MARXIST THOUGHT IN SOUTH ASIA

Edited by Kristin Plys, Priyansh and Kanishka Goonewardena

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VOLUME 40

MARXIST THOUGHT IN SOUTH ASIA

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CHAPTER 1

MARXIST THEORY UNBOUND: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES FROM SOUTH ASIA

Kristin Plys, Priyansh and Kanishka Goonewardena

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the special issue, 'Marxist Thought in South Asia', we detail the long history of Marxist politics and theorizing in South Asia and highlight the unique contributions and perspectives of South Asian Marxists to global Marxism. Three contributions we find particularly significant are (1) South Asian Marxists' approach to thinking about questions of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism, (2) the treatment of agrarian and feudal continuities in Marxist theories from South Asia and (3) unique South Asian contributions to theorizing caste from a Marxist perspective.

Keywords: Marxism; South Asia; capitalism; imperialism; agrarian relations; caste

Marxism is not just a European preoccupation. It has, perhaps, had even more vibrant articulations in Latin America, Africa and among the Black diaspora. But South Asia has been relatively neglected in efforts to highlight Global South revolutionary theoretical traditions. Our goal in this issue is to demonstrate the historical and continued relevance of Marxist thought in South Asia by both highlighting lesser known thinkers as well as promoting anti-imperialist Marxist approaches to revolutionary thought more broadly. Our efforts are not solely to make Marxism relevant to South Asia again, but to demonstrate how South Asian Marxisms can contribute to global Marxist theory. In other words, our effort is to recover the South Asian revolutionary tradition for the rest of the world. In so doing, this special issue interrogates the nexus of anti-colonialism

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and Marxism. Together, these essays are forging an anti-imperialist Marxism based on empirical work in South Asia and beyond by unsettling the propensity within various discourses (including certain strands of Marxism) to disproportionately fixate on white male theorists. Our essays contribute to anti-imperialist Marxism through dialectical and historical approaches to theorizing. While we are doing anti-imperialist Marxism in the South Asian context, we see this as being in the service of a global Marxism that is both anti-imperialist and non-Eurocentric.

Across the social sciences and humanities of late, both capitalism and the post-colonial have been central objectives of inquiry. But these parallel trends are often at loggerheads. The extremes of the post-colonial position assert the centrality of race and colonialism in shaping modernity while disavowing the role of class and capitalism, while the return to capitalism that has been central in history but other disciplines as well has brought about a vibrant revival of work in labour history and histories of capitalism. However, unlike the Eurocentric work of some influential Marxists, these new histories of labour and capitalism are more global in scope and focused on the political economy of the Global South. In bringing these two positions together, many in the humanities and social sciences have turned to concepts of racial capitalism and post-colonial political economy which has meant recovering the theories and voices of racialized Marxists living and working in the Global South. This is a development we welcome and celebrate. While African, Black diaspora, Latin American Marxists have been central to this endeavour, and while to a lesser extent East Asian Marxists such as Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno have also been a part of this conversation, South Asian Marxist voices who theorize race, coloniality and the historical development of global capitalism have been relatively neglected in this effort to revisit the work of Global South and diaspora Marxists of the 20th century.

MARXISM DURING BRITISH RULE

While Marxist academics of the Global North have disproportionately focused on the work of African and Latin American Marxists in recovering anti-colonial and anti-racist Marxist perspectives, Marxism has long flourished in Asia. The South Asian Marxist tradition has a long history dating back to the early 19th century. With the formal end of the global slave trade in the 1830s, labour from South Asia was mobilized by the British and French Empires to replace enslaved workers in British and French territories in Africa and in the British West Indies (Mohapatra, 2007, p. 178; Sharma, 1982, p. 17; File no. 7237/91, PSA). As a colonial working class in formation, one of the unique features of the development of the South Asian working class was that from the start, it was created by European Empires to be a global working class. Because of British and French strategies for class formation in South Asia, Left responses against these conditions eventually assumed an internationalist orientation. The plantation was the primary enterprise for most of the colonial period. Labour conditions on colonial plantations were a merger of slavery with a modern rational corporate labour

regime (Behal, 2007, p. 158; 2010, p. 32; Behal & Mohapatra, 2008, p. 143; Mehta, 1991, p. 5). Desertion was a common recourse for workers to 'escape physical coercion and torture', but they would often be caught and returned to the plantation by *chowkidars* (security guards) (Behal, 2007, p. 159; Behal & Mohapatra, 2008, p. 161). In some cases, labour uprisings occurred, including the Bengal Indigo Disturbances of 1859, the Blue Mutiny of Champaran in 1917 in Bihar (Mehta, 1991, p. 5) and Rowmari Garden Uprising in 1903 (Behal & Mohapatra, 2008, p. 165), typically in reaction against violent assaults by European plantation staff (Behal, 2007, p. 166).

