1 Revolutionary Pasts

> To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was'. It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.[1]
>
> Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*

Working on a maize farm deep in the Argentinian heartland in the year 1929, Naina Singh Dhoot was taken aback by an unexpected visit from Rattan Singh, a communist, roving revolutionary, and leader of the Ghadar Party. Prior to his visit, Rattan Singh had already toured Europe, the United States, Canada, and Panama for the party, which had initially been founded by Indian immigrants in North America in 1913 with the single-minded purpose of freeing India from British rule. In the 1920s, the party established links with the Communist International, which enabled it to send its cadres and recruits to Moscow for political and military training. As part of its mission of recruiting new cadres, the party sent its emissaries to Indian diasporas across the world, from North and South America to East Africa and South East Asia. This was how Naina Singh met Rattan Singh, the party's emissary extraordinaire.

Born and raised in the village of Dhoot Kalan, Punjab, Naina Singh had migrated to Singapore in 1927 in search of work. It was in Singapore that he first learnt the poetry of revolution. There, he heard of a collection of poems by Punjabi labourers and farmworkers in North America. The *Ghadar di Gunj* (Reverberations of Rebellion) lamented the chains of imperialist slavery that bound India and Indians. But its poems also sang of revolution, freedom, and a new world to come, a world that was within their grasp. For Naina Singh and his friends, it was almost as if a 'new spirit had been injected into them'.[2] In Argentina, his next destination in search of work, Naina Singh was equally spellbound by what he heard from Rattan Singh, who appeared as a 'divine messenger' from another

[1] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' (1940), www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm.

[2] Naina Singh Dhoot, *The Political Memoirs of an Indian Revolutionary*, trans. Surinder Singh (Manohar Publishers, 2005), p. 89.

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world. Other emissaries of the Ghadar soon followed in his footsteps. They too spoke of the tyranny of British rule. Already chastened by their experiences of racism and exploitation in foreign countries and moved by Ghadar's stirring call for action, Naina Singh and his fellow Punjabi workers set up a party cell in the city of Rosario. He offered his name to the list of cadres who swore to sacrifice their *tan*, *man*, and *dhan* (body, soul, and wealth) for the party. Others promised to sacrifice one, some two of the three.[3] Shortly after making their pledge, Naina Singh and his comrades left Argentina for the Soviet Union.

Their journeys to, and sojourn in, the Soviet Union indelibly changed their lives. They formed a nucleus of Indian revolutionaries who travelled via the Soviet Union to bolster the growing communist movement in India. In doing so, they were among countless others who made their way to Moscow, the undisputed centre of the communist world. For revolutionaries from the colonized world and beyond, the Soviet Union stood as a symbol of world revolution, as the patron in chief of national liberation struggles, and a site where a new age, a new future, a new world, were being inaugurated. Whether their paths physically passed through Moscow or not, the ideals of Communist Internationalism the Soviet Union ostensibly stood for remained profoundly inspiring and liberating for millions of men and women looking to reclaim their future. At stake for them was nothing less than the radical transformation and rebirth of a degraded and tarnished world. How this global project unfolded in colonial India with all its twists and turns is the story of this book.

The other central concern of this book is the utopian impulse that enabled and sustained this politics. What did it mean to live in utopian times? What, indeed, made those journeys possible? By any measure. Naina Singh's decision to leave for Moscow with eight of his comrades was a daring course of action. They had reached Argentina in search of work. Simply getting there had been onerous enough. But they were willing to give it all up in pursuit of a dream. Few had any illusions about what this might mean for them. They knew the risks in leaving for the Soviet Union. Not only was the way to Moscow fraught with dangers, it also meant a life on the run from an unforgiving British Empire.

And yet they were irresistibly drawn to this life. It was no coincidence that Naina Singh spoke of a 'new spirit' and a 'divine' message. This was an appropriate description of the utopianism of his times. How do we understand this sensibility, especially in our present times, which are

[3] Ibid., pp. 96–100.

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marked by an entrenched suspicion of idealism and utopianism? Today, utopias and utopian visions appear as relics of a bygone age. Not so long ago, though, they were the hallmark of a rapidly transforming and tumultuous 'short' twentieth century.[4] This was, after all, the century of internationalisms, all of which sought to link geographically dispersed movements through global projects that would transform the world.[5] Together, they were sustained by certain expectations of the future. In this, Naina Singh Dhoot, along with countless others, was very much a part of his times. This book, then, is centrally concerned with excavating what Reinhart Koselleck called the 'horizon of expectation'.[6] And it is within this horizon that I seek to situate the politics of Communist Internationalism in India.

What made Naina Singh's world so rich with possibilities? That this was a world marked by political tumult, intellectual ferment, collapsing empires, global conflict, transnational solidarities, revolutionary change, and much else does not bear repeating at length. Other studies have shown this in a more comprehensive way than I could hope to emulate here.[7] For my purposes, it is sufficient to note that the subjects of this book found themselves in a vortex of an unprecedented intellectual, social, and political ferment unleashed by the cataclysmic events of the first half of the twentieth century, particularly the years following the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. This was a world in which anything, and everything, seemed possible. From Woodrow Wilson's promise of self-determination for colonized peoples to Vladimir Lenin's support for national liberation struggles to the heady mixture of anarchism, syndicalism, socialism, communism, feminism, anti-racism,

[4] A phrase immortalized by Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (Michael Joseph, 1994).

[5] See, in particular, Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Glenda Sluga and Patricia Calvin (eds.), *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Miguel B. Jeronimo and Jose P. Monteiro, *Internationalism, Imperialism and the Formation of the Contemporary World: The Pasts of the Present* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Miralini Sinha, Donna Guy, and Angela Woollacott, *Feminisms and Internationalism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1999); Marc Matera and Susan K. Kent, *The Global 1930s: The International Decade* (Routledge, 2017); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2009); and Ali Raza, Franziska Roy, and Benjamin Zachariah, *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, and World Views, 1917–39* (Sage, 2014).

[6] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Columbia University Press, 2004).

[7] See, for instance, Philipp Blomm, *Vertigo Years: Europe 1900–1914* (Basic Books, 2010); Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Mariner Books, 2000); Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (W.W. Norton, 2001); Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*.

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fascism, revolutionary terrorism, Pan-Islamism, and Pan-Asianism, this was a world seemingly on the brink of transformative change. The present with its tyranny was no longer desirable, or even tenable.

Keeping this backdrop in view, I cover a period of four decades, from the eve of the First World War to the immediate aftermath of decolonization. Through a geography that goes beyond the colony and metropole, I chart the intellectual and political journeys of key individuals in revolutionary networks that linked cities and villages in northern India to North America, East Asia, Europe, and the Soviet Union. The individuals I cover are exiled dissidents, migrant workers, students, lascars, peasants, and religious mendicants, all united by a desire to remake the world. My aim is to show the varying inflections of communist and leftist internationalism over this period and how the dream it kindled momentarily receded in the embers of a violent post-war and decolonizing world. In doing so, I demonstrate the diverse and changing contours of leftist politics – a broad platform encompassing a dizzying variety of political expressions – and its relationship with global intellectual and political trends. Viewed this way, this book is a contribution to a world history of communist and leftist internationalism from a South Asian perspective.

