

Interrogating Provincial Politics: The Leftist Movement in  
Punjab, c. 1914-1950

## Short Abstract

**Thesis Title:** Interrogating Provincial Politics: The Leftist Movement in British Punjab, c. 1914-1950

**Name:** Muhammad Ali Raza

**College:** St Antony's College

**Degree:** DPhil. History

**Term and Year of Submission:** Michaelmas, 2011

**Word Count:** Approx. 98,000 words

### Abstract

This thesis examines the development of the Leftist movement in British Punjab and the insights it provides into the political spaces it inhabited and the actors it engaged with. Broadly speaking, this is an attempt at uncovering lesser fragments that offer the possibility of complicating our understanding of Punjabi and South Asian History. In doing so, I seek to uncover a socio-political arena which played host to a multiplicity of contested identities, notions of sovereignty, and political objectives. I thus seek to explore this complex and fluid arena through the study of a variety of movements and intellectual strands, all of which can collectively be labelled as the 'Left.' I begin by situating the Punjabi Left within the wider global arena and then shift to examining it within the province itself. I then explore the Left's acrimonious relationship with the Colonial State as well as its tortured engagements with 'nationalist' and 'communitarian' movements. Taken together, this thesis, aside from enhancing our understanding of the 'Left' itself, also contributes to regional studies in general and questions historiographical demarcations and the categories that are normatively employed in standard political histories.

## Detailed Abstract

**Thesis Title:** Interrogating Provincial Politics: The Leftist Movement in British Punjab, c. 1914-1950

**Name:** Muhammad Ali Raza

**College:** St Antony's College

**Degree:** DPhil. History

**Term and Year of Submission:** Michaelmas, 2011

**Word Count:** Approx. 98,000 words

### Abstract

On the surface, this thesis aims to examine the development of the Leftist movement in British Punjab. But this work is not intended to be a standard political biography of the Punjabi Left. In any case, that has been done with varying success in other works. Rather I use the case of the Punjabi Left to explore the regional political landscape and the various actors it engaged with. In doing so, this thesis provides additional insights into certain political spaces and the actors that inhabited it, not least of which was the Left itself.

It is of course legitimate to ask why yet another thesis on the Punjab is required. The Punjab, more so than many other regions in the subcontinent, has been the subject of numerous works within South Asian historiography. But generally speaking, most of these works have been wedded to the broader themes of Empire, Nation and Community. There is of course considerable justification in this focus. After all, the Punjab was the epicenter of rival communitarian narratives and one of the two fault lines on which two nation states were created. Additionally, there is also much to be said for the Punjab's arguably distinctive colonial experience. Also relevant is the fact that the province on both halves of the post-colonial divide played an important role in the trajectories of both Pakistan and India.

And yet, this emphasis understandably neglects the lesser fragments that offer the potential of complicating our understanding of Punjabi and South Asian history. A key fragment within this wider narrative is the history of leftist radicalism in this region. At first glance, it seems incredible that the Punjab, despite its renowned sobriquet as the 'Sword Arm of Empire,' was home to a thriving movement of leftist radicalism. Admittedly, this movement was weaker as compared to its counterparts in Bengal or Bombay. Despite its relative weakness though, the Punjabi Left made an impact on the political landscape that was far in excess to its strength and constant vulnerability to state persecution. After all, this was one of the first regions within the subcontinent where the Left established a concerted presence, while its history of anti-colonial radicalism predated its formal association with the Leftist movement.

In short, I use this fragment to uncover a socio-political arena which played host to a multiplicity of contested identities, notions of sovereignty, and political objectives. In exploring this diversity, I also seek to explore associational allegiances which went

beyond the ostensibly rigid socio-political affiliations to the tribe, community, caste, or indeed, the Nation. For the most part, this socio-political milieu has all too often been understood in terms of immutable categorizations which arrive with their own assumptions and hence predetermined outcomes. As a result, much of the contemporaneous diversity of socio-political action and thought remains neglected at best or deliberately ignored at worst. I thus seek to explore this complex and fluid arena through the study of a variety of political movements and intellectual strands, all of whom can be labeled, for want of a better term, as the political 'Left.'

There have of course been a variety of academic and popular works on the Punjabi Left. Naturally, these pale in comparison to the number of works produced on the favoured themes in historiography centered on the Punjab. Given the relatively limited work on the Punjabi Left, it is only inevitable that there are certain gaps which need to be filled by additional research. In general, studies on the Left are distinguished by the polarized debates they generate. At one end, the Left is mostly viewed through the prism of the Nation. Belonging as they do to nationalist historiography, these works recognize the anti-imperialist credentials of the Left but consider its brand of politics to be misguided at best.

In contrast, there are numerous works that seek to rescue the Left's image by highlighting its innumerable contributions in the struggle against the British Raj. Some of these, authored by prominent leftists themselves, read like hagiographies. Even the more academic works restrict the Left to ideologically rigid compartments in which there is little, if any, room for maneuver. By and large, this literature also examines the Left in isolation to other social and political processes. In between, there are a few monographs that view the Left through a more nuanced lens. This enquiry, then, is very much in the spirit of these works. Thus, from the very outset, I seek to unpack the term 'Left' and highlight its political and ideological heterogeneity while situating it within the contexts from which it emerged.

In line with its overarching focus, this thesis is structured in a manner which details the engagement of the Left with the political spaces and actors it came in contact with. The lone exception is the Unionist Party, which dominated Punjabi politics up until the mid 1940s. Unlike other political forces, I have avoided devoting an exclusive chapter to the Unionists as the Left, aside from their constant opposition, did not have any meaningful engagement with them. I have therefore chosen to provide references to the Unionists in most chapters.

Following the introduction, the first substantive chapter of this thesis situates the Punjabi Left within the wider global arena by examining three networks that served as entry points for many aspiring revolutionaries. This chapter highlights how the history of Punjabi anti-colonial radicalism predated the development of the 'Leftist' movement in the province. Additionally, this chapter illustrates how this history is not a standard 'regional' history. Rather, as I argue, the politics of these networks show how the 'region' can be re-envisioned in ways that complicate and transcend its geographical boundaries. In terms of chronology, I begin this chapter and thesis with the inception of

the Ghadar Party in 1913-14. Broadly, this chapter highlights the various trajectories of radicalism that fed into the Punjabi Leftist movement.

The second chapter shifts the focus back to the Punjab and examines the broader context in which the Left established itself. After briefly analyzing the broad currency that radicalism enjoyed in the province, I conduct a detailed examination of the Kirti Kisan Party. This Party, its successors, and their Ghadarite allies were together the most significant Leftist movement in the Punjab. I use the Kirtis as a case study to demonstrate how the Left conducted its politics and how it was tied to the context in which it operated. While the Party itself had a relatively short political career, its members remained at the forefront of radical politics in the province and the post colonial state. After analyzing the Party I then undertake a brief survey of factionalism within the Punjabi Leftist movement in an attempt to highlight the diversity within it. Again, in a theme allied to the first chapter, I emphasize how the development of the Leftist movement was firmly tied to certain contexts which determined how people made the transition to radical politics. Additionally, this chapter will also provide insights into a period and a political space that was remarkable for its socio-political flexibility and amorphousness.

In a shift from political spaces, the following section initiates a series of discussions aimed at exploring the Left's engagements with dominant political forces. The first of these of course was the State itself. In its dealings with the Left, the Colonial State was a partisan actor which constantly sought to delegitimize and crush what it viewed as 'subversive' politics. In this, 'Communism' was obviously a favored target of a State that was anxious about the seemingly unstoppable tide of communist successes around the globe. But this relationship was not simply a narrative of mutual antagonism between two asymmetric forces. Rather, as I hope to illustrate, the engagement between the two amply highlights the nature of the State and the political space it sought to demarcate. Additionally, this chapter will show how this political space shifted over the years in response to changing political events of national and global significance.

The fourth chapter examines the oscillating relationship between the Left and the expected inheritors of the Colonial State: the Congress movement. As I seek to show, the engagement between the two also highlights the evolving relationship between the impulses of 'nationalism' and 'internationalism.' This chapter also introduces the Congress Socialist Party which has oddly enough, never been considered as the 'genuine' Left. That honour is more often than not, accorded to its rivals in the Communist Party of India. In looking at the Congress, this chapter also provides insights into the provincial Congress movement and highlights its variegated nature.

In the fifth chapter I initiate the first of two discussions on the Left's engagement with communitarian politics. In this regard, I first examine the Left's encounters with the Akali movement. This analysis is also important as the Akali movement proved to be an entry point into radical politics for most Punjabi leftists. It thus highlights the importance of specific contexts in enabling a transition to Leftist politics. Broadly, I will examine the shifting relationship between the two movements from the mid 1920s when the two were

barely distinguishable from one another, to the 1940s when the differences between the two resulted in fierce political competition. More than any other section, this chapter highlights how the Punjabi political landscape drastically shifted from the 1920s to the 1940s.