In the latter half of the 19th century, peasant uprisings and labour revolts were the most common form of dissent against colonial capital. These uprisings were mostly 'scattered and unorganised' (Sen, 1997, p. 65), generally consisting of informal actions directed at gaining control over the work process or of spontaneous outbursts and rioting (Veeraraghavan, 2013, p. 65). The first known strike in British India was a weavers' strike in Empress Mills, Nagpur in 1877 (Meyers, 1958, p. 56; Sharma, 1982, p. 65). By the first decade of the 20th century, strikes became more organized. In 1903, a strike over unpaid overtime in the Government Press in Madras lasted six months (Veeraraghavan, 2013, pp. 69–72). In 1905, mill workers in Bombay organized strikes against the introduction of electric light in factories, refusing to work past dusk and before dawn. In 1907, an India-wide railway worker's strike lasted one week and garnered key concessions. In 1908, workers in various sectors in Bombay organized a political strike against British rule (Saxena, 1990, p. 61). During the 1910s, industry, especially heavy industry such as steel and iron, intensified. Likewise, strikes proliferated from 1917 on. The year 1920 saw at least 51 major strikes in South Asia, each strike involving as many as 70 to 135,000 workers (Saxena, 1990, p. 78; Sen, 1997, pp. 120–4).

The first two formal trade union organizations were the Madras Labour Union founded in 1918 by BP Wadia and *Majoor Mahajan* (Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association) founded in 1918 by Mohandas Gandhi. The Madras Labour Union was created by a group of textile workers in the B and C Mills in Madras, and with the help of BP Wadia, it became a citywide organization consisting of workers from various industries – including textile workers, rickshaw-pullers, railway workers, printing press workers, kerosene oil distributors, aluminium vessel workers, barbers, scavengers, policemen, postmen and domestic workers (Mathur & Mathur, 1957, pp. 16–17; Veeraraghavan, 2013, p. 88). MLU's first tasks were to ameliorate the economic condition of workers by raising wages and ensuring timely and accurate payment of wages (Karnik, 1978, pp. 24–25; Mehta, 1991, pp. 44–46; Ramanujam, 1986, p. 14; Veeraraghavan, 2013, p. 91). But of far greater concern to the union was the violence inflicted upon workers by British managers in workplaces across the city (Jha, 1970, p. 89; Mathur, 1964, p. 19; Rao, 1938, p. 14).

Majoor Mahajan, on the other hand, was 'abnormal' for a trade union, in that the goal of the union was to create class-cooperation between owners and workers. If a worker was 'victimized' by management, the union would pay the aggrieved worker a token sum to prevent labour unrest (Rao, 1938, p. 159). MM

was staunchly opposed to strikes, and from 1918–1939, workers in Ahmedabad struck only once, during a general strike in 1924, and that too without the support of trade union leadership (Chandavarkar, 1998, p. 86; Jha, 1970, p. 100; Meyers, 1958, pp. 57–60; Rao, 1938, p. 160). *Majoor Mahajan* was also an exclusively Hindu trade union. As a result of this communal discrimination, Muslim textile workers in Ahmedabad were non-unionized until the 1930s when they created Mill Mazdoor Sangh affiliated with the Communist Party of India (CPI) (Chandavarkar, 1998, p. 77).

By 1920, 125 formal trade unions were founded across South Asia – in Bengal (mostly in Calcutta), Punjab, Madras, Jamshedpur, Ahmedabad, Burma, Oriya and Bombay (Mathur, 1964, p. 21; Mehta, 1991, pp. 40–42; Saxena, 1990, pp. 83–88; Sen, 1997, pp. 138–139; Sharma, 1982, p. 77). The period of 1919–1922 saw the greatest growth of political consciousness of the working class, which coincided with a growing nationalist movement and worsening economic conditions (Roy, 1990, p. 6). As a result, the 1920s were characterized by unprecedented workers' unrest. The colonial state responded by spying on unionized workers, imprisoning them and subjecting them to police search and harassment, but also developed special Labour Advisory Boards in Madras, Bengal, Bombay and Punjab (File no. 5629/69, PSA) as a legal forum through which to settle labour disputes. While most of the rulings of these boards were in favour of employers, the Labour Advisory Boards did recommend establishing a minimum wage along with the legal recognition of trade unions in order to prevent disputes (Sen, 1997, p. 140).