Situating the Left

When does this story begin? Where does it originate? It is worth starting from these questions, not least because they have framed the way the Left in South Asia is understood and written about. Both questions are also derived from a nationalist reading of the Left's history. The tone for these frameworks was set by one of the first, and certainly the most influential, scholarly studies on the communist movement in India. Published in 1959 by political scientists Gene Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* was written under the auspices of the Institute for South Asia Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. It was also funded by the Ford Foundation. Both sources of institutional support give a clue to the book's central concerns and assumptions.[8] The first chapter began its account by pointing out that, 'although concrete attempts to plant the Russian flag there were abortive, India, the pivot of the British Empire, was for centuries an object of tsarist ambitions'. From there, it was only a short leap, literally a paragraph's worth, to discussing how the Bolshevik regime only carried forward Russia's tsarist

[8] See, for instance, Ishan Ashutosh, 'America's Battle over South Asia: Imagining the Region in the Second World War', www.saada.org/tides/article/americas-battle-over-south-asia (accessed 23 February 2017).

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ambitions. Much like the Tsars before them, the Bolsheviks understood 'that even a *threat* to British power in India would undermine British power the world over'. To be effective, though, 'the Bolsheviks needed both a revolutionary plan and revolutionary agents'.[9]

This was how Indian revolutionaries stepped into a history that was always understood as a history external to them. It was never theirs to begin with. *Communism in India* was not the only monograph making this charge. In explicitly situating the history of Indian 'communism' outside of 'India', Overstreet and Windmiller were building on earlier histories framed by colonial officials and the colonial archive itself. Each act of colonial writing prior to *Communism in India* helped etch a rough framework through which communism could be understood and made legible in terms of language and conceptual framings. Central to this framework was the assumption that 'communism', however defined, was foreign to India. Overstreet and Windmiller extended this argument in a scholarly endeavour that helped foreground the question of foreignness or origins in other scholarly studies on the Left in South Asia. Their concluding, and rather foreboding, note to the book left little doubt where communists would be situated in historiography. Following a detailed commentary on the prospects of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Indian politics, they warned that 'up to now, [the CPI's] nature has been more Communist than Indian … Should it become even a little more Indian, it will be truly a force to be reckoned with.'[10]

My purpose, though, is obviously not to quarrel with a text written in the 1950s. *Communism in India* was clearly a product of its time. Even if it was shaped by the Cold War, it was still a thorough empirical account of communist politics in India. What is of interest to me is how the question of foreignness came to foreground and dominate any discussion of the communist movement in South Asia. It was no accident that *Communism in India* took the question of origins, or rather foreignness, as its starting point. Indeed, this charge had been central to the colonial and postcolonial state's attempts in delegitimizing communists in both India and Pakistan. Nationalist histories in both countries sought to efface other histories of belonging. And prominent among them was the history of the Left. The Left in both countries was cast as a proxy of communist blocs and as an anti-national force, a term that has become even more amplified today.

[9] Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Perennial Press, 1960; first published University of California Press, 1959), pp. 7–8. Emphasis in the original.
[10] Ibid., pp. 538–539.

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The trope of foreignness, though, served another purpose. As Overstreet and Windmiller hinted, Indian communism's alleged failure and inherent inability to embed itself in the social and cultural fabric on the subcontinent was the paramount reason for its apparent inefficacy or failure. This issue of success and failure is another question that has dominated both scholarly and popular accounts of the Left. More recently, the evocatively titled *Marxism in India: From Decline to Debacle* claimed that 'the Marxists did not, *rather could not*, grow their roots in India'.[11] Another claimed that the inapplicability of 'Marxist scriptures' to India's 'traditional social and cultural mores' meant that communism was unable to establish a foothold in the subcontinent.[12] To that, one can add innumerable works, all attempting to answer why the Left, and communism specifically, 'failed' in India.[13] The charge is familiar. Not only were communists alien to their land, they were also bound to an inflexible, rigid, and all too foreign ideology that permitted little, if any, deviation. And so communists could best be understood through their dense and impermeable texts – a move that would be not be unfamiliar to scholars of orientalism – and which, as Overstreet and Windmiller pointed out, could only be decoded by the 'priesthood' of the communist movement.[14] Given this framework, communists and leftists of varying stripes could only exist as unthinking, unreflexive agents, responsive only to the external powers that controlled them. The interrelated questions of origins, success/failure, and ideology, then, all served to expunge these subjects from the history they helped create. They were always external to it, never really registering an impact or leaving their unique imprint on this history.

Lest this be mistaken as a mere historiographical debate, it is worth pointing out how these framings continue to have enduring consequences for political alternatives in South Asia today. Which ideas belong? Where do they originate? Who speaks for those ideas? How are they (de)legitimized? These questions continue to haunt the political

[11] Kiran Maitra, *Marxism in India: From Decline to Debacle* (Roli Books, 2012), preface (my emphasis).

[12] Satyabrata Ray Chowdhuri, *Leftism in India, 1917–1947* (Palgrave, 2007), pp. 210–211.

[13] For another, and earlier, example, see J. Bandyopadhyay, *Indian Nationalism versus International Communism: Role of Ideology in International Politics* (Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966), who claimed that the 'available published material on Indian Communism proves beyond any doubt that in its origin and development, the Communist Party of India was not an indigenous growth; that it was launched, inspired, promoted, controlled and directed by foreign Communist agencies'. All the scholarly books referred to were published in the Anglo-American hemisphere, and included, obviously, Overstreet and Windmiller, who, in their 'brilliant and hitherto unsurpassed study … produced by far the best account of the origin and development of the Communist Party of India and its *foreign links*' (my emphasis), p. 6.

[14] Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, p. 5.

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sphere in South Asia, especially in our own times when parochial nationalisms seem to be on the ascendant. And it is partly through these framings that the Left has historically been marginalized, in Pakistan more so than India and Bangladesh. This is, of course, not to uncritically endorse the Left as an antidote to contemporary populisms. But it is to argue against restricting and reducing ideas to questions of belonging.[15] In this sense, even relatively sympathetic histories on the Left have not fared any better. Here too one can detect an original/copy model at work that studies how communist and socialist ideas travelled from the 'centre' to peripheries around the world.[16]

For these reasons, I argue for a history that resists these framings. I claim no originality in this approach. In the past decade or so, some excellent studies have considerably enriched our understanding of revolutionary and leftist pasts in South Asia.[17] My work, then, extends these attempts at questioning the dominant discourse on the Left. My purpose is not simply to invert the way in which the Left has been written about. Doing so inevitably places the Left in a nationalist framework in which only its contributions to the liberation of India are highlighted and eulogized. Viewed within these confines, communist and leftist pasts will always be truncated and open to questions that mark them as alien to that specific history. That, at any rate, has been the thrust of the many hagiographical works on the Left, authored either by erstwhile comrades or by those sympathetic to them. In contrast, I am interested in charting the evolution and development of leftist thought and politics through the lives of those who inhabited them. In doing so, I trace the manifold

[15] For a powerful explication of the argument against origins, see Manan Ahmed, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Harvard University Press, 2016). Also see Vijay Prashad, 'Introduction: Communist Histories', in Vijay Prashad (ed.), *Communist Histories*, vol. 1 (LeftWord Books, 2016), pp. 7–28, in which he critiques scholarship that sought to cast communists either as traitors or as cultural outsiders.