In the last substantial chapter, I comprehensively examine the Left's short lived political alliance with the Muslim League in its campaign for Pakistan. This, then, is the second communitarian force this thesis looks at. This chapter examines the Left's perplexing decision to support the right of Muslim self determination, which earned it the ire of the nationalist movement. In contrast to other works which have examined this decision in light of ideology, I situate this strategy in a shrinking political space in which the Left was compelled to hedge its bets in the colonial end game. This, in particular, was the starkest illustration of what the shifting political space meant for the politics of the Left and its future in the post-colonial states of India and Pakistan.

Additionally, in a special section related to the chapter above, I briefly examine the Left in Pakistan in the immediate years following Partition. I have chosen to extend this narrative into these years in order to highlight the continuities between the post-colonial state and its predecessor. I also consider this an attempt to remain faithful to the characters I am writing on, for whom decolonization was nothing like the independence they yearned for. If anything, it only marked the passing of formal power and signaled a new round of persecutions of a political force that was suspected of being 'subversive' in both the colonial and the post-colonial state.

This then leads to the concluding section in which I sum up the insights provided by the Left. These related to the regional and extra regional political spaces, the organizations that inhabited these spaces as well as the politics and experiences of individuals who engaged with a form of radicalism that was bound to incur the wrath of Empire. In doing so, I hope to show how this analysis makes the case for a much required intervention into how the political history of the province, and British India in general, is written about. The contribution of this thesis, then, is both empirical and theoretical. Aside from having implications for regional studies in general, this thesis also questions historiographical demarcations and the categories that are normatively employed in standard political histories.

In the memory of Jauhar Hussain  
and  
those who dared to dream

## Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
List of Abbreviations	x
Glossary	xi
Introduction	1
1 Widening the Gaze: Radicalism in the Global Arena	35
2 The Left in the Local Arena: The Case of the Kirti Kisan Sabha	76
3 Contesting Political Space: The Colonial State and the Punjabi Left	123
4 Competing Visions of the Nation: The Congress and the Punjabi Left	166
5 Dealing with Communitarianism I: The Akalis and the Punjabi Left	202
6 Dealing with Communitarianism II: The Muslim League and the Punjabi Left	235
7 Epilogue	261
Conclusion	284
Select Bibliography	302

## Acknowledgements

Over four years of research, it is only proper that I have incurred an incredible number of intellectual and personal debts. Firstly, I am profoundly grateful to Judith Brown for her time, support and invaluable supervision. I learnt a lot from her, and not just about South Asian history. Thanks are also due to Jeevan Deol, who supervised me for a couple of terms, and David Washbrook who looked after me in my first term at Oxford.

In terms of intellectual and personal debts, I am grateful to Michele Louro, Caroline Stolte, and especially, Benjamin Zachariah and Franziska Roy. This thesis would have been distinctly underwhelming without their profound insights and general camaraderie in Berlin and elsewhere. Thanks are also due to our transnational history group at Oxford, and in particular, Tamson Pietsch, Benjamin Mountford, and Jonathan Sudbury. I am also obliged to the decolonization group in Washington, and particularly John Darwin, Roger Louis, Philippa Levine, Jason Parker and Pillarisetti Sudhir, for their valuable feedback. Additionally, Faisal Devji, David Gilmartin, Ayesha Jalal, Harish Puri, Kamran Asdar Ali, Rosalind O'Hanlon, Raza Kazmi, and Yasmin Saikia, offered some excellent insights which have made their way into this dissertation. Special thanks are also due to Amarjit Chandan. He greatly added to my knowledge about the Punjabi Left and pointed me towards directions I was unaware of.

I am also indebted to Aasim, Asha and Rumi for their inspiring discussions and their incredible generosity in allowing me to colonize their guest room during my research in Islamabad. Similarly, Goshi and Dost provided me with a place to stay where I could work on my thesis and conduct research at the British Library. Profound thanks are due to them for putting up with me for months on end and for keeping me involved in a world outside my DPhil. Closer to Oxford, I am grateful to Moizza, Ammara and Ayesha for their kindness and memorable conversations.

This thesis was also made easier by the assistance of archivists and librarians at various archives, and in particular, the National Documentation Center, National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, Library of Congress, India Office Library, Zentrum Moderner Orient, and the Bodleian Library. And it certainly would not have been possible without the financial support of the Higher Education Commission and the Beit Fund.

On a personal note, this thesis is owed to the endless prayers, support and love of my parents who encouraged me to pursue my dreams. Equally immeasurable was the support given to me by my better half, Zahra. It is to them that this work is dedicated to.

## Abbreviations

AIKC	All India Kisan Committee
AIL	Anti-Imperialist League
CA	Comintern Archives
CAIP	Communist Activities in India and Pakistan
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPP	Communist Party of Pakistan
CSP	Congress Socialist Party
INC	Indian National Congress
IOR	India Office Records
HSRA	Hindustan Socialist Republican Association
KKP	Kirti Kisan Party
NDC	National Documentation Center
NJBS	Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha
NIHCR	National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research
NWFP	North West Frontier Province
MCCP	Meerut Conspiracy Case Papers
MLNG	Muslim League National Guard
LOC	Library of Congress
PCP	Punjab Communist Party
PKC	Punjab Kisan Committee
PPSAI	Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence
RPAP	Report on the Police Administration in the Punjab
RSS	Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh
SA Dal	Shromani Akali Dal
SGPC	Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee
UP	United Provinces
ZMO	Zentrum Moderner Orient

## Glossary

<i>Amrit</i>	Syrup used in Sikh religious observances
<i>Anjuman</i>	Association
<i>Azadi</i>	Freedom
<i>Begar</i>	Forced labour
<i>Chaprasi</i>	Peon
<i>Chowkidar</i>	Watchman
<i>Desh Bhagat</i>	Patriot
<i>Ghadar</i>	Mutiny
<i>Ghoondas</i>	Bad characters/criminals
<i>Granthi</i>	Keeper and reader of <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>
<i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>	Holy scripture of Sikhs
<i>Inquilab</i>	Revolution
<i>Jatha</i>	Band/Group
<i>Jathedar</i>	Leader of <i>jatha</i>
<i>Khuda</i>	God
<i>Kirti</i>	Labourer
<i>Kisan</i>	Peasant
<i>Panchayat</i>	A village council
<i>Pandit</i>	Hindu priest/caste
<i>Panth</i>	'Path,' used to denote a religious community/sect
<i>Pir</i>	Holy man/descendent and trustee of Sufi shrine
<i>Qabaristan</i>	Graveyard
<i>Qarza</i>	Loan
<i>Sajjada nashin</i>	Descendent and trustee of Sufi shrine
<i>Sarkar</i>	State
<i>Tehsil</i>	Administrative division
<i>Thana</i>	Police Station
<i>Thikri Pehra</i>	Night patrolling
<i>Mahant</i>	Priest/caretaker of temple/gurdwara
<i>Maulvi</i>	Muslim clergyman
<i>Mazdur</i>	Labourer
<i>Mehnatkash</i>	Labourer
<i>Murdabad</i>	Death to...
<i>Naujawan</i>	Young men
<i>Pardah</i>	Veil
<i>Rasul</i>	Prophet
<i>Sabha</i>	Party/organization
<i>Sahukar</i>	Moneylender
<i>Saropa</i>	Gift of honour
<i>Swaraj</i>	Sovereignty, self rule
<i>Updeshak</i>	Preacher
<i>Zail</i>	Administrative unit consisting of up to a few dozen villages

*Zaildar*

Official in charge of a *zail*

*Zamindar*

Cultivating landowner – not similar to the large landowning *zamindars* in the UP

*Zindabad*

Long live...

## **Introduction**

This is a thesis on the development of the Leftist movement in Colonial Punjab and the insights it provides into the political spaces and actors it came into contact with. The Punjab, despite its distinctive colonial experience, was home to a thriving movement of Leftist radicalism. While they may have been relatively weaker when compared to Leftist movements in Bengal and Bombay, Punjabi movements nevertheless made an impact on the political landscape that was far in excess to their strength and vulnerability to state persecution. Indeed, this was one of the first regions within the subcontinent where the Left established a concerted presence. The province's history of anti-imperialist radicalism also predated its engagement with the politics of the 'Left,' as it is normatively understood.

This narrative is thrown into sharp relief when analyzing the dominant themes in Punjabi and South Asian historiography. In fact, the contrast between the two was one of the driving forces behind this thesis. My motivation for this work was a search for the lesser fragments that offer the possibility of complicating the tidiness of wider historical narratives. For the most part these discourses overlook the variety of ideas regarding the contentious issues of identity, sovereignty, and socio-political alternatives that motivated countless individuals to enter the political arena. My purpose then, is to write a history of alternate possibilities that were contemporaneously viable and yet retrospectively ignored. For this purpose, I seek to examine marginal socio-political movements that were situated within the 'local' political arena.