In 1920, the All Indian Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed. This was the first working class organization in South Asia that encompassed all of British India. Its platform was generally anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist but was also cautious not to stoke the ire of the British Empire or of the Gandhian Congress Party (Adhikari, 1972, p. 206; Karnik, 1978, p. 33; Sharma, 1982, p. 151). In its founding address to its members, it took a stand against the Gandhian independence movement, 'Your nation's leaders ask for SWARAJ, you may not let them leave you out of the reckoning. Political freedom to you is of no worth without economic freedom'. (As quoted in Amjad, 2001, p. 34; As quoted in Sen, 1997, p. 158). In their founding year, the AITUC had 107 member unions, representing a total of 20,994 workers. Most of these unions were based in Calcutta, Bombay, Lahore and Jamshedpur. Notably, *Majoor Mahajan*, consisting of 6 unions and 16,450 workers, refused to join the AITUC because of the AITUC's anti-Gandhian line (Mehta, 1991, pp. 54–55; Ramanujam, 1986, p. 15; Saxena, 1990, p. 91).

The CPI was formed later that same year, on 17 October 1920 in Tashkent (Adhikari, 1972, p. 215; Ahmad, 1962, p. 57; Singh, 1994, p. 37; Sen, 1997, p. 170) headed by MN Roy, Mohammed Shafiq and MPBT Acharya. In 1921, the CPI founded four regional groups in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Lahore. The Bombay group, led by SA Dange, focused on the student movement and trade union activities (Sen & Ghosh, 1991, pp. 52–53). In Calcutta, Muzaffar Ahmad and poet Nazrul Islam started the Communist literary journal *Navyug* in 1922, and began organizing workers in and around Calcutta (Sen & Ghosh, 1991, p. 53). The Madras

group was adopted by the existing labour movement and led by labour organiser, Singaravelu M Chettiar. In Lahore, the party was led by Ghulam Hussain, who left his job as an economics professor at Peshawar College to found the Inquilab Group (Josh, 1979, p. 46), which produced the Urdu-language newspaper, *Inquilab* (Josh, 1979, p. 47), and to work in concert with the Railway Workers Union.

The aims of this burgeoning party were, as stated by Singaravelu Chettiar, 'to win Swaraj for the masses in India, to prevent exploitation of the workers and peasant by suitable land and industrial legislation, to secure to the bread winner, a minimum wage by which he and his children shall have the necessaries of a decent life and to end all distinctions of caste, creed or sect in all political and economic relationships' (First Communist Conference Papers, Subfile No. 4, NMML). Their method to reach these aims was to strengthen the working class through unionization, strategic strikes and striking with 'full force and effect'. From its origins, Marxism in South Asia was anti-colonial, and primarily dedicated to opposing an international labour regime in which racialized workers from the Global South were placed at the bottom of racial and economic hierarchies.

MARXISM AFTER INDEPENDENCE

While political and trade union movements inspired by Marxism played a decisive role in South Asia's movements for independence in the 1940s, after Independence was won, Marxism thrived in some regions within South Asia, while in others, political and social conditions threatened Marxist intellectual development and politics.

In Punjab, where Marxism was well established before partition, the labour movement, along with the radical Left, was decimated. Istiaq Ahmed contends that the demobilization of soldiers contributed to creating a more violent partition in Punjab, as unemployed soldiers stoked by communal tension (and many suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder from their participation in the World Wars) took it upon themselves to rid their towns and villages of the religious 'other' (Ahmed, 2011). The violence was not only communal in nature but also inflicted against the Left. The genocide that took place in Punjab debilitated Punjab's labour movement, trade union movement and the Communist Party. Though dealt a difficult hand, which was exacerbated by the mass departure of Sikhs who comprised a majority of the Communist Party in Punjab (Ali, 2015, p. 64), Sajjad Zaheer and other communists consolidated the Communist Party of Pakistan in the aftermath of partition. While the most well-known Communists of Pakistan's early years remain better known for their literary works, they were also committed to resurrecting and building the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP). Faiz Ahmed Faiz contended that without addressing the more radical aims of the Communists in their support for national independence, national liberation in Pakistan remained incomplete. In response to this stalled revolution, Sajjad Zaheer pushed for an even harder Communist line, purging all Islamists, nationalists, liberals and even Freudians who 'disrespected love as a pure desire' (Ali, 2011, p. 517; See also Jalil, 2014, p. 356). The

