the Andhra squad for undertaking to save regional culture from decay. The messages of the pieces and songs performed largely moved within communist precincts—agricultural laborers fighting for their rights, Soviet achievements, the Bengal famine, etc. The strategy paid certain dividends. For example, the audience's eagerness to contribute to the Bengal famine fund after the performance of a "hunger dance" was so great as to force Puchalapalli Sundarayya to call for momentary restraint in the donations. Yet, the traditional form had simply been filled with a new content—and with respect to matters such as family and community the content was, in fact, not all that new.⁷³⁹

In much the same manner, Joshi's report on the Kisan Sabha's 1945 session featured almost a full page of pictures—expensive print items—of the accompanying folk festival. Compared to the coverage of the cultural festival, the session's programmatic proceedings had receded into the background. By then, no conference of peasants or trade unionists went without similar cultural decorum. The enthusiasm over 'authentic' culture permitted even avowed communists to indulge in ethno-zoological nosiness, such as when Joshi wrote excitedly about never having seen "real Manipuris" before, rejoicing that the peasant movement had eliminated "all traces of chauvinism" in folk culture.⁷⁴⁰

Yet, far-reaching appropriation in itself could hardly purge it of "chauvinism" any more than modify the communist perception of what constituted chauvinism. A remarkable

⁷³⁸ All quotes in P. C. Joshi, "Among Kisan Patriots," *People's War*, 9 March 1944.

⁷³⁹ P. C. Joshi, "Among Kisan Patriots," *People's War*, 9 March 1944 (quote). See also Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances*, 164. On Joshi see also, for example, his considerably developed critical faculty in P. C. Joshi, "National Folk Dance Festival," *New Age*, 9 February 1958.

⁷⁴⁰ All quotes in P. C. Joshi, "Festival Of Folk Culture," *People's War*, 27 May 1945.

reappraisal illustrates this: “The revivalist[s] gave us national pride [!] and anti-imperialist hatred by glorifying our own past from ancient days to our downfall [!].” Joshi went on listing stalwarts of non-chauvinism such as the Wahabi movement and the Deoband school among Muslims, and “Bankim [Mukherjee], Swami Vivekanad, and others” as their Hindu counterparts. If “even [!] *Vande Mataram*,” the INC’s national song, had “religious forms and imagery,” spiritual politics and Islamic puritanism apparently counted among the forgivable offences, at least having fostered “national pride” in “our own past.”⁷⁴¹

Yet, in contrast to nationality policy the embrace of majority culture generally was not cast in an emphatic pro-Hindu mold. (Instances such as Zaheer’s eulogy of Tulsidas, whose “whole genius” was “predominantly and overwhelmingly Hindu,” constitute the exception to the rule.⁷⁴²) The inevitable Hindu imprint of the communist turn towards majority culture was an adjunct to rather than the core of cultural affirmation. Principal acknowledgement and appraisal could be paired with criticism of concrete manifestations. For example, the resuscitation of the Mahayagnya festival in early 1944 gave reason for critical, if solidary, intervention. The problem was not that the festival was a reinstitution of an ancient ritual by a swami considered “a consistent opponent [...] of all progress, political or religious.” Rather, the stumbling block was that the festivity involved the sacrifice of considerable amounts of foodstuff—a “criminal waste” in the face of the raging famine in Bengal. Therefore, CPI activists petitioned the organizers to reduce the waste, and formed “singing and collecting squads” touring the Mahayagnya grounds with “great” success. It was apparently great enough to compel the festival organizers to set up a tent for the usage of the communists, replete with the red flag on top—a symbol of felicitous intervention for the comrades, yet to the spectators arguably a sign of their self-conscious participation in a religious celebration.⁷⁴³

Of the latter, examples are legion. In a pioneering study on the cultural situatedness of communism in Malabar, Dilip Menon corroborates the close entanglement of the CPI in local Hindu culture. The focus on national unity and communist participation in food committees had engendered cooperation with “‘communal’ groups” such as the League,

⁷⁴¹ Joshi, “For the Final Bid for Power,” 136.

⁷⁴² Zaheer, “The Historical Background Of The Problem Of Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani,” *Marxist Miscellany* 4 (1945), Roll No. 1736, 92.

⁷⁴³ All quotes in Saria Gupta, “For Religious Rights But Against Criminal Waste,” *People’s War*, 27 February 1944. In the end, the festival organizers agreed to a compromise and cut down the number of those to be fed for free on the festival’s closing day by 95% in order to send the food to Bengal. This was a doubtful success as the alms had merely been shifted from one needy group to another, whereas the foodstuff consumed in the holy fires had been burnt as intended: *ibid.*

local Mahasabha circles, and various caste associations, and thereby greatly increased the party's foothold in rural society.⁷⁴⁴ The local CPI's hugely successful revival of ancient shrine festivals in response to the failure to gain access to temples for untouchables further abetted its success. By the same token, traditional social ties were resuscitated as the landowning upper castes (to which the CPI's leading stratum belonged) continued the traditional practice of sponsoring such events. Menon rightly comments that "what began as an intervention in the interest of the party was transformed into something far richer," that is, the acculturation of communism.⁷⁴⁵ The Kerala Progressive Writers' Conference in January 1944 chimed in: Even as its manifesto cautioned against the virulent "destructive diseases" in the fibers of subcontinental society (particularly untouchability, superstition, and discrimination against women), the Keralites were exhorted to be "proud of their cultural heritage"—as if the "destructive diseases" had not arisen as a very part of it.⁷⁴⁶

Of these "diseases," the party was firmly dismissive, at least among Hindus. *People's War* hailed the passing of the Draft Hindu Code, which sought to address gender inequality, aimed at the elimination of restrictions on inter-caste marriages, banned polygamy (the "most welcome step" of the proposed law), and tentatively veered towards a legal framework for the separation and dissolution of marriages. The paper's polemic against the government for having been too lenient in the past in the name of non-interference in religious matters however seemed misplaced, for *People's War* tellingly remained silent on the proposed law's limitation to Hindus.⁷⁴⁷ The hardly less rigid practices in other communities apparently fell under the preservation of endangered nationalities.

From a close-up perspective, the turn towards and also the increased readiness to criticize Hindu culture was due to its predominance in subcontinental society (in a way reminiscent of the role of the Russian component in Lenin's conceptualization of Czarist Russia's collection of nationalities). Yet, it also reflected the communists' own life-world: Being a largely Hindu party, much of the experiences of its members revolved around matters, constraints, and predicaments connected with a deeply Hindu environment. The possibly alienating effects of a visit of close relatives to a comrade living in the peculiar environment of the Calcutta communist "commune" were among the less serious

⁷⁴⁴ Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism*, 172. This corroborates older findings by Hardgrave 1973, 125–6; and Gupta, *Communism in Indian Politics*, 183.