In this respect, the Leftist movement within colonial Punjab provides an obvious choice. The Punjab, more so than any other region in the subcontinent, has been caught up in a web of narratives centred on the themes of Empire, Nation and Community. In this sense, recovering minor fragments that offer the prospect of altering our understanding of Punjabi and South Asian history becomes all the more difficult. And yet, it is also the most rewarding. In what follows therefore, I undertake an analysis of the multi-layered politics of marginalized organizations and individuals that offer the prospect of complicating some narratives that are favoured within Punjabi and South Asian historiography.

### Setting the Context

At first glance, it seems incredible that British Punjab was home to a thriving leftist movement. After all, this province was distinguished by the rigid control the colonial state exercised over it. Annexed in 1849 from the remnants of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's once powerful kingdom, the Punjab became renowned during the 19-20<sup>th</sup> century for its despotic, if paternalistic, style of administration.<sup>1</sup> The provincial administration, otherwise also known as the 'Punjab School,'<sup>2</sup> prided itself on its ostensibly efficient

---

<sup>1</sup> For the best example of this outlook, see the memoirs of F. L. Brayne, *Better Villages* 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Bombay; New York: Oxford University Press, 1946). Also see the memoirs of one of the most famous (and notorious) governors of Punjab, Sir Michael O' Dwyer, *India as I knew it, 1885-1925*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Constable, 1925).

<sup>2</sup> For an insight into the internal workings of the Punjab administration, see: P.H.M. van den Dungen, *The Punjab Tradition: Influence and Authority in Nineteenth-Century India* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972). Also see, Andrew J. Major, *Return to Empire: Punjab Under the Sikhs and British in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1996) and Clive Dewey, *The Mind of the Indian Civil Service* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). For an account of the most famous of all Punjabi administrators, who were in many ways the founders of the 'Punjab Tradition,' see, Harold Lee, *Brothers in the Raj : The Lives of John and Henry Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

governance which ensured order and stability in return for state patronage to certain groups crucial to the maintenance of empire.

Given the largely rural composition of Punjabi society, the edifice of Empire was supported for the most part by the rural arena. The relationship between the colonial state and Punjabi rural elites was firmly laid during the events of 1857-58 when the latter provided invaluable military assistance in subduing the rebellion across North India. These groups continued to support Empire almost till the end of British rule in the subcontinent. For its part, the colonial administration ensured their allies support by bestowing them with state largesse in the form of land grants, titles, and political and administrative control. In this respect, the most prominent beneficiaries of state patronage were tribal leaders, wealthy landowners and/or *pirs* who controlled popular shrines.

The largest group of beneficiaries included (relatively) small scale cultivating landowners (*zamindars*) who comprised the bulk of the rural population. Initially, the colonial government relied upon a low revenue demand and land acts favouring the *zamindars* which in turn ensured their loyalty. With the introduction of the market economy however, these groups came under significant amounts of debt which led to the transfer of their land to moneylenders. To reverse this trend the government embarked on what has been called the ‘greatest single piece of social engineering ever attempted in India’<sup>3</sup>: the distinction between ‘agriculturist’<sup>4</sup> and ‘non-agriculturist’<sup>5</sup> tribes. Enacted through the Land Alienation Act of 1900, the state singled out tribes and castes deemed as agriculturists and forbade the transfer of their land to moneylenders or commercial castes

---

<sup>3</sup> N. Gerald Barrier, ‘The Punjab Disturbances of 1907: The Response of the British Government in India to Agrarian Unrest,’ *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (1967) pp. 354-355

<sup>4</sup> *Jats, Arains, Gujjars, and Rajputs*, among others.

<sup>5</sup> Such as the largely urban based *Khatri*s and *Aroras*.

that were labelled as non-agriculturist. Later acts further enhanced the protection available to *zamindars* from 'non-agriculturist' groups.<sup>6</sup>

The loyalty of rural groups was further ensured through the development of 'canal colonies.' By any definition, this was the largest and most ambitious project of socio-economic and demographic engineering in South Asia.<sup>7</sup> From the 1880s to the 1940s, a dozen colonies were gradually established in central-western districts through the creation of one of the largest irrigation systems of the world which converted previously unproductive lands into fertile grounds for agricultural production. Ostensibly, the official aims of agricultural colonization were relief from population congestion in the east, settlement of the land with the most 'efficient' agriculturists, and improvement of living standards. Other motivations went far beyond officially stated benevolent objectives. For one, land distribution frequently won the loyalty of those who were rewarded. Secondly, the pattern of land distribution, combined with other agrarian and economic policies, also strengthened the status and authority of social groups and classes selected for land grants so that they in turn could serve more effectively as bastions of support to the colonial administration. These groups were constituted of landholding peasants, landlords, state functionaries, religious leaders, and last, but not the least, serving and retired military personnel. Disloyalty to the state or non compliance with the conditions under which the land was given could result in the confiscation of grants.

---

<sup>6</sup> See for instance M. Mufakhar-ul- Islam, 'The Punjab Land Alienation Act and the Professional Moneylenders' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2. (May, 1995) pp 271-291 and Gerald N. Barrier, *The Punjab Alienation of Land Bill of 1900* (Duke University: Program in Comparative Studies on Southern Asia, 1966). For an excellent insight into official anxieties on this issue, see, S. S. Thorburn, *Muslims and Moneylenders in the Punjab* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1886)

<sup>7</sup> Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) pp 237. This is by far the most comprehensive and best account on the canal colonies. For a briefer account on the same, see Imran Ali, 'Malign Growth? Agricultural Colonization and the Roots of Backwardness in the Punjab,' *Past & Present*, No. 114 (Feb., 1987), pp. 110-132

These measures to ensure cooperation and loyalty were crucial to sustaining the role that Punjab played as the heartland of military recruitment to the British Indian Army. After the Rebellion of 1857-58 the British gradually shifted their recruiting grounds to the region. This shift was initially driven by the assistance rendered by Punjabis in suppressing the Rebellion. But more crucially, the emphasis on recruiting certain Punjabis to the Army was driven by the spurious theory of 'martial races.'<sup>8</sup> Under this idea, certain castes from specific areas were identified as inherently possessing the qualities of 'masculinity, fidelity, bravery, and loyalty.'<sup>9</sup> That obviously singled them out as ideal recruits to the British Indian Army. In terms of localities in central Punjab, military recruitment was strictly restricted to the districts of Amritsar and Lahore, and to a lesser extent, Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana. Sikh *Jats*<sup>10</sup> adhering to the *Khalsa* creed were the principal group recruited from these districts. Sikhs from other districts, with the exception of the low caste *Mazhabis*, were considered for various reasons to be unsuitable for recruitment. By the same token, Muslim recruits were largely enlisted from dominant landowning tribes such as the *Ghakkars*, *Awans* and *Janjuas* which inhabited the Salt Range tract. Included in this area were the districts of Jhelum and Rawalpindi. Lastly, a relatively small proportion of Hindu and Muslim *Jats* were recruited from the south-eastern districts of Rohtak, Hissar and Kangra. The process of recruitment

---

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis into the profound effects of this discourse see, Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1985)

<sup>9</sup> Tai Yong Tan, *The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab 1849-1947* (Delhi; London : Sage, 2005) pp 65

<sup>10</sup> The dominant peasant caste in the Punjab

therefore was exceptionally localized.<sup>11</sup> As an example, the district of Amritsar alone supplied more than a third of all Sikhs recruited in the Punjab.<sup>12</sup>

The importance of Punjab to military recruitment was reflected in the composition of the British Indian Army. By the turn of the century Punjabis accounted for more than a half of Army recruits. No other province or region in British India came close to matching this ratio.<sup>13</sup> The Punjab therefore was a highly militarized province, though the political, social, and economic repercussions of this development were especially concentrated in the districts which supplied recruits to the military. The process of militarization was also driven by the fact that the Punjab, until the creation of the North West Frontier Province in 1901, was the virtual frontier of British India and hence intimately involved with the Anglo-Russian 'Great Game' in Afghanistan. While the maintenance of internal security was of prime concern, the Punjabi dominated army was also extensively used to defend the global interests of the British Empire. Both serving and retired Punjabi servicemen were deployed in a variety of theatres ranging from North and East Africa to South East Asia. This was in addition to their seminal contribution in the First and Second World Wars. Owing to its role, the Punjab became known as the 'Sword Arm of Empire.' Conscious of the impact of militarization, the state undertook various steps to manage the effects of recruitment and demobilization in certain districts. The most important of these was the creation of District Soldier Boards that were specifically charged with ensuring the welfare of demobilized soldiers and the families of serving soldiers.<sup>14</sup> This was

---

<sup>11</sup> Exceptions were, however, made in periods of crises such as the two World Wars. The pressure to enlist more men during the two conflicts led the military to look for new recruiting grounds.

<sup>12</sup> Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State*, pp 71-75

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* pp 17-18

<sup>14</sup> See, Tai Yong Tan, 'Maintaining the Military Districts: Civil-Military Integration and District Soldiers' Boards in the Punjab, 1919-1939,' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Oct., 1994), pp. 833-874

coupled with the provisions of pensions and grants of land. Hardly surprising then, that the *sarkar* came to be viewed by many as a caring entity.