[16] Benjamin Zachariah, for example, has made this argument forcefully in his study on fascism in India. See Benjamin Zachariah, 'Global Fascisms and the Volk: The Framing of Narratives and the Crossing of Lines', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, 4 (2015), 608–612.

[17] Notable examples include Kris Manjapra, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge, 2010); Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (University of California Press, 2011); and Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text* (Hurst, Oxford University Press, 2014). These are in addition to numerous journal articles, special issues, and edited volumes. See in particular Kama Maclean and Daniel Elam (eds.), 'Reading Revolutionaries: Texts, Acts, and Afterlives of Political Action in Late Colonial South Asia', *Postcolonial Studies* 16, 2 (2013) and Kama Maclean, Daniel Elam, and Chris Moffat (eds.), *Writing Revolution in South Asia: History, Practice, Politics* (Routledge, 2017).

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trajectories that fed into the development and evolution of Communist Internationalism in colonial India. In foregrounding the politics and ethics of internationalism, I am also attempting to situate the Left within the global and international frame to which it belongs. I do so in the recognition that for those involved in this project there was little to distinguish between nationalism and internationalism. Both were intimately tied to each other. Nor could one work without the other. And yet, that is precisely what the nationalization of leftist and communist pasts has sought to conceal. Those pasts cannot be understood without foregrounding the larger global and utopian projects of which they were an integral part. This was, after all, an era of infectious and utopian idealism in which the remaking of the world was an imminent possibility. For that reason, the subjects of this story have to be placed in a geography that they would have understood and related to.

Lastly, the subjects of this book do not feature prominently in scholarly histories of communism or the Left in South Asia. None among them was viewed as an 'intellectual' worthy of close scholarly attention. This sets them somewhat apart from the usual suspects: individuals like Jayaprakash Narayan, Gangadhar Adhikari, Puran Chand Joshi, Rajani Palme Dutt and, the most iconic of them all, M.N. Roy. Roy, in particular, was for long viewed as the sole subject worthy of attention for his notable contributions to Marxist–Leninist and humanist thought. That too is a framing I want to resist. My attempt, then, is to excavate a history of communism and communist thought and the seemingly ordinary subjects who inhabited it. These constitute what I, and others, have called 'intermediate histories': histories that occupy the liminal space between intellectual histories and biographies of elite figures and the 'autonomous' subaltern domain identified by Subaltern Studies.[18] This is, in other words, the communism of the everyday. The figures who dominate the following pages may not have contributed to Marxist or Communist 'thought', if 'thought' is restricted to political treatises and theoretical contributions, but they were subjects in their own right with an acute sense of their time and place in the history they imagined themselves making. This, in other words, is a history from the ground up instead of a history of the party or the intellectuals who dominated it.

Listening to the Left

Where are those subjects to be found? They exist as disembodied fragments, as isolated voices, as apparitions, even, in colonial archives.

[18] See introduction in Raza, Zachariah, and Roy (eds.), *Internationalist Moment*.

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This is despite the fact that for an ostensibly marginal political force in British India, the communist movement, and the Left at large, generated an exceptionally voluminous archival trail. That alone was a clear indication of the actual and imagined threat posed by the Left to imperial order and stability. Fixated and obsessed by this threat to a degree that has been termed paranoiac by scholars, the Raj produced vast amounts of documentation on 'seditious' individuals, organizations, spaces, print cultures, and much else besides. These reports emanated from all levels of the state, from the local police *thana* (station) and the district court to the Secretary of State of India presiding over the India Office in London. While the sources provide an intriguing insight into the specific concerns of each arm of the colonial state, they do converge in their view of communism as an imminent threat to India, the Empire, and the world at large. In the 'prose of counter insurgency',[19] the Left could only exist as an extension of a foreign power, and as a thought that was antithetical to India itself. Predictably missing in this narration were the conditions, experiences, and motivations driving individuals to radical, transformative, political action. Moreover, this was also where the first histories of the Left were authored. Given the sheer volume of reporting material devoted to the Left, both the Raj and the India Office in London periodically issued authoritative and consolidated accounts of the communist and revolutionary movement in India. Intended as concise historical primers on Indian Communism 101 for concerned officials, they helped shape how Indian communists would be understood.

That said, it is important to point out that the meaning and understanding of 'communism' was hardly, if ever, fixed. Even for a bureaucracy accustomed to classifying, categorizing, and affixing meanings to social groups and political movements in India, 'communism', along with its attendant radical strains, was notoriously difficult to define and demarcate. Perhaps the only fixed meaning at work was that 'communism' posed a significant, and even existential, threat to the Raj. Matters became even more complicated given that there were innumerable organizations and individuals operating under the label of 'socialist', 'communist', 'revolutionary', and so on. Time and context added another layer of complexity, as political alliances and ideological affinities were often transitory, fluid, and contingent on prevailing circumstances. Thus, it was quite common for ostensibly 'communal' or communitarian political movements and individuals to express an ideological affinity

[19] A concept introduced by Ranajit Guha. See his article 'The Prose of Counterinsurgency', in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri C. Spivak (eds.), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

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with the ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution in the 1920s. It was usual, for instance, for the same individuals to appear both under the categories of 'Sikh Affairs' *and* 'Communism'. That in turn was a function of a period in which the meaning of 'communism' or 'bolshevism' was hardly fixed even within international communist and internationalist movements. Similarly, the threat of political 'radicalism' was itself relational to political norms at any point in time. A 'radical' position in 1915, for instance, could well be considered a centrist position in the 1930s. Related to this issue was the question of who was involved in the task of categorization and classification. Unsurprisingly, the most elastic understanding of the 'Left' or 'Communism' came from the security and intelligence services of the Raj. Their counterparts in the civil and administrative services often had a different and somewhat measured view. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the most restrictive definition of these terms came from the Left itself. Given the intense factionalism within the Left and its many adjuncts, political rivals were quick to brand each other as ideologically deviant and unorthodox. Finally, matters became trickier still when it came to the realm of ideas. Which ideas, after all, could be classified as 'leftist', 'communist' or 'socialist'? In the 1920s, for example, ideas routinely labelled as 'Bolshevik' or 'communist' were part of a wider vocabulary and grammar of politics used by political activists of all hues and stripes.

For all these reasons, I have avoided using the terms 'communist' or 'leftist' or 'socialist' in a fixed way. I use them interchangeably to convey the complexity and relationality of ideas and political affiliations. That does not mean, of course, that labels did not matter. They did. Very much so, in fact. Especially to those invested in them, whether they were colonial officials or leftists/communists/socialists. I thereby use them selectively when conveying the perspective of those whose stories animate this book. But I do so in the recognition that political boundaries were always amorphous and constantly in flux. Not doing so would leave us with hermetically sealed ideological compartments in which there is little sense of the amorphousness of ideas and how they changed over time.