⁷⁴⁵ Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism*, 176–7. See also Nissim Mannathukkaren, "The Rise of the National-Popular and Its Limits: Communism and the Cultural in Kerala," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 14, no. 4 (2013).

⁷⁴⁶ "Rouse Pride in Culture & Faith In Our Future," *People's War*, 26 March 1944.

⁷⁴⁷ "Draft Hindu Code," *People's War*, 1 April 1945.

problems.⁷⁴⁸ Graver matters such as questions of marriage held a greater challenge to communist progressive-mindedness. In June 1943, a Sudhindra Ray bewailed that the father of his betrothed comrade would agree to a marriage only if it was celebrated according to traditional Hindu rites.⁷⁴⁹ With a wild romantic escape out of the question—an option generally discouraged by the party—he faced the choice to either compromise on atheism or forfeit his bride. In general, despite their criticism of prevalent cultural norms communists also tended to reproduce them, including patriarchal ones. Apart from an official party morality resembling the most conservative of moral regimes,⁷⁵⁰ this was also true for the way of handling private and family matters. In the above example, the conflict was slugged out only between the suitor and his prospective father-in-law, without any mention of the bride or her opinion on the matter at all. And back in 1936, a letter by Muzaffar Ahmad informed Philipp Spratt that he had finally managed to marry off his daughter in the traditional way.⁷⁵¹

V.2 The Nationality Meltdown

The dividends of cultural politics were slow to pay. In the fast-changing environment after the end of the war, when the INC had re-entered the political scene, more tangible matters determined the communists' political fate. Negotiations with the British for some form of self-government had been resumed, with the Congress-League seeming ever more irreconcilable. Constant quarrels over the composition and the functioning of new instruments of self-rule—the Interim Government and the Constituent Assembly—exacerbated their differences. The 1945/46 elections confirmed the emergence of a 'Muslim' against a 'non-Muslim' vote block, with over 86 and over 91 percent of the votes in the respective contingents going to ML and INC. Communal polarization operated at all

⁷⁴⁸ Letter from "Momin" (Calcutta) to Shikha Guha (Dhaka), WBIB File 35/26 SL 225/1926, 286 (pt. I).

⁷⁴⁹ Letter from Sudhindra Ray (Mymensingh) to Sisir Kumar Ray (Rajshahi), 16 June 1943, WBIB File 35/26(i) Mymensingh SL 317/1926, 103.

⁷⁵⁰ See *On Letter from Balai*, CPIL-AB SN 367, esp. 2.

⁷⁵¹ The bridegroom was, of course, a Muslim (the poet Abdul Qadir): Letter from Muzaffar Ahmad to Philipp Spratt, 3 December 1936, WBIB File 168/22(i) SL 121/1922, 25 (K.W.). The tendency among communists to move within the precincts of conservative family norms has been substantiated for Bengal by Ross Mallick ("The only thing worse than marrying an untouchable is marrying a Muslim"): *Development Policy of a Communist Government: West Bengal since 1977* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), 25.

social levels. Everywhere, “sporadic but very striking” manifestations of anti-British unity were being rivaled and successively eclipsed by the rise of communal violence on a novel scale from mid-1946 onwards.⁷⁵²

V.2.1 Rediscovering Communalism

The CPI’s capacity to intervene in these developments suffered not only from its still limited organizational clout. Also, its attractiveness reached a long-time low during the post-war years for a number of reasons. First, the failure of the communist multi-nationality concept calling for one-and-a-half dozen constituent assemblies in an independent subcontinent to resonate became painfully obvious. This was exacerbated by the loss of any consistent political vision in the appraisal of the nationality situation. Bengal and the Punjab were especially delicate cases. A 1943 resolution had called for a division of the Punjab since “Western Punjabis (dominantly Muslims)” constituted a nationality of their own.⁷⁵³ A year later, Joshi extended the scheme to Eastern Bengalis, until then viewed as part of a united Muslim-majority Bengal, on the grounds of the “common bond of their folk culture, strengthened by the traditional Muslim culture.”⁷⁵⁴ In late 1945, with partition on religious lines becoming a palpable threat, Bengal was to remain united again,⁷⁵⁵ while Adhikari’s 1946 short-lived concept for a Sikh homeland even envisioned an essentially tripartite Punjab.⁷⁵⁶ The result was that by the mid-1940s, few had a clear idea about the CPI’s agenda beyond a vague advocacy of Muslim separatism.⁷⁵⁷

Second, there was the lack of a distinct political profile. Even though Stalin had dissolved the Comintern in 1943, the CPI in established tradition went with the advice from CPGB and CPSU.⁷⁵⁸ Both merely recommended reverting to the pre-war anti-imperialist

⁷⁵² Sarkar, *Modern India*, 426–7.

⁷⁵³ “On Pakistan and National Unity,” 463.

⁷⁵⁴ P. C. Joshi, “They Must Meet Again,” in *Documents* 4:387–8, 390.

⁷⁵⁵ “The New Situation and Our Tasks,” in *Documents* 5:83–4.

⁷⁵⁶ Adhikari, *Sikh Homeland*, 5. Later, the CPI’s independence resolution cynically condoled Punjabis for being a nationality “artificially split”: *August 15. To the People of Pakistan. Communist Party’s Appeal*, PCI CPI 1947a, 6.

⁷⁵⁷ *Interview of Jawarhalal Nehru by Z. A. Ahmad*, 2–3.

⁷⁵⁸ External advice and developments remained influential long into the party’s post-war history. In fact, the party’s shift to mass insurgency at the 1948 II party congress had been decisively encouraged by Andrei Zhdanov’s speech at the formation of the Cominform exhorting communist parties in non-socialist countries to

united front with the nationalist bourgeoisie. With resumption of the class struggle nowhere on the agenda, the CPI's distinctiveness as a transformative political force failed to materialize. If the party later criticized itself for "tailing behind the Muslim League" during its 'nationality period,' after the war it factually tailed behind the Congress. The "frenzied excitement" (Nehru) and anti-British bitterness on the post-war subcontinent, augmented by the trial of officers of Bose's Japanese-propped Indian National Army and the Tory government's vague promise of independence in June 1945, hardly resonated in communist mobilization.⁷⁵⁹

Third, relations between the Congress and the CPI had taken a serious downward turn. This was because of (1) the communist "people's war" policy, which was widely perceived as anti-national and had culminated in much-resented communist opposition to the INC's all-or-nothing 1942 "Quit India" campaign; and (2) the lurid divergence in the approach to the League and its Pakistan demand. Even Congress leftists sympathetic to the CPI were deterred by its constant reiteration of the nationality issue. In 1945, Nehru tried in vain to impress on the party that ceding to the ML's separatist demands would tear the Congress apart. When a motion to bar communists from voting in all Congress bodies came up in the Working Committee in December 1945, they had no lobby left to prevent their factual expulsion.⁷⁶⁰

