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21.02.2024

Rezension zu: *Laursen, Ole Birk: Anarchy or Chaos. M. P. T. Acharya and the Indian Struggle for Freedom. London 2023* , ISBN 9781787389489, in: H-Soz-Kult, 21.02.2024. <hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-136768?language=en>
Edited by Maria Framke.
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Title: Anarchy or Chaos. M. P. T. Acharya and the Indian Struggle for Freedom
Author(s): Laursen, Ole Birk
Published: London 2023: Hurst & Co.
Extent: 343 S.
Price: £45.00
ISBN: 9781787389489

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There is no shortage of biographies of world-travelling Interwar Indian revolutionaries, but Ole Birk Laursen's "Anarchy or Chaos, M. P. T. Acharya and the Indian Struggle for Freedom" manages to enrich the genre in several meaningful ways. What set Acharya apart from better-known colleagues such as M. N. Roy, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya and Shyamji Krishnavarma was his embracing of anarchism as the ideology of true independence – both for individuals and wider popula-

tions.[1] Laursen's biography stands out through its attention to detail, for example when the reader pictures Acharya at a 1907 Congress meeting in Surat, caught in a brawl between "moderates" and "extremists," lifting a chair in the air in order to throw it at a moderate nationalist, but refraining when suddenly faced with his respected old teacher (p. 28). Such scenes, supported by ample evidence from various angles, convey the complexities and fissures within the Indian national movement, one of the main aims of the book, as well as the political and personal struggles faced by an individual member (p. 9).

The biography takes the reader through known theatres of Indian revolutionary activity such as London, Paris, New York, Moscow, Tashkent, Stockholm and Berlin, where Acharya produced propaganda and was involved in a plethora of revolutionary organisations. In addition, it visits more unusual sites such as Tangier, where Acharya found himself stranded when he wanted to help the Rifians in their insurrection against the Spanish during the 1909 Second Melillan Campaign, and Constantinople, the Suez Canal and Baghdad, where Acharya was a part of a Turkish-German mission to sabotage the British Empire during World War One. What's also unusual for biographies of Indian revolutionaries abroad is that Laursen dwells on Acharya's time in India, where he lived in Bombay (now Mumbai) between 1935 and his death there in 1954. The book details his efforts to start an anarchist movement and publication, as well as his intellectual exchanges with socialists and anarchists from India to France and Uruguay. Laursen's nuts-and-bolts insights into the mechanics of an itinerant life, characterised by mostly precarity and some privilege, are among the

[1] See for example Kris Manjapra, M. N. Roy. Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism, London, New York 2010; Nirode K. Barooah, Chatto. The Life and Times of an Anti-Imperialist in Europe, New Delhi 2004; Harald Fischer-Tiné, Shyamji Krishnavarma. Sanskrit, Sociology and Anti-Imperialism, London 2014; Timothy Harper, Underground Asia Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire, London 2020.

greatest strengths of the biography. It relies on sources gathered from archives on several continents, including police reports, records from political organisations, published journals, memoirs and images, as well as a wealth of correspondence. Through careful reflection about what such sources tell us – and, crucially, what they do not – Laursen's work speaks to the wider literature on mobility and cosmopolitanism, particularly in suggesting that an important feature of mobile intellectuals was their occasional isolation.[2]

Reconstructing Acharya's relative isolation in both Stockholm and independent India as well as his utter destitution at several points during his life complicates narratives of easy connections between faraway places made by mobile intellectuals – even in places that we would think of as their "home". As such, Laursen's biography conveys an image of mobility that changed an individual both in terms of their capacities and their limitations, all to an extent where they could not simply return to a place where they were at home again, but remained strangers to an extent. A key characteristic of this type of mobility was language, at times as a helpful resource, sometimes an insurmountable boundary, or subject for reflection. Acharya often managed to eke out a living as a translator between English and many other languages, even in Soviet Russia, where he and other Indians worked for the American Relief Association in 1922, as it was providing food assistance to millions of people. By that point Acharya found himself at odds with the Bolshevik regime, but his value as a translator meant he stayed out of harm's way, at least for a while (p. 117). At other times, a lack of certain language skills isolated Acharya from his direct environment and circumscribed the extent to which he could do effective on-the-ground political work, as

[2] For example Miles Ogborn, Global Lives. Britain and the World, 1550–1800, Cambridge 2008; Desley Deacon, Transnational Lives. Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present, Basingstoke 2010.

he wrote while in India in in 1950: "As I do not speak or write in any Indian language well, I can only try to work on intellectuals" (p. 226). English, French, Spanish and German also provided an avenue for global anarchist cooperation, being widely known as they were, but were troubling because of their colonial history. Esperanto, on the other hand, though favoured by Korean, Japanese and Chinese anarchists, was not understood widely enough (p. 211).

For an intellectual biography, what the book could have traced in more detail are Acharya's ideas. While Laursen time and again shows Acharya's connections to other intellectuals, the contents of their discussions take up less space – even though the book claims global anarchism cannot be understood without reference to Acharya (p. 9). As Acharya was a highly prolific writer grappling with various political and cultural systems, the reader is left wanting to know more. Particularly his life-long engagement with Gandhi and non-violence is intriguing, as is the question to which extent Acharya's critiques affected anarchist thought more broadly. Specifically, more could be said about Acharya's take on anarchist conceptions of free love, developed in contact with the French anarchist E. Armand, who had set up an organisation with the impressive name of the Association Internationale de Combat contre la Jalousie et l'Exclusivisme en Amour (p. 162). Acharya thought Indians seemed more reasonable and free-spirited than Europeans when it came to sexuality, and that matriarchal societies "[…] were historically more equal and non-hierarchical and would pave the way for more anarchic communities" (p. 164). Did he in any way refer to South Indian instances of matriarchy, and if so, in what way? There seems to be more left worth exploring in Acharya's work in conjunction with global anarchism. Compellingly, Laursen notes the absence of certain things in Acharya's work, which reflected little on issues of caste and the violence of Partition, but does not offer suggestions



for why this may have been the case, and if this was due to Acharya's individual point of view or may have applied more widely among itinerant revolutionaries.

The book takes the reader into the life of an oft-missed but significant radical Indian thinker and activist who made his mark in a wide range of political and intellectual theatres. With it, Laursen has produced a thorough and refreshing biography of a fascinating intellectual that will not only prove of interest to students of anarchism or the Indian national movement, but will also provide solid ground for those historians working on intellectuals and mobility.