To return to the question of the archive, the Left itself was not far behind in leaving its set of archival traces. Leftist organizations published an astounding array of materials that included, but were not limited to, pamphlets, newspapers, theoretical treatises, histories, biographies, autobiographies, and meticulously documented speeches, resolutions, meetings, rallies, and demonstrations. Indeed, so vast is this collection that I frequently found myself sympathizing with the predicament of intelligence officials who often complained about having to read bombastic, theoretically dense, voluminous and, occasionally, sleep-inducing

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tracts. This is again where the official archive became the most extensive repository for this literature. Publications were often reproduced, preserved, and translated in their entirety by colonial officials. For its part, the Left also meticulously archived and reproduced its documents, or those that were available anyway. Decades after independence, both the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) produced multi-volume histories and source anthologies of the communist movement in India.[20] These were the authoritative and official versions of their interlocked histories. Other edited collections, of colonial reports and leftist documents, were also published by those affiliated to the Left. More anthologies, histories, biographies, autobiographies, and other documents were published in a variety of languages across India.

Still, for all their rich detail and variety, there were other sources and documents missing. For most of their existence in colonial India, communist and revolutionary movements were proscribed and forced to operate underground. In doing so, they regularly destroyed documentary evidence that could implicate them for their seditious activities. The same was true after independence in India, and more so in Pakistan, where activists were politically persecuted by governments and dictatorships implacably opposed to communism. The first casualties of these acts of wilful destruction were everyday correspondences and brief published tracts that bore witness to how deeply communism was embedded in the everyday. What largely survived was what the state and the central communist leadership considered as 'official' or representative of the excised histories they chose to tell. For that reason, historians of 'subversive' movements begin their task with histories that have already been disciplined. Much the same, of course, can be said about virtually any other movement, but the case of the Left is particularly pronounced in this respect. Indeed, the absence of these documents is an enduring testament to how the Left was treated by the colonial state and its successors.

Nevertheless, the historian is still left with a voluminous official and non-official archive to contend with. These sources are a testament to both the changing nature and the varying inflections of the leftist movement in India. They reflect the metaphorical 'languages' through which the Left spoke. The first, and the most easily identifiable, was the language of orthodoxy. This way of speaking was replete with dense and theoretical arguments. Published in treatises, party communiqués,

[20] See G. Adhikari, M.B. Rao, and Mohit Sen (eds.), *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India* (People's Publishing House, 1971) and Jyoti Basu (ed.), *Documents of the Communist Movement in India* (National Book Agency, 1977).

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resolutions, and more, and faithfully reproduced in the authorized histories of the communist movement in India, the language of orthodoxy was the language of ideology and ideological conformity. Its authors, all highly educated, all men, were intellectuals committed to the theoretical frameworks of Marxism–Leninism. Those frameworks were assiduously deployed in understanding and interpreting the conditions they were operating in. Moreover, these arguments were also made in tandem with debates within the international communist movement and with the official line of Moscow. It is of course tempting to cast this language as disconnected from reality, as many did at the time, and have done so since. More than anything else, it was the communists' alleged ideological obtuseness, rigidity, and purity that marked them out as different and divorced from the reality of India. To be sure, there is much force in that claim. And yet, that charge could just as well apply to other parties across the political spectrum, all of whom in some way imagined the reality they saw themselves addressing. It would also underestimate the underlying appeal, strength, and utopianism of those ideological frameworks, which incorporated India in a universal arc of history instead of relegating it to an irrecoverable site of historical difference.

Everyday politics, though, had its own requirements. This is where the language of orthodoxy proved inadequate. If the communist movement was always conscious of its interlocutors in Moscow and the international communist movement, it was equally sensitive to, if not more so, to its immediate audience in India. This was where the Left created, appropriated, and translated Marxist–Leninist idioms in familiar social, cultural, and religious idioms. This was the language of everydayness. And it is this language that has been most neglected in many analyses of the communist movement in India. The world this language inhabited was constituted of public meetings, rallies, poetry, newspapers, pamphlets, posters, and much else. Within this sphere, 'communism' was anything but a 'foreign import' or an ideology dislocated from India. Meant both for the audience they appealed to and for many activists themselves, the language of everydayness was often expunged from the official record, and not least the official histories of the communist movement and in the histories of its contemporaneous and later detractors. Indeed, this language was often disowned by party intellectual themselves, who often prized ideological conformity and purity over the exigencies of everyday politics. And in the puritan and stifled atmosphere wrought by Stalinization, any evidence of this language was frequently used as a weapon against internal opponents or dissenters.

This in turn pointed to another language that emerges from the archive: the language of interiority. Evident in internal documents,

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pamphlets, newspapers, memoirs, letters, reported conversations in police reports and so on, this language was addressed to other activists, interlocutors, opponents, and allies. While there is relatively little in terms of sources to go on when it comes to charting internal discussions, the documents we have sketch a world rich in intellectual and political debates, dialogues, and conflict. If anything, these sources point towards the richness and diversity within the broad umbrella of the Left. They also provide an insight into the conflicts – ranging from ideological disputes to accusations of personal impropriety – that fractured the Left into a multitude of communist, socialist, and revolutionary camps. More than anything else, though, these documents also serve to humanize leftist cadres. Otherwise portrayed as unreflective, single-minded, unidimensional figures, the individuals that emerge from these sources are conflicted, complicated, and errant beings. In other words, they are all too human.

Yet, their full humanity is precisely what is negated in official reporting and in the histories that echo them. In documents produced by the state, these individuals emerge as irrational, fanatical figures, devoid of any complexity, except as dogged, irascible individuals implacably opposed to the Empire. Alongside the many commentaries produced by colonial officials, these sketches are most evident through another discursive repertoire: the intertwined languages of coercion, evasion, and defiance. A product of confessions, interrogations, judicial testimonies, and deliberate misrepresentations designed to mislead authorities, these languages cast leftist cadres in shades far removed from their public and private personas. Here, one finds activists disavowing their politics, forswearing their activism, pleading their innocence, and betraying their erstwhile comrades. Some consciously used idioms they imagined would be intelligible to state functionaries to escape harsher sentencing or torture. Thus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others, might invoke their faith to prove how an atheistic ideology could never really appeal to them. Others, though, do emerge as 'fanatics' and uncompromising ideologues, defiant and proud in their replies to police interrogators, district magistrates, sessions court judges, and other state functionaries, refusing to disavow their politics or deny their complicity in one crime or the other. Some spoke this language on their way to colonial jails across British India and through to the Andaman Islands. Others sang it on their long walk to the gallows.

My purpose in explicitly pointing out these metaphorical languages or voices through which the Left speaks from the archive is to draw attention to the importance of creating a multifaceted portrayal of the Left. To my mind, this is precisely what has eluded many histories of leftist movements in India. Barring some notable exceptions, they

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listened to the Left in only one or a few voices, never quite taking a fuller measure of the variety of voices through which the Left made itself known and heard.