Its new status as political outcaste did not prompt the party to revise its approach. Instead, it contented itself with a somewhat more sympathetic embrace of militant anti-British struggles than the Congress, such as in the case of the February 1946 Royal Indian Navy mutiny. The August 1946 pamphlet *For the Final Assault* bore out the CPI's indecisiveness between united front tactics and more radical working-class agitation; it was only with the resolution *For the Final Bid for Power* that class issues—spurred by the tebhaga movement in Bengal—again asserted themselves on the communist agenda late in 1946.

adapt a more radical line: *A. A. Zhdanov on the International Situation: Report made at the Conference of the Nine Communist Parties held in Poland, Sept. 1947*, PCJ CPI 118. The Cominform was a considerably toned-down successor organization of the Comintern; a detailed account on its formation can be found in Braunthal, *History of the International* 3:144–81.

⁷⁵⁹ Surjeet, "Introduction," in *Documents* 1:L–LIII (quote); CPSU commentators even tended to ignore the CPI in assessing the subcontinent's political constellations: See Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 212.

⁷⁶⁰ *Interview of Jawarhalal Nehru by Z. A. Ahmad*, 2–3. See also Home/Poll/1946 Nr. 7/1, 7–8; in anticipation of their ejection, many communists had already resigned from INC bodies: Sarkar, *Modern India*, 420. On the eminence of the nationality question for the Congress-CPI split, see also Maitra, *Marxism in India*, 216.

1946—ironically, the same year which confirmed the ML’s electoral breakthrough to the long-claimed (and CPI-backed) status of representative of the subcontinent’s Muslims—also marked the end of the ‘nationality period.’ Despite its own poor showing in the elections (only eight seats in the provinces, none at the center, and 2.5 percent of the vote), the CPI initially hailed the “new anti-imperialist upsurge” and gloated over a supposed defeat for “reactionaries” in the Hindu and Muslim camps.⁷⁶¹ However, the League’s continued refusal to enter into any lasting agreement with the Congress and escalating communal violence made a conciliatory approach less plausible than ever before—let alone an openly pro-separatist stance that, if anything, further exacerbated tensions. Moreover, neither the limited success of communist advances towards the ML nor the similarly futile efforts to establish a foothold among its mass base rendered the ‘Muslim option’ overly attractive.⁷⁶²

The framework of ‘nationality policy’ did not permit an all-out assault on communalism. Yet, rising communal antagonism peaking in the ML’s August 1946 “Direct Action Day” in Calcutta that left more than 4,000 dead prodded the party to withdraw support for Pakistan. Instead, it undertook anew to differentiate between the League leadership and its following. Falling back on old epistemological idealism, the CPI’s Central Committee contended in response to the “Direct Action Day” carnage that “the contradictions between the democratic freedom urge of the common Muslims and the bankrupt [...] policy of the leaders of the League will come to the fore, more and more disillusioning the Muslim masses.”⁷⁶³

First, however, it was the communists themselves who had to be disillusioned with nationality politics. In mid-1947, General Secretary Joshi still defended “Muslim self-determination” on the grounds that viewing the subcontinent as a single unified nation was “obviously [...] wrong.”⁷⁶⁴ Yet, an alternative line had already emerged. Rajani Palme Dutt’s 1946 intervention against the nationality policy, although too late to mend relations with the INC, had provided a point of departure. In Dutt’s reckoning, “social and economic aspirations against exploitation” motivated the “Moslem masses who have gathered under the League banner.” While partition on religious lines was to be avoided, the ML’s

⁷⁶¹ “On the Result of the Elections: CC Resolution of April, 1946,” in *Party Letter*, 21 May 1946, PCJ 1946/7, 1–2.

⁷⁶² On the CPI’s largely futile efforts to infiltrate the ML, see Sunanda and Basu, *The Sickle and the Crescent*, 71–90.

⁷⁶³ “For the Final Assault. Tasks of the Indian People in the Present Phase of Indian Revolution,” in *Documents* 5:109. A detailed account of “Direct Action” and the communist role can be found in Sunanda and Basu, *The Sickle and the Crescent*, 113–52.

⁷⁶⁴ Joshi, “For the Final Bid for Power,” 130–3.

following had to be approached with “sympathetic understanding” for the material and, ambiguously, “national” aspirations drawing them to the League.⁷⁶⁵

Even though the retreat to the old Western revolutionary pattern was sounded in the vocabulary of the fading ‘nationality period,’ the halcyon days of subcontinental community politics were over. In what amounted to an admission of defeat of his policy, Adhikari’s review of the 1946 events concurred that the ML was deceiving the “anti-imperialist and freedom-loving Muslims” by attacking Hindus and the INC and pushing the “undemocratic and separatist demand of Pakistan.”⁷⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the real culprit had to be imperialism, which occasioned acrobatic reasoning: Alongside upholding “Muslim self-determination,” Joshi castigated the Mountbatten Plan to divide the subcontinent as a “desperate move against the freedom movement which,” in his opinion, stood “for the complete independence of the whole of the country.”⁷⁶⁷ However, Joshi’s main concern was not partition on religious lines and its probable consequences. Instead, he was concerned that the British would retain their influence through “new forms of indirect rule,” particularly in Pakistan.⁷⁶⁸ It was only Dutt who unambiguously stated that the looming partition would be “disastrous for Indian progressive development,” encouraging “particularism, reaction and communal antagonism” instead.⁷⁶⁹

Renouncing all insights into the processes of Muslim identity formation his own party had recognized and fostered until recently, Joshi counseled that it was “only through utmost vigilance against reaction and a steadfast adherence to democratic policies” that the “exploited Muslim masses of Pakistan areas [could] achieve their real objective of freedom, democracy and prosperity.”⁷⁷⁰ With no trace left of the earlier realization of a broad politicization of Muslims along ‘national,’ that is, communal lines, Joshi simply exempted the agency of the “backward masses” from the unpalatable developments. As if nothing had happened, as if a broad movement with a separatist communal agenda had not arisen, as if elections had not been won, and as if the empirical reality of Pakistan was not about to come into being with consent and involvement of the ‘masses,’ he called upon them to “defeat the selfish and reactionary policies of their upper classes.”⁷⁷¹ In what amounted to a declaration

⁷⁶⁵ Dutt, *Freedom for India*, PCJ 1946/1, 7.

⁷⁶⁶ Adhikari, *Resurgent India at the Cross Roads. 1946 in Review*, PCJ 1947/5, 1, 8.

