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An Anarchist Communist ‘In Defence of a Free Press’

Guy Aldred and the Indian Nationalists in London

Ole Birk Laursen

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At a time when press freedom is, simultaneously, under attack by and usurped by the political right across the United States, India and Britain, for example, there is an urgent need to bear in mind the ways in which activists and radicals on the political left have defended the right to free speech and press historically. While the sedition law was still used against IRA organisers in the 1970s, the law was scrapped in the UK in 2009. However, it remains in the statute books in many former British colonies, including India. The repression of a free press, in other words, is another colonial legacy that demands greater historical attention if we are to understand the importance of defending it.

In November 2015, the Benchers of the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple reinstated the former Indian lawyer and nationalist Shyamaji Krishnavarma ‘in recognition of the fact that the cause of Indian home rule, for which he fought, was not incompatible with membership of the bar and that by modern standards he did not receive an entirely fair hearing’. As an

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advocate of non-parliamentarian anti-colonial nationalism, Krishnavarma was the founder of the Indian revolutionary movement in Britain; in the space of six months in 1905, he set up scholarships for Indian students to study in Britain, the penny-monthly *The Indian Sociologist*, the Indian Home Rule Society and India House, a hostel for Indian students in London.

In February and March 1909, Krishnavarma engaged in a public quarrel with Virendranath Chattopadhyaya in *The Times* newspaper, in which he defended the murder of British officials and innocent bystanders because 'those who habitually live and associate with wrongdoers or robbers [and Indian Nationalists regard all Englishmen in India as robbers] do so at their own peril'. This attracted unwanted attention from Inner Temple, which decided to disbar him on 30 April 1909. As a consequence of his public defence of political assassination, he also found himself in need of a new printer of *The Indian Sociologist*. Asking first Thomas Keell, editor of the anarchist publications *Freedom* and *The Voice of Labour*, and then Twentieth Century Press, the contract eventually went to Arthur Horsley. In the July 1909 issue, Krishnavarma once again noted that 'we repeat that political assassination is not murder'.

When former India House-resident Madan Lal Dhingra assassinated political *aide-de-camp* Sir William Hutt Curzon Wylie (and Cowasjee Lalcaca, a doctor who tried to help Curzon Wylie) on the front steps of the Imperial Institute in London on 1 July 1909, Krishnavarma's premonitory defence of political assassination naturally brought *The Indian Sociologist* and India House even further into the spotlight of Scotland Yard. While Krishnavarma edited the publication from Paris, where he had lived since June 1907 and could therefore not be prosecuted, Horsley was immediately arrested and sentenced to four months in prison for printing sedition. Upon hearing that the government had suppressed *The Indian Sociologist* and charged Horsley with sedition, the British anarchist Guy A. Aldred contacted Krishnavarma and offered to print the periodical with

the Bakunin Press, which he had set up with the German-born anarchist Charles Lahr in 1907.

In the August issue, Krishnavarma reiterated that 'political assassination is not murder', and Aldred linked the fate of Dhingra to the British working class: 'he is not a time-serving executioner, but a Nationalist patriot, who, though his ideals are not their ideals, is worthy of the admiration of the workers, at home, who have little to gain from the lick-spittling crew of Imperialist blood-sucking Capitalist parasites at home, as what the Nationalists have in India'. Aldred was immediately arrested and at the trial in September 1909 he remarked that 'I have undertaken the printing and publication of [Krishnavarma's] paper in defence of a Free Press'. He was sentenced to 12 months in prison.

During Aldred's imprisonment in Brixton Jail, the Indian nationalist Vinayak Savarkar was arrested in London for his involvement in the murder of A. M. T. Jackson in India in December 1909 as well as seditious speeches in 1906. En route to stand trial in India in July 1910, Savarkar jumped ship outside Marseille and made it onto French territory where he claimed asylum. Controversially, he was returned to the British authorities on the vessel, which caused uproar among European socialists and anarchists, British and French alike.

Released from prison in early July 1910, Aldred immediately set up the Savarkar Release Committee and threw himself into the fight for Savarkar's right to asylum in France. Through his paper *The Herald of Revolt*, he covered the case closely and urged the British anarchists to take up the case as well. Drawing comparisons to the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta's deportation case in 1912, he published a special 'Savarkar Issue' of *The Herald of Revolt* and remarked that 'Savarkar's immediate release must be insisted upon with the same fervour, the same unwavering determination as that with which we demanded Malatesta's salvation from an Italian dungeon'. To little avail, though. The anarchists in Britain

were reluctant to get involved in the case and, in general, resisted the nationalist bent of the Indians. Aldred's Savarkar Release Committee only amassed a few pounds altogether, and he never succeeded in garnering support for Savarkar's release from the anarchists in Britain. When the First World War broke out, Aldred turned his attention to campaigning against conscription. As a consequence, he was imprisoned and interned several times during the war, and his attention to the Indian nationalist struggle for independence waned.

Convinced of his right to defend the Indians and their propaganda organ, however, Aldred was also blind to the problems of Hindu nationalism, espoused by Savarkar and Lala Har Dayal, for instance, and his anarchist vision of freedom remains somewhat compromised by his myopia. Despite Krishnavarma's reinstatement to the bar in 2015, the Indian nationalist struggle for independence in Britain was not unproblematic and retained dangerous elements that linger on in India today. However, as we return to the colonial archives to uncover a longer history of defence of freedom of the press, we are reminded of the ways in which the global political left must still defend the free press from the hands of those who curb and usurp it.