Utopian Times, Utopian Subjects

Even so, for all the Left's multivocality, there was still a point where the cacophony of languages and dreams converged. There was, after all, a future to be claimed. Indeed, the most striking feature of this era is the sheer variety of utopian horizons on offer, and it is in these horizons where these figures can best be placed and understood. I offer this reading keeping in mind other interpretations that have been offered for leftist thought and politics in India. To point out a few, it was commonplace for historians of Indian communism to begin their studies with a detailed analysis of socio-economic conditions.[21] With impressive statistics on landholding patterns, rural indebtedness, exorbitant land revenue rates, unemployment levels, low wages and so on, the implication was clear: the development of leftist politics was rooted in specific socio-economic conditions, even if the link between political activism and material conditions was not always made explicit. In a Marxian reading, it was self-evident that there was a deep connection between the two. Others, following from decades of social and peasant histories, spoke of a 'peasant consciousness' in tracing the development of political thought and action.[22] Other explanations cast leftist politics as a product of a narrowly defined national liberation struggle. More recently, some much-needed interpretations have emerged, which, among other things, chart the germination of leftist and revolutionary ideas within transnational and cosmopolitan contexts. The focus here is on the crossing of literal and metaphorical borders to portray a world marked by intellectual, social, and political ferment.[23]

In what follows, my debt to these approaches will be evident, some more so than others. I am, however, more interested in pursuing another line of inquiry through which the Left and the communist movement can

[21] See, for instance, Bhagwan Josh, *Communist Movement in the Punjab, 1926–47* (Anupama Publications, 1979) and S. Gajrani, *Peasant Movement in Punjab* (South Asia Books, 1987).

[22] As an example, see Mridula Mukherjee, *Peasants in Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory* (Sage, 2004) and not least the 'autonomous domain' identified by Subaltern Studies.

[23] See in particular Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2014); Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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be understood. One after the other, the sources we have attest to how their subjects had a very intimate relationship with the era they lived in and which they perceived as extraordinary and tumultuous. In other words, these subjects were *constituted* in large measure by an affective relationship with Time. They had an acute sense that they were citizens of a rapidly changing world. This was, after all, a world marked by unprecedented tumult, conflict, and intellectual ferment. It seemed as if the world of the old, with its norms, traditions, and oppressions, was in its death throes. But its imminent death also foretold a long-awaited birth. Indeed, it is striking to see the range of metaphors used at the time – of births, of deaths, of pregnancies, of adulthood, of coming of age, of waking from a long slumber – all speaking of the imminent arrival of a new world. Put simply, this was a messianic conception of the world. What did this world look like? Briefly put, it varied from individual to individual, but there were some unifying threads. This was a world free of empire, capitalism, and social oppression, with all three being broadly defined and understood. This was also a world of internationalism, solidarity, and unity of all the 'weak', and the 'oppressed', as one magazine put it. Still, these were vaguely defined visions. What united them all in more tangible ways was an affective relationship with their time: the Time of Now.

What did it mean to live in the Time of Now? In asking this question, I am taking my lead from Walter Benjamin's conception of *jetztzeit* or 'Now-Time' in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. For Benjamin, *jetztzeit* signified a conception of time in which every moment was alive with radical possibilities that could fracture the present and liberate it from an otherwise recursive and hollowed-out continuum of time.[24] This was where the 'transformation of history' could take place. And it is this intimate and affective relationship with time that interests me here. To illustrate this better, the figures animating this book became political subjects in an era in which the dominating discourse of Empire claimed Time and History for itself. Colonial subjects were either not worthy of freedom or were not worthy *yet*. Placed within an endlessly deferred and unrealizable temporal horizon, colonial subjects were destined to shuffle along endlessly under colonial tutelage before they would be deemed worthy of autonomy or freedom. In other words, they were destined to endlessly inhabit, to invoke Ernst Bloch, the time of the

[24] Walter Benjamin, 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Schocken Books, 1969). I am also indebted in this reading to Giorgio Agamben's treatment of *jetztzeit*. See Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 102.

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'not-yet', or what Dipesh Chakrabarty evocatively termed the 'waiting room of history'.[25] And yet it is striking to see how many of the individuals in this story insisted on inhabiting the 'time of the now' far before the leaders of the Indian nationalist movement insisted on the same. Put differently, the time for freedom was the time of now, with every moment holding out the promise of transformation and revolution. In their understanding of their moment, these figures inhabited a revolutionary time in which anything was possible. Not only was a new world within reach, it was well on its way. For all intents and purposes, then, the individuals in this book were already living in the future.

Why is this significant? Because their orientation towards the future and the world to come explains in great measure their motivations, politics, sheer perseverance, and frequently, their suicidal determination. And it is precisely the seductive appeal of this imagination and its relationship to both the political and the self that has received negligible scholarly attention. It is tempting, of course, to consider these ideas as utopian or idealistic, as many did at the time and have done so since. But that would be to entrap the Left in a reading that takes the post-colonial nation state in South Asia as the predetermined outcome of decolonization. Once that is taken as a starting point, other possibilities, other political futures, seem all too marginal, eccentric, and unviable. In other words, this approach reduces these horizons to a peripheral story within an overarching telos of nationalism. And yet, this is not the only reason for neglecting the astonishing variety of alternate, open-ended, and viable political futures on offer in this era.[26] As Manu Goswami reminds us, a key reason is methodological. Through an engagement with Reinhart Koselleck, she points out how historians are more attuned to privileging histories of experience over histories of expectations. Doing so 'has worked to propel studies of movements, institutions, and categories regarded as durable, prevalent, or immediately recognizable in the present'.[27] For those reasons, perhaps, these dreams and their relationship to the political have received scant attention from historians.

Within the constellation of political horizons on offer in the age of internationalism, what distinguished many leftists was their unshakeable conviction in the inevitability of progress, historical change, and enlightened futures. For doctrinaire Marxists, History was subject to fixed laws

[25] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 8.
[26] Gary Wilder, for instance, makes a similar point in *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press, 2015).
[27] Manu Goswami, 'Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms', *The American Historical Review* 117, 5 (2012), 1485.

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that could be scientifically understood and acted upon, which made it distinct from the crude utopianism and idealism that Marxism was opposed to. For Ernst Bloch in his magisterial *The Principle of Hope*, Marxism, unlike the other utopian schemes he surveyed, offered both a theory of utopia *and* a method of creating it.[28] Whatever else Marxism may have meant to the figures involved, it was clear that there was a telos, a method, and a political subject at the heart of this transformative project. Still, that did not make it any less dubious for its universalizing claims. That much, at any rate, has been made clear by the crucial interventions of post-colonialism and post-structuralism. Utopias and universals were rightly suspect. They also could not be divorced from their dark legacy of totalitarianism. And yet, that would be to disregard the drawing power of these claims for many colonized subjects who felt expunged from a universal history and a universal arc of progress. Indeed, they yearned to be part of this universal history. They also yearned to make this history, not as supplicants or passive recipients forever destined to play catch-up, but as equals. The time the subjects of this book imagined themselves inhabiting was a time that was *de-territorialized*. This was a time that promised salvation and revolutionary transformation for the world at large, whether it was Europe or its colonies. Put simply, their time was an enchanted time.[29] This was the perspective of the subjects that animate this book. This was a story they could be a part of.