⁷⁶⁷ Quoted in Dutt, “The Mountbatten Plan For India,” *Labour Monthly* 29/July (1947):212. See also Adhikari, *Resurgent India*, 12.

⁷⁶⁸ “Political Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India, June 1947,” in *Documents* 5:353–4.

⁷⁶⁹ Dutt, “The Mountbatten Plan.”

⁷⁷⁰ “Political Resolution of the Central Committee,” 361.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 361–2.

of political bankruptcy, the party insisted on the eve of independence that only the “upper classes” had wielded the “poisonous weapon of preaching communal hatred” to disrupt the “natural [!] process of unity” of exploited Muslims and non-Muslims.⁷⁷²

In the atmosphere of June 1947, with riots spreading over much of North India in the runner-up to the great bloodshed in the Punjab, these postulates sounded thoroughly misplaced. And yet, they were the only communist response possible if the core principle—to remain with the ‘masses’—was to be upheld. The overall volatility of the situation had penetrated into communist theorizing, necessitating the replacement of the Eastern nationality policy affirming collective religious particularisms with Western preaching of unity on class lines. Communalism had to be reinvented, relocalized, and reasserted against entrenched patterns of communist communal empathy. The earlier stance of bending communalism into nationality formation had rendered the CPI unable to respond to its violent reassertion after the end of the war. Accordingly, the communists now had to direct their efforts, hitherto committed to the identification of progressive Muslim ‘national’ consciousness among the ‘masses,’ to the opposite: acquitting the bulk of the population from said consciousness, now figuring as narrow communalism, no matter how great the bloodshed.

V.2.2 Massless Mass Frenzy

Disregard for the rapid totalization of communal antagonism blossomed into the hope that ‘true’ movements with a social agenda would usurp grass-roots unrest. The CPI again considered it only a matter of mobilization whether protest expressed itself ‘properly’ in economic demands or went down the communal road. Thus, Adhikari rejoiced in late 1946 that “the shame of Noakhali and Tippera [Bengal districts badly affected by communal rioting] is being wiped out in the fighting unity of the Hindu and Muslim kisans in the battle for Tebhaga,” a peasant campaign in Bengal for an increase in the cultivators’ share of the harvest.⁷⁷³ It certainly was no coincidence that the centers of the new wave of labor unrest often lay in areas badly affected by communal violence, such as Calcutta and rural Bihar.

⁷⁷² August 15. *To the People of Pakistan. Communist Party’s Appeal*, PCJ CPI 1947a, 1.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*, 15–16 (quote); see also Sarkar, *Modern India*, 438–41; Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian*, 511–14.

Yet Dutt's sedulous claim that the working-class movement alone had maintained an unstained record of communal harmony was far from reality.⁷⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it was on externalizing Western lines that communist reception and assessment of the massacres accompanying the partition—becoming reality together with India's and Pakistan's independence on 15 August 1947—developed.

The central motive was to muddle the fanaticized 'masses' through the communal storm and ward off epistemological challenges posed by direct exposure to the events. Armed with sufficient determination, not even the most horrifying atrocities could unsettle communist theorizing. An account by a prominent Punjab organizer—probably future General Secretary Ajoy Kumar Ghosh—is a particularly good example. Writing under the telling alias Dhanwatri (the doctor of gods in Ayurvedic medicine), the author drew up a ghastly picture of the situation in the province: "What happened in the Punjab cannot be called a riot. It was a regular war of extermination of the minorities" driven by "passions" and the "frenzy and savagery" of communal mobs. Among them were "trained bands equipped with fire-arms and modern weapons," the "storm troops of the various communal parties."⁷⁷⁵ Following this lurid exposition, the mainstay of his report consisted in detailing British "devilish skill," allegedly responsible for ruining the Punjab's ostensibly harmonious communal relations "overnight" and engineering the involvement of government organs in the bloodshed.⁷⁷⁶

The same pattern also characterized other statements. The Punjab CPI's realization that instances where citizens defended the local minority community were only "isolated cases" was immediately rationalized into conspiracy theories: Certain concrete "enemies" were operating with "a definite plan and a definite motive."⁷⁷⁷ Far from being involved, if only as consenting bystanders, the broad population were mere victims of the "MOST DIABOLICAL PLAN AGAINST OUR PEOPLE" unfolding in the Punjab. Unsurprisingly, its "leader, inspirer and organiser" was British imperialism; its aides "the Princes and big landlords." Their aim was "to overawe the Government, to silence and even physically wipe out the forces of progress."⁷⁷⁸ Other party sections, such as the UP unit, seconded the scheme of grand conspiracy: Although the Punjab was the victim of the "maddest and most immense communal frenzy ever known," it was as incorrect as it was "unjust to fix the

⁷⁷⁴ Dutt, "The Mountbatten Plan for India."

⁷⁷⁵ Dhanwantri, "Beware!" in *Documents* 5:371.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 371–81.

⁷⁷⁷ All quotes in *Save Punjab Save India. Statement of the Punjab Committee of the Communist Party on the Present Punjab Situation*, PCJ 1947/8, 1–2.

⁷⁷⁸ All quotes *ibid.*, 3–5.

responsibility for communal frenzy and bloodshed on the common people themselves, whether Muslim, Sikh or Hindu.” The instigators were imperialists, landlords, princes, black marketeers, and the “communal leaders” supported by all of them.⁷⁷⁹

Such insistence on the principally pro-British orientation of the rioters and fundamentalists is remarkable. According to this logic, either Pakistan itself was ultimately a British project, or the “extreme communalists” would have had to oppose independence and opt for the continuance of colonial rule. Although neither conclusion was sufficiently plausible, the negative synthesis of both—that the *modern nation-states* of Pakistan and, to a lesser degree, India came into being under active involvement, and were accordingly shaped by popular ideas, of religious and communal extremists—was unthinkable for Joshi and his flock. The aperies inherent in limiting anti-religious criticism to the new countries’ “compromising” elite surfaced in the CPI’s assessment of the 1948 Pathan revolt in Waziristan and the NWFP. While the party pamphlet reproduced the insurgents’ demand to convert Pakistan into a sharia state without further comment, it castigated the repressive stance adopted by Pakistani authorities as contrived by British imperialism.⁷⁸⁰

Under the Communal Swatter

It is conceivable that such inclusiveness arose in response to the disintegration of the communist core constituency. If party communiqués maintained that the “workers, peasants and progressive intelligentsia” were “the most determined forces that resist all riots,” Dhanwatri admitted that solidarity and unity among workers had not lasted long.⁷⁸¹ Once workers began to lose their jobs on communal grounds, doom was spelt for “the entire young Trade Union movement in Punjab.” All efforts to contain the madness were “but a drop in the ocean.”⁷⁸² Although Dhanwatri insisted that working-class unity could hardly have broken “from within,” his disillusionment with the unfolding reality in the Punjab is palpable. There was every reason. The case of Ramesh Chandra, a trade union organizer from Lahore, illustrates the lost cause of communist intervention under the preeminence of communal confrontation. In a letter to Ranadive from February 1948, he described the

⁷⁷⁹ *In the Name of Freedom, Honour and Bread. United Provinces Shall not Go the Punjab Way*, PCJ CPI 101, 2, 4.