In terms of exerting control, the province was divided into five administrative divisions, each under the supervision of a commissioner. These divisions were further subdivided into twenty nine districts, each containing around a thousand villages, which were administered by deputy commissioners. Lower down the districts came the *tehsils*, each of which contained an approximate number of 150 villages. These were headed by *tehsildars* who wielded revenue and judicial powers. At the bottom of the administrative pyramid came the *zails* which were constituted of a few dozen villages. At this level, control was entrusted to the *zaildar* who supervised the village headmen or *lambardars* and acted as an honorary police officer in charge of the village police.<sup>15</sup> Subordinate to this position was the rank of the *sufedposh*. Both positions were highly coveted and were endowed largely as a reward for loyalty and in recognition of the holder's local power. Only local landowning elites who demonstrated unflinching loyalty to the state were appointed to these positions. Regarded as the 'natural leaders' of rural society, these local intermediaries of state power were entrusted with maintaining stability and order at the local level. These appointments, however, were not merely a function of prior influence. Rather, in central and eastern districts, where social hierarchies were less exaggerated, the possession of a *zaildari* was a means through which local influence was acquired.<sup>16</sup>

This administrative control was coupled with the creation of a political system that encouraged the dominance of intermediary groups. For one, the British introduced a tribal idiom in representative politics that ensured that the *zail* was a primary constituency for

---

<sup>15</sup> Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1988) pp 35

<sup>16</sup> Ian Talbot, *Khizr Tiwana: The Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1996) pp 53-54

election to the district boards. During the period of dyarchy, the provincial government saw to it that political power in the countryside remained the sole preserve of prominent landowners. Moreover, only members of 'agriculturist' tribes were permitted to stand as candidates for the rural constituencies of the Legislative Councils introduced by the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. This pattern did not change significantly even with the 1935 Government of India Act and the increase in franchise, as constituencies were redrawn in such a way so as to ensure the predominance of rural interests in the provincial assembly.<sup>17</sup>

These interests were most prominently represented by the Unionist Party that dominated provincial politics up until the eve of Partition. The party first emerged as a formalized political grouping in the Punjab Legislative Council in the early 1920s. Dominated as it was by large landowning interests, the Unionist Party was part of a wider kaleidoscope of loyalist and landlord parties operating in various provinces of the subcontinent. Nowhere though, was such a party as prominent and politically powerful as in the Punjab. Broadly, the Unionists represented a broad coalition of rural interests that cut across communitarian boundaries. Their strength, however, was not derived from the political positioning of the Unionist Party, but was rather based in deeply entrenched patronage networks that were particularly strong in the western half of the province. Since they represented agriculturist interests, the Unionists were at the forefront of pushing for agrarian reforms that were particularly related to rural indebtedness. In doing so, they attempted to ameliorate agrarian grievances that could have posed a challenge to the authority of the state.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid pp 58.

Given the structures and technologies of patronage and control, it was largely inconceivable to colonial administrators that the Punjab could ever experience unrest. And yet, the very nature of the state also created many tensions. For example, the militarization of the province, while instrumental for many families seeking to augment their income, also imposed unprecedented pressures on Punjabi society. This was particularly true for the two world wars when shortages of staple commodities, rampant inflation and strict curbs on civil liberties led to resentment against the Raj. The latter factor, for instance, lay behind the agitation against the unpopular Rowlatt Act. Also, as the colonial administration soon discovered, military manpower was not an inexhaustible resource. Pressures on local recruiters to enlist more men for the war effort often led to complaints of coercion and administrative high handedness.<sup>18</sup> On the frontline as well, soldiers were scarred by what they witnessed on the battlefield, particularly in the trenches on the Western Front.<sup>19</sup> These experiences were instrumental in the breakdown of racial stereotypes and the belief that many held in the invincibility of the *sarkar*.

There were of course other causes of unrest as well. These could also be driven by those who benefited from state patronage. One of the best examples of this was the 1907 agitation in the canal colonies. Initially motivated by widespread corruption and maladministration in the Chenab Colony, the agitation was sparked off by the proposed Punjab Land Colonization Bill, which was perceived to be unjust by canal colony settlers.

---

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, I found references to scores of petitions filed before district commissioners in the Punjab Archives. Unfortunately, the letters themselves had been ‘weeded’ out (by no less than a ‘weeding officer’ who is appointed for this express purpose!) owing to a ‘lack of space’ in the archives. All I had were the subject headings of those petitions in the catalogues. From their descriptions these letters were written to complain about the methods employed by military recruiters during the First World War. In many cases, there were also pleas from worried parents asking for their sons – some of whom had been forcibly taken away – to be returned to them.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance the accounts in the *Garrison State* and David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994) and *Indian voices of the Great War: Solders' Letters, 1914-18* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999)

With the involvement of Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh, this protest movement soon acquired a radical character which led to an unprecedented political defeat of the Government.<sup>20</sup> Ajit Singh himself became one of the first of many Punjabi revolutionaries who travelled throughout the wider global arena for the singular purpose of struggling against Empire. The 1907 agitation therefore was the first of many agrarian agitations that took place over the next few decades. Often directed against the state, these movements contest the claim made by some that the rural space was largely apolitical and unaffected by radical activism.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, political activism was naturally more feverish and concentrated in the urban arena. The urban space, and in particular the cities of Lahore and Amritsar, was home to all sorts of political organizations, associations, and institutions which encouraged activism that was often directed against the state. Matters were also helped by the development of a thriving print culture. Moreover, the provincial and district governments, while deriving their power and legitimacy from the countryside, were nevertheless headquartered in towns and cities across the province. As a result, the urban arena remained the main focus of political activity along nationalist, class, and communitarian lines.

What emerges from this analysis therefore is a picture of a region that was highly differentiated. For one, the power and influence of the state was unevenly spread. In Western Punjab for instance, where powerful landowning tribal leaders held sway, there were little, if any, prospects for a concerted movement against the Raj. This was far from the case in central and eastern districts where landowning patterns and sources of power

---

<sup>20</sup> For a brief account of this agitation see Barrier, 'The Punjab Disturbances of 1907.'

<sup>21</sup> See for instance the introduction by Imran Ali in *Punjab Under Imperialism*.

were more fragmented. This assisted the development of a politics that was more radical in orientation. On another level, politics was also differentiated between rural and urban arenas. Both had their own internal logics that while overlapping at certain points, were nevertheless roughly distinct from each other. This pattern of differentiation was also true insofar as Punjabi rural society was concerned. To the extent that generalizations are possible, rural society consisted of five main groups. The top of the economic pyramid was occupied by landlords who owned large tracts of land that were leased to tenants for cultivation. These tenants themselves could be quite wealthy and own small parcels of land. Other groups included peasant cultivators who owned and worked their landholdings, the servant groups or *kamis* who provided essential services and landless labourers or *kisans* who depended on their landowners for employment.<sup>22</sup> That said, even this structure varied considerably across the province.<sup>23</sup>

Strictly speaking therefore, this thesis, for the most part, examines a particular section of the Punjabi landscape (highlighted in the map on the following page). Owing to various reasons which will be examined later, the leftist movement within the Punjab was mostly concentrated in urban centres and the central rural districts. Even in these districts, most leftist cadres were Sikh Jats; the very same social group which supplied the British Indian army with a disproportionately high number of recruits. In terms of general features, the central districts, and in particular the *Manjha* tract, were among the most heavily cultivated and densely populated regions in the Punjab.<sup>24</sup> These areas were mostly populated by small scale peasant proprietors; again, the very same economic group that