Instead of evaluating their utopian claims for their theoretical validity, as others have done, I am more interested in understanding how their utopian politics was woven in through their present. In doing so, I am taking my lead from the collective interventions of Michael Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash. Together, they point out how utopias are an indictment of the present. Moreover, the politics of utopia also offers an opportunity to excavate the 'conditions of possibility' or 'the conditions of imaginability'. Utopianisms are not just simply ways of imagining the future, 'but can also be understood as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to reimagine their present

[28] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols. (MIT Press, 1995).

[29] Here, one can also make an instructive comparison with ardently nationalist (and communal) articulations during this period that spoke of an enchanted space instead of an enchanted time. One of the best examples of this, to my mind, is V.D. Savarkar's *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1928), which lends India the status of both a motherland and a holy land. This articulation of a sacred and enchanted space that is home to a great Hindu race, nation, and civilization stands in marked contrast with the internationalist imagination of a de-territorialized time that weaved disparate cultures, territories, and populations together in a universal arc of progress.

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and transform it into a plausible future'.[30] More than understanding it as an idea, then, I seek to excavate utopianism as a practice and as a lived ethic. Doing so may allow us a fuller understanding of the subjects of this book, of the specificity of their time and place, and the imaginative, cultural, and social resources they drew on to construct a world driven by the politics of expectation, the politics of waiting, and the politics of anticipation.

While I have attempted to sketch those practices and ethics throughout this book, the practice that most interests me here is the act of writing histories, memoirs, and (auto)biographies. More than any other practice, these interlinked genres provide us a with profound insight into the subjects who lie at the heart of this book. By way of a (long) introduction, leftists – organizations and individuals both – have been at the forefront of authoring publications that document their self-professedly critical role in the struggle against the Raj. The anxiousness, prolificacy, and meticulousness with which these histories and source anthologies were written, published, circulated, and narrated, indicated that the Left sought to write itself into histories from which it had been excluded. In part, then, this was a riposte to the collective amnesia of nationalist historians who either ignored or misrepresented the Left's contribution in the struggle for independence and self-determination. It was also a response to the lingering gaze of Empire, faithfully replicated in histories condemning the Left. More than anything else, though, it was an indictment of the discipline of history itself. Thus, as far as one leading member of the communist movement was concerned, history writing that proclaimed the much-vaunted values of neutrality, detachment, and objectivity was 'barren and imperialistically tendentious'. Indeed, for him, any historian worth his or her salt must be on the side of the enslaved, the oppressed, the downtrodden.[31]

It is tempting to dismiss this as propaganda, as many no doubt did. But this critique did get to the heart of the imagined tyranny of histories inaugurated and indelibly marked by the colonial endeavour in India and elsewhere. For those reasons, history writing – their *own* history writing – was an essential and key practice in leftist and revolutionary politics. And in claiming to represent the downtrodden, an otherwise anodyne act of history-writing was transformed into an ethical practice with clear moral stakes attached to it. Whether published in memoirs and scholarly

[30] Michael Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash (eds.), *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 2.

[31] Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History* (People's Publishing House, 1978), p. 3.

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accounts, serialized in newspapers and pamphlets or invoked in public rallies, meetings, and demonstrations, revolutionary histories were ubiquitous in leftist practices. What did these histories look like, though? In short, they were reverential commemorations of past struggles as well as scathing indictments of imperial rule. They were thus the exact converse of colonial histories, and they exercised a power on the imagination that was fully recognized the colonial state. To that end, as Durba Ghosh points out, amateur and popular history writing was a key part of anticolonial resistance and political insurrection.[32] Remembrance was a revolutionary act. And for that reason, these histories were continually proscribed and their authors prosecuted. One of them, a leading member of the Ghadar Party, Bhai Parmanand, was even sentenced to death – later converted to transportation for life – in large part for his authorship of *Tarikh-i-Hind* (History of India). In sentencing Parmanand, the judicial tribunal conceded that the 'historian enjoys certain privileges'. Indeed, 'criticism, exposure, and condemnation of what is wicked or unethical, approbation of what is noble and chivalrous, and vindication of the truth are some of the privileges conceded to him'. But he had 'no right, under the guise of a historical treatise to malign, traduce or calumniate anybody, much less a ruling race, with the object of bringing the subject of his criticism into hatred and contempt which, as a citizen owning allegiance to a Government, he has no right to assail'. Put briefly, *Tarikh-i-Hind* 'was nothing short of sedition clothed in an ostensible historical treatise'.[33]

There were few instances as illuminating as this one about the enduring power of history writing. Its credibility as a historical account aside, *Tarikh-i-Hind* exemplified the role that history and history writing played in leftist and revolutionary politics. Through these histories, Indian revolutionaries sought to insert themselves in a specific genealogy and legacy of struggle. They were the inheritors of those imagined legacies. And they would be the ones to carry the torch forward. Before one could reimagine the present and reclaim the future, there was a history to be written. In short, there were histories to be recovered, there were histories to be reclaimed, there were histories to be made. The past served as an inspiration, as a lesson, as an aspiration even. Indeed, in a troubled present, the past offered a way, perhaps the only way, in which the future could not be foreclosed. The future remained open-ended, full of promise, and, more importantly, *theirs*. But for that, the past, in its beauty as

[32] Durba Ghosh, *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919–1947* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 63.
[33] F.C. Isemonger and J. Slattery, *An Account of the Ghadr Conspiracy, 1913–1915* (1919), p. 194.

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well as ugliness, had to be theirs too. For a movement oriented towards the future, then, the Left had a deep, meditative, and constitutive relationship with the past.

A brief word on other genres: memoirs and (auto)biographies. One can read these as ego-documents (with more emphasis on the ego than the document), largely preoccupied with cementing their authors' legacies and giving a befitting response to their detractors, be it colonial or nationalist accounts, or even their opponents within the Left.[34] But I also read these texts as an insistence to be the subject of one's story. They had long been, and still are, cast as ephemeral or marginal subjects in a story that was never considered theirs. They were dim-witted proxies at best, traitors at worst. Even in histories sympathetic to the Left, official or otherwise, they were mere recipients of ideas that had been fashioned elsewhere by inordinately European, highly educated, men. At best, those ideas had been crafted by a few Indians, who were, again, elite, highly educated, men. For those reasons, they were viewed as ordinary subjects, never theoretical subjects, whose lives were worth telling, and emblematic of a history they helped make. We were thus mostly left with intellectual and party histories that rarely reflected the rich life-worlds of those who inhabited this politics and this moment. This is where writing and narrating one's story became even more urgent.