⁷⁸⁰ *Who Rules Pakistan?*, PCJ 1948/6, 7. The preceding leftward shift towards open revolution at the 1948 II party congress had not wrought about a change in the embrace of mass sentiments. See the “Political Thesis of the Second Congress of the Communist Party,” in *Documents* 5:598–600, and 630–1.

⁷⁸¹ *Resolution on the Present Political Situation*. 17 December 1947, WBIB File 35/26(i) SL 180/1926, 127.

⁷⁸² All quotes in “Beware!,” 384, 386.

agony in no unclear terms: Having opted to stay in Pakistan to disprove the communalists, he had discovered that conditions were beyond even his worst imaginations. After bringing his family to Delhi, he had returned to continue trade union work, but soon found that even moving freely was a luxury:

Whereas one can move about to a certain extent, it is not possible for a nonmuslim to do any mass work [...] the position was such that I should not even attend the delegates meeting of the west Pakistan TU Federation. My comrades think that the atmosphere was such that my name should not be proposed for the General Council [...] I am now completely demoralized.⁷⁸³

Chandra's letter closed with a request for transfer to Delhi. His experience was replicated in many East Pakistan areas, where the predominantly Hindu CPI unit found itself unable to reach out to the Muslim population. Its sullen pretension of "definitely anti-communal sentiments of the masses" would stultify itself in 1950, when most Hindu party members had to flee the communal riots and settle in West Bengal.⁷⁸⁴

In fact, there was no dearth of reports about communists falling victim to fanaticized mobs. Inevitably part of a community themselves, they were often suspected of secretly working for another. During the August 1946 Calcutta riots, communists became targets of attacks. A year later, Ajoy Kumar Ghosh eluded death only by chance when fanatical Muslims attacked his train to Lahore and massacred the passengers. A December 1947 circular of the East Punjab unit listed numerous comrades who had gone missing.⁷⁸⁵

And yet: If not even the most horrible events and experiences could shatter the communist commitment to progressive mass politics, many proved to be equally undeterred in their relief efforts. The unwavering struggle of countless party members against communalism on the spot, and the faithful implementation of the party's exhortation to become "model refugee relief workers" to whom "the question of communal peace is the question of [their] life" are rightly praised by Irfan Habib as an "epic chapter" in communist history.⁷⁸⁶ Javed concurs that communists stood out by their commitment to the protection of minorities and the conservation of peace in many localities, which underlines the subjective sincerity of their efforts to maintain communal peace.⁷⁸⁷

⁷⁸³ Letter from Ramesh Chandra (Lahore) to B. T. Ranadive (Bombay), WBIB File 35/26(i) SL 180/1926 pt. I, 160–2.

⁷⁸⁴ "Exodus of Minority from E. Pakistan to W. Bengal," *People's Age*, 28 November 1948 (quote); Brass, "Political Parties of the Radical Left," 11.

⁷⁸⁵ WBIB File 35/26(i) SL 180/1926 pt. I, 101; on Calcutta, see Jyoti Basu (interviewee), recorded by Shikha Mukherjee and Usha Prasad (interviewers), 18 July 2003, NMML-OHP, AccNo 781, 45–7; and on Ghosh, see Ghate (interviewee), 212–16.

⁷⁸⁶ *In the Name of Freedom, Honour and Bread*, PCJ CPI 101, 27–8; Habib, "The Left and the National Movement," 27–8.

⁷⁸⁷ Javed, *Left Politics in Punjab*, 233.

The events of 1947–8 also provided the party with a long-term opportunity to recover lost political ground. In contrast to the ‘nationality period,’ the CPI’s stance of blaming the mayhem of partition on imperialism and its domestic allies was again understandable to a wider political arena and created common terrain with left nationalists and socialists. CSP stalwart Lohia would accuse the Indian government of being an accomplice in the “imperialist and communal game to weaken the people by partitioning the country” in much the same manner as the CPI did from 1948 onwards.⁷⁸⁸ In fact, this has become the staple view in the Indian left since.

Despite the haunting experience of partition and the programmatic turn away from the League in 1946, parts of the CPI found it difficult to chime with the new course. On 30 November 1947, a well-attended joint conference of local ML and CPI units convened in Lalgola in the Murshidabad district, during which “some C.P.I. speakers characterised the Congress as a communal organisation.” Conversely, the Leaguers’ questionable promise to commit the paramilitary Muslim National Guards to the securing of peace was well received.⁷⁸⁹ However considerable the extent of communalism in the Bengal INC: Assisting the pot in calling the kettle black attested to the enduring pro-Muslim sentiment. In this sense, a 1951 appraisal of Joshi has its truth in that the “party of the proletariat was too weak and,” nota bene, too “immature to play any effective role” in the course of events. However, his claim that the CPI had ever been “the honest broker between the warring Congress and League leaderships” tuned out its own bias.⁷⁹⁰

This very text of Joshi (which also has to be read as an ex post justification of his tenure as general secretary, rudely ended at the 1948 party congress with his ouster on the grounds of “reformism”) also exhibits an unusual degree of frankness on the CPI’s failed advances to the broad population before and during partition. Therefore, it shall here be quoted as an epigraph on communist mass-mongering. According to Joshi, the factual acceptance of partition as independence on the part of the ‘masses’ had demonstrated the extent to which they had been under the influence of the bourgeoisie. With this circumstance admitted, a remarkable degree of misanthropy manifested itself in Joshi’s closing verdict that the ensuing carnage was essentially well-deserved: “A people that hail treachery as liberation

⁷⁸⁸ Rammanohar Lohia, “Struggle against Communalism within and across the Border,” in *India and Pakistan*, ed. by Rammanohar Lohia, Ashok Mehta, and Jayaprakash Narayan (Patna: Socialist Party Publ. 1950), 1.

⁷⁸⁹ WBIB File 35/26 Murshidabad SL 271/1926, 26.

⁷⁹⁰ Joshi, *Documents for Discussion: Problems of the Mass Movement*, PCJ CPI 229, 11. On communalism in the Bengal Congress, see Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, 140–6.

can only learn through bitter experience and hard struggles.”⁷⁹¹ Woe to the ‘masses’ that do not requite communist affection. It is, however, telling that Joshi carefully avoided to implicate his own, openly pro-separatist line for the disaster of partition. Ever since, it has been the ‘bourgeois’ orientation rather than the enthusiasm for religious mass culture that figures as problematic, highlighting the lasting impact of the ‘nationality period.’