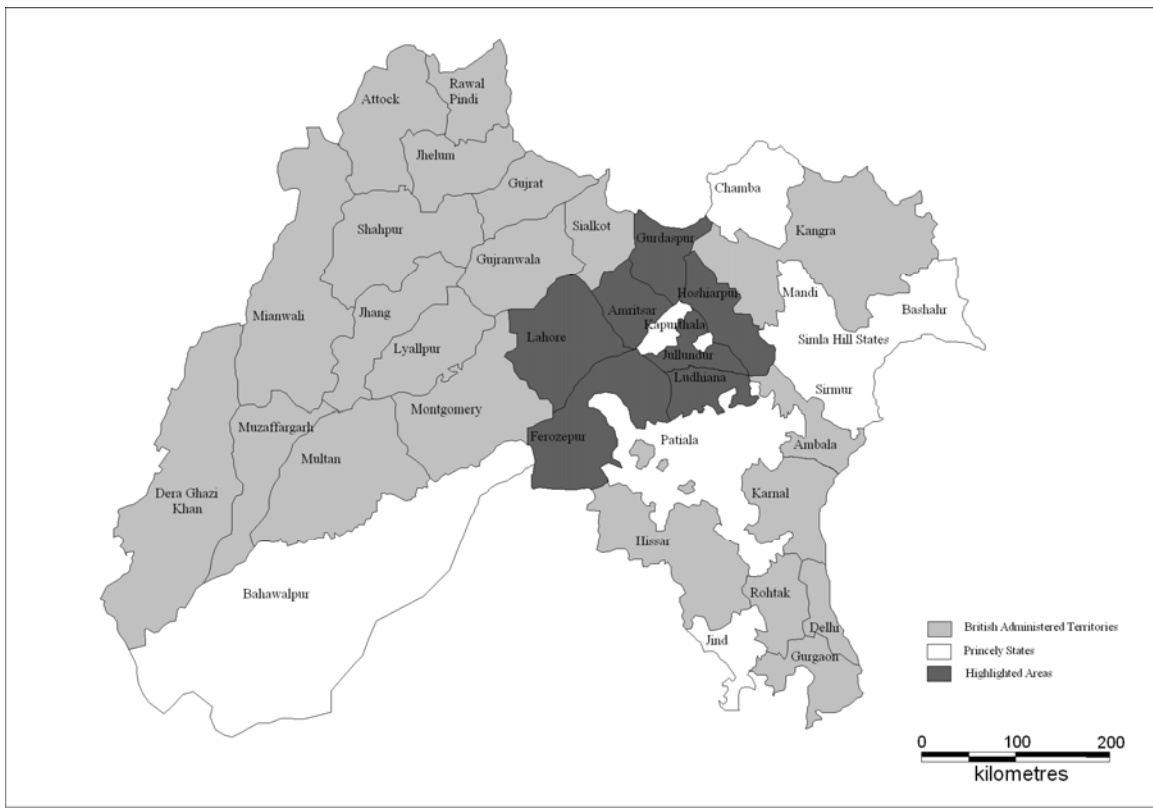
---

<sup>22</sup> Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj*, pp 15

<sup>23</sup> As an excellent example, see the fascinating contemporary accounts of Malcolm L. Darling, *Rusticus Loquitur: Or, The Old Light and the New in the Punjab Village* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930) and *Wisdom and Waste in the Punjab Village* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934)

<sup>24</sup> See for instance Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State*, 86-89

the Raj claimed to protect. The manifold pressures on the land also led many to enlist in the army and migrate to distant lands in order to augment their income. Family incomes therefore were often supplemented through a combination of immigration, enlistment and land cultivation. This meant that the central districts grew to be quite prosperous, especially when compared to the impoverished salt range tract or south western Punjab. Paradoxically, though, the very opportunities that afforded these regions their relative prosperity also worked as entry points to radical politics. And it is here that the dual nature of Empire becomes important. Aside from exercising control and providing real or perceived prosperity, the Empire could also afford many the opportunities and conditions through which it could be contested. And it was with the confluence of these and certain other conditions that Punjab developed a Leftist movement that threatened the stability of the province.



## Conceptualizing the Left

One of the main stumbling blocks in studying the Left is first determining what the 'Left' actually is. For a start, there were innumerable organizations and individuals who operated under the label of the 'Left.' This was equally true for the Punjab as it was for other provinces. Somewhat counter-intuitively, this problem cannot simply be solved by examining certain movements or individuals. For one, leftist movements, for various reasons, had relatively short political lives. In addition to political outlook or ambition, they were also tied to certain personalities, which is why it is often difficult to distinguish between movements and individuals. On another front, 'leftist' individuals could also be found in organizations that fell outside the 'Left,' however defined, or explicitly distanced themselves from it. Given this, I have opted to introduce various organizations and individuals in this thesis for the dual purpose of highlighting the diversity of the Punjabi Left as well as using them to study the wider political arena.

Time and context add another layer of complexity, as political alliances and ideological affinities were transitory and contingent on other circumstances. In terms of period, it was quite common for individuals who came to be associated with communal politics in the 1940s to be considered as part of the 'Left,' or at least to be in sympathy with it, in the 1920s. Similarly, since political radicalism was relational to political norms at a particular point in time, the idea of 'radical' itself, or at least the leftist variation of it, underwent significant shifts. In other words, a 'radical' in 1915 might be considered a centrist in the 1930s. Context too is an important element in this equation. For example, an individual's 'leftist' credentials might vary from audience to audience. All of this of course, adds significantly to the problem of determining what the 'Left' is.

Related to this issue is the question of who is doing the labelling. In this respect, the most elastic understanding of the 'Left' is provided by the colonial state itself. Institutionally conditioned by an often irrational fear of 'Communism,' colonial officials in security and intelligence services were often quick to detect 'communist' traces which could easily be explained in other terms as well. Even within the colonial state, there were institutional and personal differences on who could be legitimately classified under these terms. For officials in the administrative services for example, these definitions were far less elastic. Moving on, the more restrictive definition of the 'Left' comes from their political opponents. Despite having cross party and personal alliances with their 'leftist' counterparts and holding ideas that could very well be bracketed as 'leftist,' these political rivals often drew distinctions between themselves and the 'Left' depending on a variety of circumstances. Obviously, the extent to which this was done varied from one organization to another in the provincial and national arena. But possibly, the most restrictive definition of the 'Left' comes (perhaps unsurprisingly) from the 'Left' itself. While factionalism was a prominent feature of politics in colonial India, it was particularly pronounced within the 'leftist' spectrum. This meant that there were a variety of definitions ranging from 'communist' to 'enemy of the people.' These were employed both for the purposes of distinguishing oneself from the other as well as to condemn leftist rivals whose ideological and political allegiances were not particularly suited to the outlook of an organization or an individual.

Matters become even trickier when it comes to the realm of ideas. After all, what kind of ideas can be classified as 'leftist'? Again, this can be answered in part by asking who is doing the labelling, but other insights can also be gained by examining the period and

context of these ideas. In the 1920s for example, ideas routinely labelled as ‘communist’ by the state were part of a wider vocabulary and grammar of politics which politicians of all hues and stripes used in the political arena. The wide currency these ideas enjoyed meant that politicians *had* to use them in order to legitimate themselves. Indeed, going by the rhetoric of the times, it was worth asking if there was anyone who could *not* be classified as a ‘leftist.’ And yet, these ideas evolved into other forms in different periods and contexts and gradually rid themselves of their association with the ‘Left,’ as defined in the 1920s.

This complexity and the near impossibility of demarcating which ideas were ‘leftist’ or not leads me to argue that a serious engagement with this debate has little, if any, value. The same goes for determining who is a ‘leftist’ and who is not. Others who have gone down this route have inevitably come up with watertight compartments in which there is little scope for overflows and overlaps. My proposal to solve this dilemma is to think of the ‘Left’ as a relational term which changes according to the user employing it as well as the period and context in which it is being employed. My point in this thesis is precisely to show how expansive (or restrictive for that matter) the idea of the Left is; which is something that cannot be neatly compartmentalized.

In recognition of this, I often try to avoid using the terms ‘communist’ or ‘socialist’ and have instead frequently opted for the more ideologically non-deterministic terms of ‘radical’ or ‘revolutionary.’ The former are heavily loaded with assumptions that colour any discussion on the politics of movements and individuals. That does not mean however, that ideological and political distinctions cannot and should not be made. Indeed, there has to be some level of abstraction in order to make sense of wider

processes. I therefore use the term 'Left' in relation to other political strands but not without showing how its understanding changes over time. In doing so, I project onto it an amorphous and constantly shifting political and intellectual boundary that includes a variety of divergent, and yet loosely connected, threads. Not only is this important for telling us how the 'Left' itself changed but it also, more broadly, shows how the political arena also underwent concurrent shifts; all of which provides a greater understanding of local politics and its wider repercussions.

### A Brief Survey of Historiography

Within South Asian historiography, the Punjab, as a region, has garnered a fair share of attention relative to other geographical spaces in the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, the first obstacle before writing (yet) another history of the region is getting to grips with the sheer volume of literature devoted to it. In what follows therefore, I do not aim to provide a comprehensive survey of these works. Rather, I will make some general points on the themes within Punjabi historiography and point out what appear to be some of its shortcomings.

At the very outset then, it is perhaps pertinent to point out that Punjabi historiography is mostly wedded to the broader narratives of Empire, Nation, and Community (religious and otherwise). That said, the Punjab is hardly an exception to this trend as these narratives run across, with justification, much of modern South Asian historiography. This emphasis is even more justified when it comes to the Punjab. After all, the province had a rather unique position as an epicentre of three competing communitarian claims as well as being one of the two fault lines on which two independent nation states were

created. Moreover, this region was also crucial to the imperial project within the subcontinent and beyond. Added to that is the significant role that Punjab has played in both post-colonial states, though its politics has had more of a dominating influence in Pakistan than in India. Given these reasons, it is perhaps understandable why a subtle thread of Punjabi exceptionalism runs across much of its historiography.