Most of these accounts were published well after independence at a time when histories of the liberation struggle were being written. In their villages, towns, and regions, their authors were lionized as *desh bhagats* (patriots). Others were remembered as martyrs, some more renowned than others. But on the national level, there was little, if any, recognition of their struggles and sacrifices. One of the most iconic of them all, Sohan Singh Bhakna, spoke for many in an appropriately titled pamphlet *Dukh* (Sorrow/Grief), writing that 'Congress historians … have deliberately drawn a veil on that glorious chapter of history which the revolutionary patriots wrote with their own blood.'[35] Somewhat ironically, in writing

[34] They were also, as Ghosh notes, didactic in intent with an aim of attracting new recruits. Together, these accounts foregrounded examples of mythologized (male) revolutionaries who made great sacrifices for their nation. This was certainly the case for autobiographical accounts that were published at the height of the anti-colonial struggle. In doing so, they added to a burgeoning corpus of life histories that were already a well-established genre within the Indian nationalist movement. One reason for this, she notes via Javed Majeed, was that autobiography became the genre for conveying one's individual subjectivity and consciousness, which in turn was a response to the orientalist charge that Indians were fundamentally unmodern. See Ghosh, *Gentlemanly Terrorists*, pp. 65–66.

[35] Quoted in Sohan Singh Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party* (People's Publishing House, 1970), p. xxi.

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their memoirs, histories, and autobiographies, our revolutionaries relied inordinately on declassified colonial archives. That was, after all, their archive too. At the height of their struggle against the Raj, their publications had been destroyed, proscribed, and confiscated, leaving them with fragmented records and broken documentary trails.[36] The colonial archive was a fuller and a more complete archive than theirs ever could be. Moreover, they were also learning about themselves through these records. After all, the Raj's policing and intelligence apparatus had kept a close eye on their movements and politics. They therefore used those records to supplement missing details on their lives and histories (leaving the historian a little bemused at encountering colonial accounts in the most unexpected of places). There was also a certain kind of voyeuristic thrill, pride, and a sense of achievement that came from quoting reports on oneself. But more than that, their purpose was also to argue against the colonial archive. This was their attempt to set the record straight and cement their legacy in the pantheon of heroes of the liberation and revolutionary struggle.

It is also worth pointing out how the impulse to record, retell, and narrate was primarily a masculine endeavour. In contrast to their male counterparts, far fewer women recorded their experiences in the leftist and revolutionary movement at any length. Even so, the accounts we have are crucial in providing a glimpse into the varied experiences, lives, and unique circumstances of women within the movement.[37] Together, these testimonies are an enduring testament to the erasure of women in

[36] Gangadhar Adhikari (ed.), *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India*, vol. 1: *1917–1922* (People's Publishing House, 1971), p. viii.

[37] As one of the most striking examples, see the excellent work by K. Lalita, V. Kannabiran, and Rama Melkote (eds.), *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telengana People's Struggle* (Zed Books, 1990). Other notable examples include, but are not restricted to, the memoirs and accounts of Renu Chakravartty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement, 1940–1950* (People's Publishing House, 1980); Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* (Stree, 2001); Bina Das, *Bina Das: A Memoir* (Zubaan Books, 2010); Kalpana Dutt, *Chittagong Armoury Raiders: Reminiscences* (People's Publishing House, 1979); and Vimla Dang, *Fragments of an Autobiography* (Asha Jyoti, 2007). For scholarly engagements, see the incredibly useful bibliographical compendium of women's life histories in the colonial and postcolonial period, in Anju Vyas and Ratna Sharma (eds.), *Indian Women: Biographies and Autobiographies* (An Annotated Bibliography) (Centre for Women's Development Studies, 2013). With respect to communist and revolutionary histories, specifically, there have been some excellent works on revolutionary women in recent years. See especially Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India* (Routledge, 2019); Durba Ghosh, 'Revolutionary Women and Nationalist Heroes in Bengal, 1930 to the 1980s', *Gender & History* 25, 2 (2013), 355–375; Soma Marik, 'Breaking Through a Double Invisibility', *Critical Asian Studies* 45, 1 (2013), 79–118; and Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India*, and in particular chapter 3.

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revolutionary histories. They are also a reminder of the shortcomings of communist and revolutionary movements that did not pay sufficient attention to the question of women's emancipation. The revolutionary subject we have, then, is very much a gendered subject. The tone adopted in these (largely male) memoirs and autobiographies also gives a similar impression: 'I led', 'I argued', 'I convinced them', 'I did this that or the other' – the list of such expressions goes on and on. This was an omniscient view of the world, with its (masculine) subject cast as the maker of history, and not simply one who is driven by history. That said, even in foregrounding themselves as the makers of history, there was a sense of manifest destiny and historical inevitability at work. Nor could it have been otherwise. This interplay between autonomy/agency and manifest destiny was the hallmark of their historical imagination.

Fredric Jameson makes a similar point when he locates the tension between voluntarism and fatalism in the delicate balance between Marxism as a practical project and the imaginative resources required to will it into being. This balance, he argues,

> rests on a conception of historical dynamics that posits that the whole new world is objectively in emergence all around us, without our necessarily perceiving it at once, so that alongside our conscious praxis and our strategies for producing change, we may take a more receptive and interpretive stance.

He adds that with the

> proper instruments and registering apparatus, we may detect the allegorical stirrings of a different state of things, the imperceptible and even immemorial ripenings of the seeds of time, the subliminal and subcutaneous eruptions of whole new forms of life and social relations.[38]

What were those instruments, though? How did these subjects register and detect the stirrings of a new world? It was not simply that the world of the old was seemingly collapsing around them – that, after all, was all too evident and observable. It was also that they made their worlds legible through their bodies and selves. This was again where autobiographies were particularly illuminating. The stories they told all hinged on journeys of personal transformation. For those reasons, perhaps, these autobiographies and memoirs also read startlingly like another genre: the *safarnama* (travelogue). The travels those texts speak of were not simply actual journeys: they were also intellectual journeys. Together, they told a story of widening horizons, of coming of age, of rebirths, of transformations, of overcoming. And this was how their writers read their worlds too.

[38] Frederic Jameson, 'Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future', in Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash (eds.), *Utopia/Dystopia*, p. 26.

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Just like themselves, a new world was also coming into being, in an inexorably forward movement towards revolutionary transformation. Both the self and the world were tied to and co-constitutive of each other in their long-prophesied journey towards emancipatory futures.

That this reading was selective and reductive in how it understood the past, present, and future goes without saying. In some ways, this was reflective of the utopian imagination that Karl Mannheim pointed to in *Ideology and Utopia*. Instead of envisioning utopia as 'an articulation of a planned ideal society', Mannheim understood it as a 'socially located critical stance'. It is through this framing that one can understand how

> the innermost structure of the mentality of a group can never be as clearly grasped as when we attempt to understand its conception of time in the light of its hopes, yearnings, and purposes. On the basis of these purposes and expectations, a given mentality orders not merely future events, but also the past. Events which at first glance present themselves as a mere chronological cumulation, from this point of view take on the character of *destiny*.[39]

It is difficult to overstate the power of this imagination; millenarian in its sensibility and outlook. Dreams were, and could be, powerful.[40] A sense of destiny even more so. And yet, that is precisely what has been understated in our reading of the Left, especially in recent times when the utopian is viewed as long past its sell-by date. There was, then, a deep, intimate, and an almost oneiric relationship between the utopian and the political. The utopian imagination had the power to drive men and women to incredible, astonishing, and even suicidal lengths. It drove the subjects of this book to far-flung continents, to a life on the run, to a clandestine existence, to jails and, for some, to the gallows. The utopian imagination made these subjects as much they helped make this moment utopian.