CPP organized labour unions under the Pakistan Trade Union Federation (PTUF) even though only 0.8% of the population were industrial workers and only 0.25% were unionized (Ali, 2015, p. 74). Most of these unionized workers worked in government, railways and tea plantations. Though small in number, the PTUF organized key events in Karachi and Lahore which put forth an anti-imperialist agenda and united communist workers, peasants and intellectuals to work together to fight back against the rollback of labour standards and rights after independence along with Pakistan's cooperation with US hegemony (Ali, 2015, p. 75). The CPP encompassed many broadly Left movements, including the Democratic Women's Association, a women's labour association, Democratic Students' Federation, the CPP student wing and the Progressive Writers' Association, for writers and other artists (Malik, 2016, pp. 107–108).

But social dislocation in the aftermath of partition made political organizing particularly challenging for the Pakistani Left, and relentless state persecution and repression eventually led to the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case of 1951. Faiz and Zaheer were accused by Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan of meeting with disaffected army officers in Rawalpindi to plan a coup (Jalil, 2014, p. 372). The actual events remain unclear; some contend that there was actually a discussion about a possible coup, while others present evidence that the arrests were made to suppress opposition in the upcoming elections (Malik, 2016, p. 119). As a result of the Conspiracy Case, many prominent Communist leaders, and leaders of the Progressive Writers' Association, including Faiz and Zaheer themselves, were imprisoned. In 1954, the PCC and other leftist parties were, then, officially banned (Ali, 2013, p. 484; Mir & Mir, 2006, p. 16; Raza, 2013, p. 513). During his imprisonment, during which he spent most of his time in solitary confinement, Faiz wrote some of his most critically acclaimed poetry (Dryland, 1992, p. 180).

The development of Marxism in Sri Lanka, while echoing the Indian experience in several ways, divides into three phases. The first one begins with the formative engagement of the pioneering generation of radical Sri Lankan students with communist internationalism in the late 1920s and culminates with their achievement of some post-colonial parliamentary political power in 1956. It was during this period that the major Marxist parties in Sri Lanka were formed – the Trotskyite Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1935, and its breakaway group that became the Communist Party of Ceylon (now CPSL) in 1943. In these years, they transformed themselves into mass organizations of national scale, with remarkable influence and success in parliamentary politics as well. The second period goes from 1956 to 1977, the heyday of Sri Lanka's pursuit of post-colonial national development, during which time leaders of Marxist parties occupied a few key ministerial positions in several leftist coalition governments. It was in these years that Marxist literature became available for the masses, in English, Sinhala and Tamil, although Marx's own writings in this impressive Left literary production and circulation remained a small fraction. The ongoing third phase can be dated from 1977, the beginning of neoliberalism in Sri Lanka and the decline of Marxist parties as effective political forces within or without parliament. It is mostly in this post-1977 period, after the virtual elimination of Marxist parties from parliamentary political power, that substantive readings of Marx

and Marxism were undertaken in Sri Lanka – in various attempts to make sense of the country's history and politics – whereas in earlier phases, Marxism was mostly a matter of political strategy (Jayawardena, 1974).

Back in post-independent India, the Left ran into a number of strategic tensions even as it functioned as the main opposition to the Congress Party that had assumed power following the Partition (Namboodiripad, 1986). Towards the end of colonial rule, the CPI developed different approaches for political action in urban and rural areas. Within a year of independence, major urban centres like Bombay, Madras and Calcutta saw a rise in insurrectionist activities guided by the 'Ranadive line' that took its name from the then general secretary B.K. Ranadive. As it were, the Ranadive Line quickly pivoted from targeting the British Empire to the Congress government following independence by arguing that the independence earned did not amount to actual freedom (Bidwai, 2015). The objective of such action was to delegitimize the bourgeois regime, and to create separate platforms for a popular assertion.