Synopsis of Chapter V

Reconciling (religious) communities to the constitution of a national whole surfaced as a plausible option for cutting-edge communist policy in the late 1930s. The means was to fashion the nation into a patchwork of communo-nationalities. Theoretical assistance was provided by recurring to Lenin’s nationality model, an approved instrument from the arsenal of real-life socialism. It legitimized both the developments on the subcontinent by casting them in Marxist idioms and the communist appropriation of this supposed current of history. The CPI modified Lenin’s model by two major departures, or innovations: First, by acknowledging religion as the basis of nationality. Second, by a degree of enthusiasm for the cultural—and religious—life of the “nationalities” that far exceeded both the requirements of tactical maneuvering and side-effects of mere political support.

It was on this terrain that the CPI’s much-maligned “people’s war” policy proved innovative and committed. Evolving in close vicinity to, but ignorant of, Gramsci’s considerations on counter-hegemony from below, the communist French New Wave self-consciously addressed specific constellations on the subcontinent in a highly situated way. This manifested both in the party’s essentially conservative interventions in the field of folk culture and its enthusiasm for identity aspects of Muslim and Sikh nation building. Growing quickly into their new roles as ‘organic intellectuals,’ leading communists—notably P. C. Joshi and Sajjad Zaheer—, but also the CPI as a whole reveled in native culture and religious community. The outrage at Rajani Palme Dutt’s modest critical intervention bore out the enthusiasm of many party workers for the policy.

This is not to say that the CPI had finally become a unitary party. Lingering dissent in some party segments (notably in Bombay) and the worsening political climate brought about

⁷⁹¹ Ibid.

a volte-face. In late 1946, the nationality policy was dropped. However, its affinity to religion and culture would outlast otherwise profound political reversals, such as the II party congress in 1948. And there prevailed consequential unity on the *raison d'être* of communist policy: Never to abandon the revolutionary subject—the “masses.” Perfect inner-party unity manifested in largely apologetic diction towards the fanaticized ‘masses’ as bystanders and perpetrators of the partition massacres.

Conclusion

It is precisely because religion under communist auspices has ever been a heteronomous affair that it has been able to rise into a formative instance in communist praxis. Religion occupies a doubly subordinate role. In Marxist theory, it is reduced to a secondary phenomenon of production relations; and to a secondary consideration in communist policy designs calibrated on class and nation. Communist practice constituted a warped echo of a dictum of Marx: That the criticism of religion was “essentially completed.”⁷⁹² On the merits of this philosophical *fait accompli*, communists viewed themselves either as enemies of religion, as atheists, or at least as areligious. All the while, religion was *insubstantial* rather than a dangerous adversary. This contributed to blurring the differences between anti-religious campaigning, indifference, and fashioning revolutionary politics of the day according to religious motives.

Marxist theory and communist practice alike denied religion a formative ideological influence which it could very well possess. This perceptive gap enabled it to become part of subcontinental communism, severely qualifying the latter’s areligious core. This recognition requires transcending the Marxist perspective, yet without settling on some other ostensible ‘essence’ of history, such as pragmatics, or ideas, or even religion itself. If the latter two have occupied center stage in this study to the detriment of other aspects, much of it is due to their neglect in most available accounts, and of course constraints in scope and time.

Even the most committed of Marx’s and Engels’s writings contain very little in terms of concrete directives. Both writers had been radical critics versed in philosophy and economic analysis rather than professional revolutionaries. For example, the *Communist Manifesto* had defined future communist society as one in which the “free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”⁷⁹³ The vagueness of this and other slogans contributed substantially to the appeal of Marxian thought. And it encouraged the epigones of Marx and Engels to develop vastly diverging visions of revolution and post-revolutionary society. These visions discounted rather than precluded religion: Marx’s aphorisms had characterized it as an ideological reflection of the misery and oppression notably of feudal societies. As rationalization and enlightened thought spread alongside with capitalist

⁷⁹² Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” 378.

⁷⁹³ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 482.

modernity, the power of religious consciousness would inevitably wane. Due to its position in the process of production exposing it to unveiled capitalist exploitation, the proletariat had supposedly shed its illusions on cheap consolation and was evolving the “proletarian consciousness” necessary for revolution.

However, in the section on the commodity fetish in *Capital* Marx acknowledged that the very ideology characterizing the dominant social relations constituted a formidable obstacle to the attainment of such consciousness. Bolshevism’s solution to the problem of consciousness was both more consequential and more practical. Bolshevik parties imagined the working class as a sleeping giant whose ideological ‘backwardness’ was largely the product of bourgeois manipulation. Hence, they assumed the role of a radical progressive order, of missionaries of communism, who set out to exorcize the parasitic and artificial capitalist spirit. There were no second strings: The proletariat could be ideologically conscious or not yet conscious. It could, however, not possess a fundamentally ‘wrong’ consciousness. If it didn’t respond to mobilization efforts, the fault was either with the erroneous application of Marxist theory, mistakes in the propaganda, or the momentarily overwhelming influence of ‘reaction.’ Yet why such influence could be at all entrenched among the supposed revolutionary class, and what followed from this, the Bolsheviks and subsequent communists mostly would not answer.

Nor did they recognize the need for the question. Marxist “science” had by and large displaced the vision of the transformation of philosophy into the proletariat’s self-conscious action already by Lenin’s early days as an agitator.⁷⁹⁴ After the revolution, Lenin became convinced that the communist triumph had been irrevocably proven by history. He called on the communists to champion “every popular movement.” The concept of national self-determination immensely facilitated their appropriation. It had sprung from the urge to actualize revolutionary Marxism to the burning political questions of the turn of the century. While Lenin had avoided positive references to “national culture,” Soviet practice soon demonstrated the unfeasibility of advocating unfettered national development without its cultural adjuncts. Religion and culture became part of the communist project in the same measure that the (social-revolutionary) proletariat made way for the (national-revolutionary) ‘masses.’ Early Soviet nationality policy, prominently devised by Stalin, substantiated this tendency. By blaming the vestiges of “social reaction” on Czarist rule, Stalin projected a ‘healthy,’ progressive core of indigenous “suppressed nationalities.” In the East, the “free

⁷⁹⁴ See Fetscher, “Von der Philosophie des Proletariats,” 27–8.

development of each” *individual* as envisioned in the *Communist Manifesto* materialized in the “independent and free development of each” *nationality*. Notably in the case of Soviet Muslims, this concept had to an extent been infused with religious notions.