Chapters

This book, then, offers narratives, necessarily broken and fragmented, that seek to embed the utopian subjects of this story within their context and moment. The next chapter, 'Travellers, Migrants, Rebels', traces

[39] Partly quoted in Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash (eds.), *Utopia/Dystopia*, p. 5. Also see Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 188.

[40] Few scholars have demonstrated that as powerfully as Yuri Slezkine. In his magisterial work on the Russian revolution, he understands Bolshevism as a millenarian movement that was driven more by hopes, dreams, and desires than by cold, calculated theoretical sophistry. See Yuri Slezkine, *House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

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Indian networks that forged a radical anti-imperialist politics in the diaspora. These networks later fed into the development and evolution of the leftist movement in British India. Through the lives of key figures, I trace how networks of radicalism emerged and thrived in the global arena. Along with networks of labourers, migrants, and lascars, I focus primarily on the Ghadar and the Khilafat movements. Through these circuits and the figures involved in them, I sketch how an itinerant life provided a foray into revolutionary politics and was in turn intimately connected to a revolutionary ethic. In doing so, I also examine an oft-neglected question of how political radicalism was deeply wedded to distinct spaces and spatial imaginaries. In tracing how ideas and lived experiences – and thereby intellectual and social histories – were co-constitutive of each other, I chart the antecedents of the communist movement in British India.

I continue this story in the third chapter, 'Break with the Old World'. Using memoirs, intelligence accounts, and hitherto unused sources from the Comintern archives, I follow the journeys of Indian revolutionaries to and through Moscow. For revolutionaries from the colonized world, Moscow offered support, sustenance, and a vision for a liberated future. It was also a site of wonder and amazement, where a new world and a new human was being inaugurated. For those who learnt their communism in the Soviet Union, Moscow was both a physical embodiment of a break with History and a vision of a utopic world within reach. Through the lifeworlds of 'Moscow graduates', I trace the history of the varied and multilayered engagements between the Communist International (Comintern) and communist groups in India from the heady and millenarian days of the Leninist moment to its calamitous Stalinist successor.

The next chapter, 'This Time Is Ours', looks at a regional expression of leftist politics. I examine how the politics and ethics of Communist Internationalism acquired a distinctly regional flavour through a case study of the Kirti Kisan Party and its successors in the Punjab. Partly financed, supported and constituted by the Ghadar Party, the Kirti Party was the most prominent communist network in British Punjab. And alongside the Communist Party of India (CPI), it was also the only communist group in India to have direct relations with the Comintern. Not only is this chapter an attempt to move beyond CPI-centred histories of the Left; it is also an examination of how intimately communism was woven in with localized idioms. At the same time, it is also a reminder of how deeply local politics was tied to global developments and the politics of Communist Internationalism. In tracing this trajectory, I explore what communism meant to those involved in it. I also explore the kinds of

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ethical subjects inaugurated, in person as much as in imagination, by the communist movement in India.

The fifth chapter, 'Entangled Histories', starts from the question of erasure. Leading on from the previous chapter, I examine how the memorialization of revolutionary pasts in India and Pakistan has erased a history of entanglements between the Left and other political and intellectual strands. Specifically, I take the case of Darshan Singh Pheruman, remembered today as a martyr who gave his life for the Sikh *panth*. Through his life, I examine how the Akali movement, a Sikh socio-religious political movement in the 1920s, blended in with the communist movement in the Punjab. These intersections provide a reminder of how ideas did not observe strict ideological boundaries, boundaries that only seem unbridgeable in nationalist and communitarian erasures of revolutionary pasts. This chapter, then, offers a portrait of the relative fluidity between 'communist', 'communitarian', and 'nationalist' politics of the interwar era. In doing so, it sketches an era of political possibilities that later gave way to a bitterly contested and fractured landscape with hardened political and ideological boundaries.

The sixth chapter, 'Red Scare', examines how the British Raj dealt with the communist threat. Viewed merely as a proxy of the Soviet Union, communist movements were relentlessly persecuted by the state. In an examination of the colonial state's evolving response to the communist movement through an analysis of 'conspiracy cases' and other legislative, executive, and coercive mechanisms, I trace how the colonial state was instrumental in casting 'communism' and leftist politics in the subcontinent as essentially alien to India. Central to this argument was the way that 'communism' had been imagined by the state. Viewed from its very inception as 'unnatural' and 'foreign', and frequently likened to a 'virus' that could spread controllably if left unchecked, the state's approach to communism provides significant insights into not just the nature of the state, but also how it viewed the Indian political sphere. More importantly, it also shows how the colonial state's arguments were later appropriated by the nationalist movement and other forces inimical to the Left to delegitimize the latter's politics. More than anything else, I argue that it was the colonial state that was instrumental in fracturing the Left and its alliances with the other political movements. This explained in large measure how the Left came to be excised from histories of national liberation.

The seventh chapter, 'A Dream Deferred', explores how the dream and utopian promise of interwar internationalism faded during the upheavals of the Second World War and a violent decolonization. The Left in India was forced to choose between internationalism and

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nationalism. Through the lives and politics of those involved in this fateful choice, I examine the CPI's position with respect to the 'People's War' waged by the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany and the demand for Pakistan by the All India Muslim League (AIML). As its political choices narrowed in the run-up to independence, I trace how the communists' internationalist loyalties placed it a mutually acrimonious relationship with the presumptive heirs of the Raj in India and Pakistan. In a far cry from its heyday in the early years of the interwar period, when there seemed little to separate between internationalism and nationalism, the manifold possibilities imagined by Communist Internationalism seemed at an end in the devastation wrought by Partition.

In the Epilogue, 'Utopias Lost', I provide a brief overview of what decolonization and 'independence' meant for a partitioned Left on both sides of the Radcliffe line. For many, not much had changed. If anything, both post-colonial states persecuted communists with an equal, if not greater, alacrity than their colonial predecessor. The freedom that had been attained was not the freedom that many had imagined and fought for. This was the starting point for communist politics in both India and Pakistan. Using the communists' social–economic, political, and ethical conceptions of a post-imperial and post-national *azadi* (freedom), I ask what revolutionary pasts have to offer us in our present time when the spectre of parochial and exclusionary nationalism seems to be on the ascendant in South Asia and beyond. At the very least, I argue, a history of the Left encourages a re-envisioning of ethical possibilities and subjectivities in modern South Asia. In doing so, the Left also provides a salutary reminder of how it was, and still is, an essential and integral part of the cultural, social, and political fabric of South Asia. As Overstreet and Windmiller argued in *Communism in India*, no understanding of Indian history since the First World War is possible without an examination of the communist movement and its relation to world communism and Indian nationalism.[41]

Needless to say, I could not have agreed more.

[41] Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, preface.

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