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Anarchism in India

Jesse Cohn

2009

In the context of India and its anti-colonial struggle, the meaning of the word “anarchist” has been highly variable and contested since the turn of the twentieth century. The British colonizers then called Indian radicals – particularly rebels in Bengal, who had begun to use explosives as a means of fighting – “anarchists.” Around the same time, on a 1909 visit to London, Mohandas K. Gandhi, deeply influenced by the radical pacifism espoused by Leo Tolstoy, debated anti-colonial tactics with the residents of India House, among whom he encountered young radicals whose ideology he, too, described as “anarchist,” although he may have meant by this merely that they were advocates of armed struggle. While Gandhi’s manifesto, *Hind Swaraj (Indian Home Rule)*, repudiated their “brute force” methods (Gandhi 1989: 104–5), seven years later he was to alarm his allies by announcing, at the opening of Benaras Hindu University, that “I myself am an anarchist, but of another type” (1989: 134). This assertion was to be strongly endorsed by self-defined anarchists of other nations – not only anarcho-pacifists such as Brazil’s Maria Lacerda de Moura (1887–1945), who cited Gandhi as a positive example in her anarchist-feminist attack on militarism, but also by exiled

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Retrieved on 22nd November 2021 from
onlinelibrary.wiley.com

Published in *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and
Protest.*

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Bombay radical Mandayam Prativadi Bhayankara Tirumal Acharya (a.k.a. M. P. T. Acharya, 1888–1954).

Writing for the American anarchist journal *Man!* in 1933, Acharya described Gandhi's 1930 civil disobedience campaign against the Raj salt laws in glowing terms: "In the salt-making protest, Gandhi acted like an Anarchist tactician of the first magnitude... That day we must reckon as the birth of popular Anarchy in the world – not only in India. He planted the seed of Anarchism – even if he did not want or know it" (Acharya 1947: 2). These "claims" were greeted with frank skepticism on the part of the editor, Marcus Graham (a.k.a. Shmuel Marcus, 1893–1985), and while British anarchist Albert Meltzer (1920–96) praised Acharya for "striving on his own in the whole sub-continent to establish a movement," he nonetheless spoke for many other western anarchists in deprecating Gandhi's "cult of extreme non-violence" as elitist, a moralistic "check" on authentically popular rebellions (Meltzer 2000: 32). To such charges, Geoffrey Ostergaard replies that Gandhian non-violence indeed represents "an indigenous *Indian* anarchism and not one of the varieties of *Western* anarchism imported into India," adding that "if Western anarchists do not recognize Indian anarchism when they see it, this merely exposes their unconscious Eurocentric perspective" (in Sonnleitner 1988: viii). Finally, many of the Indians whom Acharya and Ostergaard call "anarchists" have firmly rejected the label as a derogatory term applied to them by colonial discourse. With all of these caveats, however, Indian history bears the traces of two distinct anarchisms.

The best known of these is that of Gandhi and the Sarvodaya movement, which shares with western anarchisms a rejection not only of militarism but of the distinction between means and ends, and a project of land collectivization (*Bhoodan* and *Gramdan*) in the context of a decentralist economic strategy, as well as "a critique of both Bolshevik Communism and Welfare State Socialism, the espousal of community action and the no-

tions of direct participatory democracy, ‘people’s power,’ and ‘the politics of the people,’ as distinct from ‘the politics of the State’ and party politics” (Ostergaard 1971: 148; Ostergaard in Sonnleitner 1988: viii). It is distinct from most western anarchisms in founding this program not on a refusal of religion as a source of oppression, but an embrace of religion as a source of collective spirit, which has entailed an anti-materialist asceticism, even a “puritanical character,” entirely at odds with the hedonism and sexual libertarianism of Lacerda de Moura and her counterparts (Ostergaard 1971: 156–7).

A second, far smaller anarchist current has consisted in a number of Indian radicals who took on board the ideas of western anarchists. Among these were two of the young men Gandhi may have met at India House: Lala Har Dayal (a.k.a. Lala Hardayal, 1884–1939) and M. P. T. Acharya. Har Dayal, who had begun flirting with anarchist ideas as early as 1907, was inspired by the example of the Mexican anarchists Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón on his visit to America in 1911, infusing anarchist ideas into his Ghadar (“Rebellion”) movement for Indian independence. Settling for a time in California, Har Dayal established a Bakunin Institute in 1913, but was subsequently forced to flee political persecution, taking refuge in Germany and later renouncing his radicalism.

Acharya began his political life with a lengthy exile in Europe and Central Asia, helping to found the Communist Party of India in Tashkent in 1920 before becoming disillusioned with Soviet-style communism and turning to the anarchosyndicalist views to which he had been exposed in London and Paris (Ralhan 1997: 119–20; Meltzer 2000: 128). A prolific writer, Acharya contributed to western anarchist publications such as the British *Freedom*, *Tierra y Libertad* in Mexico, and the French *Contre Courant* while corresponding with fellow Asian anarchists such as Yamaga Taiji (1892–1970). Bhagat Singh (1907–31), impressed by his reading of the history of European anarchists’ “propaganda by the deed,” rejected Gandhian non-

violence as an inadequate tactic, calling for the assassination of colonial officials, and wrote a series of articles in 1928 endorsing the anarchist goals of “complete independence” and the elimination of “the Church, God and Religion” as well as “control by the state” and “private property” before turning back towards a Marxist position (Grewal 2007: 52–4).

While the Sarvodaya movement at least retained strength long after Independence and Gandhi’s assassination, neoliberal economics and authoritarian politics have largely eclipsed India’s libertarian traditions.

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