Of course, there was also a political component. The grant of religious autonomy, including the practice of sharia, to the Dagestan ulema would not have materialized without their support in the civil war. Likewise, Bolshevik sympathies didn’t extend to those eager to pursue their “independent and free development” outside Soviet suzerainty. The Central Asian Basmachi rebels had to learn this the hard way. Nevertheless, the meaning and scope of emancipation acquired distinctly cultural undertones in the case of “suppressed” nations. Correspondingly, religion could transform from a focal point of anti-reactionary criticism into a component of national revival, or at least into a legitimate rallying point against imperialism. There was only one unequivocal and consistent injunction the CPI received from authoritative Leninist works and higher instances, notably the Comintern, alike. This was to get ever closer to the ‘masses’ and take up their demands and aspirations. Such a stance greatly abetted the accommodation of religion and culture trend and disfavored critical views on their specific character.

Subcontinental communist approaches to religion by and large conformed to one of two revolutionary paradigms. These evolved out of the distinction (in itself a passing remark by Stalin rather than a concept) between a socialist, culturally self-critical revolution in the West and an anti-imperialist, culturally affirmative revolution in the East. Put pointedly, these paradigms represented opposite notions of religion. The Western one regarded it as falsified (that is, finished for all intents and purposes), whereas the Eastern considered it non-falsifiable (that is, a valid and at times indispensable reference value).⁷⁹⁵ This appraisal comes with three caveats. First, it is not to claim that communists mindlessly copied their revolutionary recipes and policies from the Soviet Union. Instead, the theme of adaptation, often creative, assumed primacy. Second, it is communist practice rather than their theoretical efforts that allow for the identification of these very paradigms. In fact, they never matured into explicit, authoritative doctrines. And third, their implementation was neither systematical nor straightforward. Although British India, being a colony, constituted a model case for the application of the Eastern anti-imperialist paradigm, conditions on the subcontinent often discouraged this approach. The existence prior to communist activity of a

⁷⁹⁵ See James Lett, “Science, Religion, and Anthropology,” in *Anthropology of Religion: A Handbook*, ed. Stephen Galzler (Westport [CT]: Greenwood Press 1997), 116.

broad bourgeois pan-communal anti-colonial movement was a formidable obstacle to direct communist appropriation of religious culture.

Moreover: Even if interpenetrations of Marxist and religious elements in the articulation of the communist project remained palpable, the desire to transcend traditional forms and categories of politics was a core impetus for early communists. For example, communist stances on the Gandhian themes of spirituality and non-violence, which seemed to evoke the worst of the subcontinent's past, ranged from skepticism to disgust. It was not only for political and doctrinal reasons, but also for biographical ones that the Hindu outlook and bourgeois politics of the INC were a *bête noire* to the CPI. Yet, there remained the issue of the INC's immense popularity among the very populace the communists considered their own material for mobilization. Constellations along these lines invited the application of the Western paradigm: By separating leadership and followers it could fashion the mass following into unconscious partisans of the communist cause. This required sophisticated differentiation and autopoietic, adamantine clinging to the primacy of the underlying essence, invisible and revolutionary, against the contradicting, but insubstantial appearance on society's surface.

The most immediate implication of the Western approach was that subcontinental communist categories reproduced Marxist ones in *form* rather than in *content*. In the case of the proletariat, communists tried their best to write off an unbecoming 'backward' mind-set among the prospective revolutionary subject. Occasional acknowledgments of the actual ideological state of things remained isolated and marginal as they threatened the very *raison d'être* of the CPI. Not even the horrific 1929 communal riot among the Bombay workforce could unsettle these convictions. The result is an apparent mismatch between theoretical orthodoxy and empirical non-orthodoxy. However, it is this very mismatch that decisively governed the meaning of communism on the subcontinent. Subsuming the workforce under the general term 'proletariat' did not attest to 'incorrect' application of Marxist categories. Rather, it bore out their elasticity, let alone the difficulty of applying them 'correctly.' Part of the history of communist meaning has to be uncovered as the *illocutionary divergence* beneath the unitary theoretical edifice.

The approach towards rising communalism by and large also falls under the Western paradigm. Glaringly embarrassing the wholesome Eastern approach, communalism actualized the necessity to criticize current religious ideologemes. To be sure, they were ideologemes of bourgeois, communal, or imperialist instigators only. However, at this point unitary opinion ended and different traditions developed. One branch, represented by

theoreticians such as M. N. Roy and Rajani Palme Dutt, gainsaid the popular dimension of communalism altogether. They imagined it as a conspiracy of concretely identifiable groups of ‘reactionaries.’ According to this interpretation, the latter hired goondas to start riots and spread terror in order to stabilize their dominant position.

Another branch, more prominent among ‘communists on the spot,’ basically subscribed to this analysis. At the same time, these activists often tended to endow communalism ‘from below’ with quasi-revolutionary connotations. They were, after all, more familiar with local political climates and corresponding articulations of discontent. In the absence of better links to grass-roots politics, Muzaffar Ahmad even considered the allegation of communalism a deliberate slander of class struggle during the 1926 Calcutta riots. This approach was not confined to the Bengal communists. It occasionally surfaced to govern the appreciation of grass-roots movements throughout colonial times, such as the communal Moplah rebellion. From there, it was just a stone’s throw to the Eastern appropriation of communalism proper in a suitable theoretical guise—instead of only its concealed class essence.

Before the ‘nationality period’ of the 1940s, the Eastern paradigm had been reserved for supposedly non-bourgeois, resistive, and minority identity assertions ‘from below.’ It figured prominently in the attempts at defining revolutionary politics in the early 1920s when communists established a positive correlation between ‘revolutionary’ activity and the communal framework it manifested in. This was equally true for the struggle of the “heroic Sikhs” of the Akali movement to introduce Sikh in place of Hindu temple administration, the radically Islamic background of early associates of the Calcutta communists, and the initial embrace of the Moplah rebellion as a legitimate revolt of outraged Muslims. Even skeptical voices often suffered from religious bias, such as Dange’s lukewarm stance towards the Akali movement or Ahmad’s opposition to Roy’s wooing of Bengali Hindu terrorists. Both Dange and Ahmad clearly had fewer reservations towards their fundamentalist co-religionists. In Dange’s case, this translated into fervent reverence for Tilak’s militant, Hindu revivalist swadeshi campaign and firm depreciation of khilafat politics. The first half-decade of indigenous communism, at least until after the 1925 Kanpur conference, materialized in close and often explicit proximity to religious notions and categories in its environment.

During the party’s eclipse in the early 1930s under the double constraints of a sectarian Comintern line and government repression, communist approximation to subcontinental categories of political articulation underwent a theoretical revision. Fostered by the debates

surrounding the 1935 Government of India Act, a gradual reconsideration of ‘community’ materialized. Although the evidence is interspersed, it allows identifying a clear trend. It is discernible from K. B. Krishna’s qualified embrace of traditional indigenous culture, the criticism of only foreign religious institutions in programmatic party documents of the early 1930s, and the gradual approximation to grass-roots communal Muslim aspirations in the shape of the Ahrar movement in the mid-1930s.