As a consequence, it is hardly surprising that most works on the Punjab explore the communal divides that plagued provincial politics and led to the dismemberment of the Province.<sup>25</sup> As is clear from this literature, not only are the wounds of Partition yet to heal, but the violence that accompanied and the hatred that engendered it still remain inexplicable.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps that is why there is a certain teleology in many of these works;<sup>27</sup> all seeking to explain in their own way why what happened was in some ways inevitable.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, other narratives focus on Punjab's seminal role in sustaining

---

<sup>25</sup> Broadly, there have been a plethora of works on the theme of Partition. Some focus on the 'high-politics' of partition. Examples include Stanley Wolpert, *Shameful flight: The Last Years of the British Empire in India* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006) and the works cited in footnote no. 27. For other works which seamlessly blend the narrative of 'high-politics' with the politics and experiences of ordinary individuals during partition, see the studies of Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), and Vazira F.Y Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press 2007).

<sup>26</sup> The much celebrated literature on Partition is perhaps the best indication of this. See for instance the stories of Manto in, Saadat Hasan Manto, *Manto Rama* (Lahore: Sang-i Meel, 1990) and *Kulliyat-i-Manto* (Lahore: 'Ilm va 'Irfan Publishers, 2005). Also see the epic: Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press 1975). Other academic works on Partition focus on the theme of violence and the experiences of those who were caught up in it. See for instance, Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998). For a gendered perspective see, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> See for instance, David Page, *Prelude to Partition: The Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control, 1920-32* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> Some excellent works, though, explain this process without resorting to a teleological framework. In particular see the works of, Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (New York: Routledge, 2000) and David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

Empire and the resulting particularities of the provincial political landscape. These are obviously couched in studies examining the colonial impact on the region.<sup>29</sup>

While there are innumerable variations on similar themes, most locate the agency of Punjabis, elite as well as subaltern, within the rubric of communitarian and national(ist) narratives. This is coupled with a reliance on largely ‘elite’ narratives which reproduce the view from the realm of ‘high politics.’ The outcome of this focus is a history that is, more often than not, linear and teleological and which dutifully reproduces narratives that fall short of capturing the fluidity of the Punjabi socio-political landscape. This is particularly true for the way in which ostensibly homogenous categories of religion, caste and tribe are employed without a rigorous analysis of the social contexts and the structures within which they are produced. Needless to suggest, the uncritical use of these categories also precludes an analysis of their frequently shifting nature or indeed the multiplicity of identities – and hence the manifold socio-political alternatives – ascribed to by individuals.

Perhaps, these representations are both a cause and consequence of a subtle portrayal of a Punjab that is largely static. Whatever dynamism that does exist is mostly restricted to the urban space with its wide variety of socio-political, cultural and religious activities. Even so, this sense of dynamism is mostly viewed through a lens that is coloured by the events accompanying the colonial endgame. In this sense, the process of ‘change’ is itself rooted in the increasing rigidity of Punjabi society in the shape of hardening identities along tribal, caste and (largely) religious lines. Neglected for the most part, are the politics,

---

<sup>29</sup> Examples include Tai Yong Tan’s *The Garrison State* and Imran Ali’s *Punjab Under Imperialism*, and Ian Talbot’s *Punjab and the Raj*.

ideas, and social and cultural practices of individuals who defy attempts to place them in neat categorizations.

This is certainly the case insofar as the Punjabi Left and other marginal movements are concerned. These movements offer useful examples of political forces that articulated ideas about sovereignty, identity, and socio-political projects that were radically removed from the objectives of the nationalist mainstream. Moreover, this mode of politics also included associational allegiances that went beyond the ostensibly rigid socio-political affiliations to the tribe, (religious) community, caste, or indeed, the Nation.

Nevertheless, despite their relative marginalization in historiography, the Punjabi Left has still been the subject of significant scholarship. Unlike any other movement though, the Left, in general, is distinguished by the polarized debates it produces. On one end, the Left is mostly viewed through the prism of the Nation.<sup>30</sup> While recognizing the Left's anti-imperialist credentials, these nationalist narratives nevertheless consider its politics to be misguided.<sup>31</sup> Its uneasy relationship with the Congress and the Gandhian brand of politics as well as its volte-face in 1942 with the Peoples War line ensured that a significant section of the Left would be viewed with considerable distaste by the victorious nationalists. This impression was further strengthened by the suspicion that the Left was merely a Soviet fifth column; a fear that was openly voiced by the British Government as well as by certain sections of the nationalist movement and press. It is

---

<sup>30</sup> See for instance, Bipan Chandra (ed.), *The Indian Left: Critical Appraisals*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House 1983).

<sup>31</sup> See the monumental work by Shashi Joshi, Bhagwan Josh, *Struggle for Hegemony in India, 1920-47: The Colonial State, the Left and the National Movement* (3 vols., New Delhi; London: Sage, 1992-94). This monograph is perhaps the best example of works that view the Left from a rigid ideological and theoretically dense prism in an attempt to explain why its politics did not have as profound an impact as it potentially should have. Another work in a theoretical genre which is quite useful is Mridula Mukherjee, *Peasants in India's Non-violent Revolution: Practice and Theory* (London: SAGE, 2003)

hardly surprising therefore that some of these prejudices make their way into nationalist historiography.

At other end of the spectrum are works devoted to rescuing the Left's image and highlighting its contributions in the struggle against the British Raj. Though, again, the metric employed for measuring their success are their contributions to the nationalist cause. Another feature of some these works is their polemical bent. By and large, they restrict the Left to ideologically rigid compartments in which there is little, if any, room for manoeuvre. These works also inflate the impact of the Left and examine it in isolation to other social and political processes.<sup>32</sup> Most suffer from another shortcoming in that they analyze the Left's politics solely through the prism of class politics. In doing so, most authors refract this reading through their own ideological prisms and rely on an all too literal reading of the sources produced by the Left.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, this body of literature is valuable for providing some useful insights into the character and composition of various leftist movements. In more recent years, however, there have been a number of works that have highlighted the political and ideological diversity within these movements and shied away from judging their impact in terms of a crude barometer of 'success' or 'failure.'<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> See for instance Bhagwan Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-47* (Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1979), the first two chapters of Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab: A Study of the Movement up to 1967* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications 1994) and S. Gajrani, *Peasant movement in Punjab* (Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1987). Also see the earliest monograph in this tradition, Gene D. Overstreet, Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959). It is difficult to fault this monograph, however, as this is one of the first exhaustive narratives produced on the Indian Left as a whole. As an initial study therefore, this work is extremely valuable even if it was written from an explicitly American perspective well into the Cold War.

<sup>33</sup> For instance, most works preface their accounts with an examination of Punjabi class structure. See the introduction of Bhagwan Josh *Communist Movement in India* for instance.

<sup>34</sup> In this recent respect, a number of excellent monographs have been published in the last few years. See for instance, Shalini Sharma's, *Radical Politics in the Punjab: Governance and Sedition* (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2010) and the upcoming work by Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley:

Clearly, this seems to be the way forward in assessing the role of these movements. In what follows, I try to do the same, though I also use the Left to examine the political arenas it operated in. This also raises an important question about the methodological approach I have adopted in this thesis. For the most part, studies on the Left have relied on the archival convenience of studying discrete movements and individuals. In this, these works reproduce the way in which the archive itself is organized. As a result, it is far more difficult to trace patterns, networks, movements and exchanges. In part, I have tried to overcome this shortcoming by using case studies of various movements and individuals in the hope that they shed some insights into processes that had far wider ramifications than would otherwise be obvious if they were to be examined in isolation to each other. These accounts may appear on first glance to be scattered and unconnected, but they can nevertheless be used in a piecemeal fashion to weave together a broader plot. I thus use ‘micro-narratives’ to piece together a ‘meta-narrative’ to highlight, at times, a global process that is nevertheless sensitive to and rooted in a regional interplay of power relations together with its social, economic and political aspects.

#### A Note on Sources

I have relied on a variety of sources during the course of my research. The Left, fortunately, was one of the very few marginal political forces that generated the production of vast archival collections. That by itself is an indication of the political potential (either threatening or promising depending on the point of view) of the Left during the British Raj. More crucial, though, is the question of who produced these

---

University of California Press, 2011). In the biographical genre, which on this topic has mostly been subjected to the hagiographical tradition, see Kris Manjappa, *M.N Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge India, 2010).

archives. These collections were produced by a variety of agents and institutions which can in turn be divided into two broad classifications.

The first and foremost of these was the colonial state itself. Fixated by the real and perceived threat posed by ‘communism’ in India as well as around the globe, the colonial state produced vast amounts of documentation on both organizations and individuals. These reports were issued by all levels within the administrative, security and intelligence apparatuses of the state. Aside from providing crucial information, each set of sources provides a fascinating and unique insight into the particular concerns of each organization and the various levels within it. In thematic terms, these sources range from police and intelligence reports to administrative accounts and correspondences between organizations and colonial officials. Together, they constitute an almost inexhaustible set of resources that, aside from providing valuable information on the Left, also offer profound insights into the ‘official mind’<sup>35</sup> and the internal dynamics of the colonial state itself. In this respect, the angle with which the Left was viewed was also conditioned by the prerogatives of the reporting institution. Moreover, these sources are also interesting for what they do *not* say. Quite often, they are tellingly silent or ignorant about the issues and ideas which drive individuals to political action.