For rural India, a different strategy was devised. As opposed to spontaneous strike actions in the cities, the Communists in rural areas emphasized an extended agrarian struggle, with Telangana serving as the prime example. The Telangana region was part of the princely state of Hyderabad where a network of landlords served the Nizam through a systematic exploitation of debt-ridden and unpaid labourers (Bidwai, 2015). Even as India gained freedom from colonial rule, the peasants waged their own armed struggle and managed to liberate around 4,000 villages. This was done by violent actions carried out on the landlords with the intention of weakening the semi-feudal structure. But catastrophe beckoned here for Left politics. With the Nizam's hold on Hyderabad loosening, the Congress-led government at the Centre exploited the situation to get him to accede to the Indian state.

In 1964, the strategic confusion manifested into a split of CPI. A new force emerged in the form of CPI (Marxist), a trend that was to be repeated multiple times in the future as internal factions became more confident of a separate existence while still staking their claim under the broad umbrella of Left politics. Three years later, a strident faction of the CPI (M) took charge of a peasants uprising in Naxalbari, West Bengal. Taking its inspiration from Mao Zedong's ideas of a protracted people's war (Shah, 2010), this group was led by the ideologue Charu Mazumdar. Subsequently, the Mazumdar faction engineered another split by forming the CPI (Marxist-Leninist), and they came to be popularly known as Naxalites. The split was as much a result of internal conflicts among the Indian Communists as it was representative of tensions within the Communist movement internationally that were epitomized by the 'Sino-Soviet split' (Vanaik, 1986). The movement soon spread beyond West Bengal into nearby states, and it was characterized by a model of guerrilla warfare. It has since undergone multiple shifts in strategy and organization, but it remains a thorn in the side of the Indian state to this day.

The Naxalites' objective of creating a crisis of legitimacy for the Indian state received greater fuel following the embrace of neoliberal shock therapy in 1991. As the state leveraged its position to facilitate capitalist accumulation, the broad

Left was presented with an opportunity to present a new politics in the face of economic stagnation. However, a combination of hedged bets in face of the embrace of neoliberalism by other bourgeois parties, a withering organizational structure and calculated assaults on Left groups by the rising force of Hindu nationalism meant that this historic opportunity has not yet been grasped in the Indian context.

MARXIST THEORIZING FROM SOUTH ASIA

This rich history of Marxist political parties and social movements has produced a vibrant critical intellectual culture in South Asia that goes well beyond its influence in local politics. Perhaps the most significant product of Marxism in South Asia has been its unique contributions to Marxist theory. The many ways in which South Asian Marxists have applied and refashioned global Marxism to fit the local context has led to important innovations and interestingly unique themes and debates. Three contributions we find particularly significant are (1) South Asian Marxists' approach to thinking about questions of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism, (2) the treatment of agrarian and feudal continuities in Marxist theories of South Asia and (3) unique South Asian contributions to theorizing caste from a Marxist perspective.

South Asian Marxisms, which grew out of late colonial labour struggles before organizing themselves into various mass political parties, cannot be understood in isolation from the subcontinent's history of colonialism and anti-colonial struggles followed by projects of national development and neoliberal globalization in the post-colonial era. In both colonial and post-colonial times, the persistence of imperialism in the world economy too remained a constant and immediate reference point for South Asian Marxists, which cannot be said for all varieties of post-colonial theory emerging from that part of the world or elsewhere. South Asian Marxists' contribution to a global revolutionary political tradition, therefore, bears the marks of their confrontation with imperialism and colonialism in addition to capitalism, which also sets them apart from their Europeans comrades as well as kindred spirits in settler colonial societies.

Negotiating the relationship between national liberation and socialist revolution, in other words, was a formative theoretical and practical task for Marxists of South Asia, and the experience of undertaking it was constitutive of their political being. It was one which inserted them, moreover, into the heart of political debates among leading international Marxists and the revolutionary movements they represented, as exemplified in M. N. Roy's famous Comintern exchanges with Lenin on 'national liberation movements in the East'. Of course, not all Marxists – South Asian or not – agreed on the key issues debated in the Comintern and beyond, especially on revolutionary strategy in the colonies. The long-standing divisions between the various Marxist political parties of the subcontinent emerged precisely on the basis of such strategic disagreements on revolutionary politics as much as their theoretical implications.