Under the auspices of the Comintern’s 1935 popular front line, the CPI took up these cues in a process of reassessment of political constellations on the subcontinent. This led to a fundamental reevaluation and redefinition of communalism in the wake of the 1937 elections. Prodded forward by the communal divide as evinced by the election results, the failure of the INC’s Muslim Mass Contact campaign, and the emergence of a nationalist profile of the League, the communists revised their earlier stance of dismissing the League as sectarian and anti-national. Initial exhortations to the INC to abandon its Hindu tinge and fulfil Muslim “communal demands” for anti-British unity culminated in the embrace of separatist League politics from 1942 onwards. They were viewed to represent the aspirations of awakening “Muslim nationalities.” The policy aimed to provide a sustainable solution to the acute problem of national unity and at the same time opened up the perspective of a truly situated brand of communism.

This brand entailed undiluted appropriation of abstractly ‘national,’ but concretely communal expressions of Muslimness, Sikhdom, and even mainstream Hindu culture. During this pinnacle of communist self-Easternization, these expressions almost seemed to be congruent with emancipation proper. This went as far as castigating non-separatist Muslims for betraying ‘their’ nationalities’ self-assertion. In time, the practice extended to the “Sikh people,” apparently similarly deserving of a “homeland” of their own. The approach also manifested in communist embraces of grass-roots Hindu folk culture. All of this transformed the CPI’s activity into a distinctly Eastern variety of Gramscian meditations on building comprehensive counter-hegemony ‘from below.’ In fact, the only major ‘subaltern’ minority group not approached in terms of nationality were the untouchables. Yet Ambedkar’s SCF framed its agenda in anti-Hindu rather than in anti-British terms. Under the primacy of anti-imperialism, this rendered the SCF an unattractive political partner. Also, untouchables made up a sizeable part of the CPI’s own working-class constituency. The party therefore leaned towards solving the question of untouchability within its own fold.

Under the nationality policy, addressing the revolutionary subject in terms of its cultural and religious environment formed a desideratum rather than an anathema. The communist critical voice already had been timid with regard to ‘mass culture’ in a Western paradigm. In an Eastern policy context, it changed its pitch into fervent acculturation. Yet, although many themes resurfaced, the ‘nationality period’ was not just a reiteration of the cultural situatedness of the first communist years. Most conspicuously, a qualifying and more or less elaborate theoretical scaffold replaced unmediated appropriations of ‘mass’ culture and outlook. It defined their assertion in terms of established Marxist categories. The Eastern policy of the 1940s was systematic and manifested in tangible political and organizational steps. Other than the more naïve revolutionary enthusiasm of the early 1920s, the theoretical lining of the ‘nationality period’ established pseudo-scientific communal zoo-ification in a communist horizon. On the eve of independence, the ‘nationality period’ acquainted the communists with the means and categories of community politics—a legacy they would draw on in a post-independence setting.

Certainly, this does not mean that the inclusive Eastern paradigm had finally prevailed. The quaint and at times odd cohabitation of both approaches continues to distinguish subcontinental communism. Vocal opposition to the politicization of religion stands abreast with accommodation of ‘subaltern,’ often Muslim identity. Together, they constitute the historical misnomer that is the CPI’s anti-religious reputation: Pungent criticism of religion occurred mostly in connection with foreign rule or upper-class interests, real or perceived. Religion was considered problematic not as ruling *ideology*, but as a *technique* of rule. This indicates that the CPI was anything but aloof and detached from conditions on the subcontinental ground. Rather, its approach proved compatible to popular currents and ideologemes.

If any kind of insight is easy to be had it is the a posteriori kind, which lends itself just as easily to fault-finding. Shashi Joshi’s verdict that Roy had exhibited “rigid, simplistic notions of ‘consciousness’” in his efforts to rouse the ‘masses’ against bourgeois non-cooperation is certainly *correct*.⁷⁹⁶ Yet, together with the bulk of Marxist criticism of the CPI, it is not *true* in that it ignores both the historic dilemma and the contemporary power of communist weltanschauung. The externalizing Western paradigm governing Roy’s appraisals was a *necessary* idealist delusion for any communist. Acknowledging the bleak reality of dominant outlooks would have left little space for radical intervention. And unlike

⁷⁹⁶ Joshi, *Struggle for Hegemony* 1:52.

in other parts of Asia, the potential attraction of an Eastern paradigm's comprehensive acculturation was circumscribed by a pre-existing national movement that had already appropriated religion and traditional culture. Invoking revolutionary mass consciousness by pen and referring to it in (later) practice created space, and justification, for communist activity. In theory, the latter quite 'naturally' resulted from the axiom that the potential for class struggle existed in every society. The result was a circular reasoning where the very presence of communists was a vindication of progressive forces of history, or in other words, resulted from objective historical constellations. Or as Dange put it later in a justification of political rapprochement with the Congress Party: "How can the whole thing be bourgeois when I am there."⁷⁹⁷

In the same interview, Dange also exposed the fateful logic behind communist self-situation in a subcontinental environment. Echoing Lenin's call to support "every popular movement," he asserted that "if we don't accept Mahatma Gandhi, Tilak and all that, then in that case we are not accepting the masses also. Because, then, we turn the masses into great bloody fools"—apparently the ultimate anti-thesis of communist politics.⁷⁹⁸ Reversely, according to Dange's above credo it was the very presence of communists that indicated progress in whatever circumstances.

Considering the above and the CPI's track record and the criticisms often leveled at it, it follows that: If anything deserves to be called communist 'ideology' in the proper Marxian sense of the word ("necessarily wrong consciousness"), it is this fundamental conviction of inevitably standing for progress. It ensured that communists were, if at all, only gradually more committed to the divestiture of traditional loyalties and religious life-worlds than their bourgeois predecessors. If there was anything 'wrong' with the subcontinental communists, it was the entropic pattern of Marxist-Leninist reasoning, which accounts for people only as social measurements, or *things*, according to Max Horkheimer. And if there was anything 'un-Marxist' about the CPI, it was its existence in circumstances rewarding adaptation to, rather than transformation of, what Marx had identified as 'backwards' in culture and society. The *Communist Manifesto*'s "free development of each" individual came to include its anti-thesis (that is, religious communities) as part of a 'mass culture' acknowledged as resistive—implicitly in a Western, explicitly in an Eastern paradigm. More than anything else, it is this constellation that contains the meaning of subcontinental communism.

⁷⁹⁷ Chandra, "S. A. Dange—An Interview," in Sen, *Indian Communism*, 28.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

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