This complexity, inevitably, makes the work of synthesizing the information provided by these sources all the more difficult. Even more challenging is the task of deconstructing the archive itself. Driven by the bureaucratic convenience of reporting on discrete organizations and individuals, the colonial state introduced arbitrary categories that are often reproduced in historiography. This is particularly true for histories of the Left in

---

<sup>35</sup> A phrase was that immortalized in John Gallagher, Ronald E. Robinson, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981)

British India. A closer examination, however, reveals the multiple overlaps between these constructed categories and the unwelcome exceptions that dent the image of easily understood individuals; much less their politics. The difficulty, then, not only lies in transcending these categories but also centres on the extent to which they can be reasonably contested. Clearly, part of the answer lies in allowing the sources to cross-examine each other. But, occasionally, I have had to base my judgment on instinct alone, which in turn leads to thornier questions.

The key problem in this regard, and one that is far from being resolved, is the question of semantics. At one level this issue harks back to the challenge of using categories produced by the colonial state and the historiography that is coloured by it. More specifically, political categories such as 'communism' or 'communalism' and identities such as 'Muslim' or 'Sikh' are loaded with assumptions that delimit the multiplicity of ways in they are used, enacted, changed, and consciously appropriated. As an instance, in colonial reporting, the categories of 'Muslim' and 'communist' rarely, if ever, intersect. This inevitably raises some tricky questions for the historian. For example, at what point does a 'Muslim' become a 'communist'? Are both categories mutually exclusive? If not then when can they be used in conjunction with one another? In part, the answer lies in questioning who uses them, for what purpose, and in which period. But more problematically, using one or the other, or even both, unconsciously reproduces the limitations of the categories themselves. Simply put, how does one describe something that cannot be encapsulated within a term whose meaning has been fixed by the agents who produced them? And yet, the very same terms necessarily have to be used in order to make the argument more intelligible to the general reader. To add a further layer of

complexity, these categories also had a dialectical relationship with actual politics. Both, in particular circumstances, reinforced each other. They were thus quite real and fixed at certain points in time. Perhaps, then, a new terminology is called for in order to avoid falling into the conceptual traps laid by the sources. But in the meantime, it is crucial to keep emphasizing how each category used is laden with multiple meanings which keep changing over time, space, context, and the user who employs it. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason why this thesis, while being structured along these categories, also constantly challenges the way in they are employed.

The other broad set of archival collections comes from non official sources, amongst which the most important is the Left itself. In this connection, the first obvious sets of sources are the tomes of literature – pamphlets, newspapers, theoretical treatises, monographs, speeches, resolutions and others – produced by various leftist organizations themselves. So vast are these collections that one can easily sympathize with the predicament of intelligence personnel who often complained about having to read these dense and voluminous tracts. Again, the colonial archive is the best repository for these collections since party publications were often reproduced and collected in their entirety. On another note, leftist organizations and individuals in the post colonial period have been at the forefront of commissioning or authoring publications which document their seminal role (as they see it) in the struggle against the British Raj. In part this was a response to their persecution in the post colonial states of India and Pakistan and the collective amnesia of nationalist historians who ignored the Left's contribution in the struggle for national self determination.

Notwithstanding their incalculable value, the archival collections produced by the Left pose distinct challenges in their own right. The first obvious problem is that these documents were mostly political tracts aimed at certain audiences. Like any other propaganda material, these accounts had little, if any, relation to what actually occurred in the political arena. They were often produced for the purposes of self-glorification, political propaganda, and for resuscitating the memory of long forgotten ‘martyrs.’ Another purpose was to respond to political rivals both within the Left and beyond. All this was true for the colonial as well as the post-colonial period. Clearly, then, these sources have to be carefully sifted and cross examined before they can be used.

The greater challenge, however, is to understand the linkages between ideas and actions. To be more specific, leftist publications were replete with dense and theoretical arguments that had little relation to the conditions they imagined themselves addressing. They were also rarely, if ever, implemented in either letter or spirit. Indeed, the imperatives of practical politics demanded otherwise. In other words, there existed an ideological realm that was distinct and often autonomous from the arena of practical politics. In part, this was driven by the doctrinal inclinations of many leftist ideologues themselves. But another reason went back to the issue of audience. For to a significant extent, prominent leftists also kept their gaze on their patrons in Moscow where orthodoxy (or least what was considered ‘orthodox’ at any one point in time) was highly valued. It is therefore tricky to determine when these polemics were addressed to Moscow and when they were directed towards the constituencies the Left operated in. It is even more difficult to determine when and how these ideas influenced actual politics. Again, solving this riddle boils down to examining specific individuals and organizations,

and their engagement with politics. Still, these voluminous tracts are extremely useful. For one, they shed some profound insights into how ideas were appropriated, translated, and created for the Indian context. And secondly, they also provide a fascinating view into the converse of the ‘official mind’: the ‘subversive mind.’

Related to this is the problem that the Left speaks from the sources in four different languages. The first two have already been alluded to above, that is, the Left’s patrons in Moscow and the constituencies they speak to. Insofar as the former was concerned, many individuals belonging to the leftist movement were careful to colour their reporting with a Marxian discourse that would be intelligible to their orthodox interlocutors in Moscow. This was the *language of orthodoxy*. And it was employed either for reasons of seeking favour from their Soviet benefactors or for expressing what for many was a genuinely held conviction in Marxism-Leninism. Often, the two also went together.

Used on another front was the *language of legitimacy*. This was the language employed by the Left’s activists within the constituencies they operated in. This was a politics which fused familiar social, cultural and religious idioms with Marxist precepts in order to make it more meaningful and intelligible to its constituents. This language was also employed to legitimate leftist politics in the eyes of both its constituents and its detractors in the government or the wider political arena who were quick to characterize ‘Communism’ as a foreign import that had little, if any, relation to ‘indigenous’ modes of thought and politics. Moreover, this was also a means whereby many leftist activists themselves made sense of ideas that were often far removed from the conditions they encountered and operated in.

The third language used by leftist individuals was addressed to their persecutors in the state machinery. This could be termed as a *language of evasion* that was employed to avoid, to whatever extent possible, the wrath of the state. Indeed, this was necessary as the Left, amongst all political movements, was subject to the harshest measures available to the State. As a result, many leftist radicals were routinely arrested and tortured to extract information that might be of use. It was here, within the frightening confines of the interrogation chambers, that this language was used. At one level, activists could be coerced, cajoled and/or tempted to provide information. Some, however, continuously pled innocence, forswore their allegiance to radical politics and consciously employed certain idioms that would relieve them from state persecution. This often used notions that would be intelligible to the state bureaucracy. For example, a Muslim activist might consciously use his faith as a means to 'prove' his antipathy to the 'atheistic' ideas he was accused of adhering to. The exception to this norm of course were the committed ideologues who stubbornly refused to renounce their ideas for political expediency and instead openly articulated them as a means for publicizing their ideals, as indeed was the case with the Meerut Conspiracy trial.

Lastly, there is another language that speaks out from the sources. This was used by the Left to address itself, which could otherwise be termed as the *language of internality*. This mode is particularly evident in the exchanges that leftists had amongst themselves. Couched in a rivalry which could be down to ideological deviancy and/or personal impropriety, these tracts provide an insight into the many cleavages within the Left. Also important, though far more difficult to pin down, are the reflections of leftist individuals in the process of understanding their role as radicals and the ideas they publicly claimed

allegiance to. This brings one to the realm of personal intentions and motivations that are almost impossible to ascertain; though occasionally there are glimpses of this process in the sources.

These four languages, or four mannerisms of speaking, point to a number of difficulties. The most obvious problem of course, lies in distinguishing these languages from each other. Even that is not easy as, more often than not, a tract or a speech could be intended and used for a variety of purposes. More intractable is the problem of deciphering the purity of intention and motivation. In this scenario then, questions like 'what does the speaker or writer *really* mean' become nearly impossible to answer definitively. I have therefore avoided going down this route. Nevertheless, some useful insights can be gained by subjecting a text to the questions of time, context, audience and authorship. More useful, though, is an analysis into how these languages are used because they provide some fascinating glimpses into the political arenas they operated in as well as the people who semiconsciously employed them.

Another significant problem, however, is jointly posed by both sets of archival collections. Both the Left and the State present a larger than life image that is out of sync with the potential and strength of the leftist movement in British India. The Left, generally, was driven by a belief in the inevitability of a world revolution which naturally led to an overestimation of its strength and political potential. Related to that is the obvious exaggeration that is typical of all propaganda materials. Conversely, the State viewed the Left with an apprehensive and fearful gaze that seemed almost paranoid at times. Moreover, the intelligence and security apparatuses of the State were throughout concerned with the potential of the Left rather its actual strength. Given this

incongruence, then, it is exceptionally difficult to get an estimation of the ‘actual strength’ of the Left. Nevertheless, the overblown portrayal of this movement is still useful for what it reveals about the State and its leftist nemesis.

There are of course other sets of sources as well. These include newspaper reports, memoirs, travelogues, and other accounts as well as official publications like the census records and district gazetteer reports which provide some valuable insights into the provincial socio-political landscape. Most significantly, I also had the opportunity to access the Comintern Archives towards the very end of my research. A cursory examination of these documents provided some fascinating insights into the relationship between Indian leftists and their patrons in Moscow. I have, however, opted to use them sparingly in this dissertation. The reasons for doing so are twofold. Firstly, the sheer volume of these documents is an impediment to a detailed analysis at this stage. The second barrier is the linguistic diversity of these documents. While English was in many ways the language of choice between Indian leftists and their Russian interlocutors, there is still a voluminous set of documents in a variety of languages which include, among others, Hindi, Urdu, Gurumukhi, German, and, most importantly, Russian. Owing to my complete unfamiliarity with Russian, I have opted to leave the detailed analysis of these sources for future projects.

That, however, is by no means the complete set of sources available. A significant amount of archival material is available in India but owing to the difficulties in getting a research visa, I was unable to personally make a trip to Indian archives. Nevertheless, I was fortunate enough to get access to valuable documents that were provided by researchers in India. Additionally, a significant amount of source material on the Left is

held in private collections held by individuals associated with the leftist movement as well as institutions dedicated to preserving their memory.<sup>36</sup> Other materials – such as confiscated pamphlets, newspapers, first information reports, and judicial records – are still held by institutions such as high courts and criminal investigation departments where gaining access is notoriously difficult. Additionally, there are other archives in Europe that hold some significant collections on the Indian and Punjabi Leftist movement.<sup>37</sup> This project, then, is in many senses, the beginning of a series of works that could see the light of day once this source material is accessed.

### Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured in a manner which details the engagement of the Left with the political spaces and actors it came in contact with. The sole exception is the Unionist Party. This is primarily owing to the fact that the Leftist movement, aside from playing a consistently oppositional role, did not have any meaningful engagement with the Unionists. After all, the latter were largely viewed as privileged loyalists of the British Empire and were closely allied to the Punjab administration. I have thus opted to rely on frequent references to the Unionists in a number of sections instead of devoting an exclusive chapter to it.

Returning to the thematic breakdown of this thesis, the first chapter situates the Punjabi Left within the wider global arena by examining three networks that served as entry

---

<sup>36</sup> The *Desh Bhagat Yadgaar* or the Ghadar Party Martyrs Memorial is the most famous of these. This institute was founded by Ghadarites themselves to preserve the memory of the Left's struggle against Empire. Another significant private collection is held by the Pakistani archivist Ahmad Saleem who runs the South Asian Research and Resource Center in Lahore.

<sup>37</sup> In particular, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam and the archives of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Geneva.

points for many aspiring revolutionaries. In terms of chronology, I begin my chapter and thesis with the inception of the Ghadar Party in 1913-14. It goes without saying of course, that the genealogy of radicalism and the causes behind it predate this year. This chapter will therefore take these factors into consideration while discussing the formation of radical organizations and networks in the global arena. In doing so, I hope to show how the Punjab, as a region, can be imagined in ways that go far beyond its geographical demarcation. More crucially, these networks also demonstrate how various projects of radicalism were conceived and directed against the British Raj; all of which have implications for the intellectual and social history of the Left in South Asia.

The second chapter shifts the gaze back to the Punjab and examines the local conditions that fed into the development of the leftist movement. After setting out the broader context in which ideas of radicalism and revolutionary terrorism had wide currency, I will conduct a detailed examination of the Kirti Kisan Party. This organization will serve as a case study into how a section of the Left conducted its politics. While this party had an officially short political career, its members nevertheless went on to form new organizations which remained at the forefront of leftist politics in the province. Following the case study of the KKP then, I will briefly sketch the broad contours of the leftist movement and its history of factionalism. Broadly, this chapter will provide some insights into a political landscape that allowed political radicalism to survive.

In a shift from the study of political spaces, the next chapter will initiate a series of discussions aimed at charting the Left's engagement with the dominant political actors in the province. The first and most prominent of these actors was the colonial state itself. This chapter, then, will chart the Left's almost continuously hostile relationship with the

state. For the most part, leftist movements were constantly persecuted by a state anxious to prevent 'communism' from gaining a foothold in British India. But this relationship was far from being a simple narrative of mutual antagonism between two unequal forces. Rather, as I hope to show with this chapter, the relationship between the two also encourages a reassessment into the nature of the state and its constituent parts. Additionally, this analysis also provides a glimpse into the shifting contours of a political arena through which the state constantly attempted to delegitimize the politics of the Left. The fourth chapter will look at the oscillating relationship between the Congress and the Left. As I will point out, this engagement can also be understood as the relationship between the impulses of nationalism and internationalism. I will therefore chart the process through which the two became mutually exclusive to each other. In doing so, I will also introduce another important section of the Left (but which, strangely enough, has never been treated as the 'authentic' Left) to this narrative: the Congress Socialist Party. More importantly, this analysis will also show the variegated nature of the Congress Party and the nationalist movement itself.

The chapter after this will be the first of two discussions on the Left's engagement with the communitarian political movements. In this regard, I will first examine the Left's encounters with the Akali movement. The latter of course was crucial for providing many individuals an entry point into radical and later leftist politics. Similar to the second chapter, then, this section will analyze the specific contexts which fed into the development of a leftist movement. I will broadly examine the shifting relationship between the two movements from an earlier phase in the 1920s when the two were barely distinguishable, to the mid 1940s when they were openly hostile to each other.

Lastly, I will examine the Left's short lived political alliance with the Muslim League in its campaign for Pakistan. This perplexing decision, along with its endorsement of the Peoples War line, severely damaged the credibility of the Left up until Partition and beyond. In contrast to other works, I will analyze this decision in light of a shrinking political space that compelled the Left to hedge its bets in the colonial end game. In particular, this was the most striking illustration of what a constricting political space meant for the politics of the Left and its future in the post-colonial states.

Additionally, and in a separate section, I also chart the relationship between the Left and the post-colonial state of Pakistan in the immediate period following independence. Aside from serving as a preliminary commentary on the continuities between the colonial and post-colonial states, this section is also an attempt to highlight what 'independence' really meant for those who understood it in radically different terms.

This discussion will then be summed up in a concluding section. Broadly, I will highlight some of the insights provided by the Punjabi Left on the spaces it frequented and the political actors it engaged with. The case of the Left also affords a glimpse into what motivated individuals to engage with a form of politics that was bound to incur the wrath of Empire. Put together, this analysis will attempt to make a much needed intervention into how the political history of the province, and British India, is written. This is in addition to the implications this study has for regional studies and certain historiographical debates in general, and the categories that are normatively used in standard political histories. This is of course in addition to the value of studying such forces which are significant in of themselves, for not only does this exercise recover them from their marginalization in history, but it also gives space in the dominant discourse to

the aspirations and voices of millions who were retrospectively subsumed within the mainstream political impulses of the day.

## Widening the Gaze: Radicalism in the Global Arena

For a thesis aiming to examine provincial politics, the wider global arena may seem like an odd place to start. Yet, the case of the Punjabi Left helps to demonstrate how provincial politics, and the region itself, was tied to and profoundly affected by the global arena in various respects. This highlights the need for imagining the Punjab (and British India by extension) not as a bounded space, but rather as a region with an amorphous boundary that constantly shifted according to time, space and context. Viewed this way, the region and its politics extended to diasporic communities as well as itinerant groups such as traders, students, intellectuals, and political exiles. British Punjab, then, was part of a global *network of exchanges*, in which it was profoundly affected by the to and fro movement of goods, ideas and individuals. This was also true for political events that occurred far beyond its shores, of which the two world wars are but an obvious example. In recent years, a body of work has emerged that highlights these linkages between British India and the wider global arena.<sup>1</sup> This is a part of a series of approaches which have been variously labeled as ‘world,’ ‘global,’ ‘international,’ ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘transnational’ history. While each of these approaches maintains its own distinctiveness, often at the expense of arbitrarily sketched conceptual boundaries, they do converge to a great extent in their focus on global interconnectedness. Notwithstanding the problems associated with each category, the broad method of studying interconnections provides a

---

<sup>1</sup> Notable examples include, Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Judith M. Brown, *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

welcome respite from narratives focusing on retrospectively reified borders. Also refreshing is a shift back to meta-narratives which had been almost sacrificed at the altar of an equally reified concept of ‘culture’ or ‘cultural difference’, which emphasized and celebrated the distinctiveness of each society’s historical experience.

This comment, however, should be accompanied by an obligatory note of caution; for the zeal in pursuing global processes also has the potential of depriving us of the riches offered by particularistic narratives that focus on local histories. In what follows therefore, I try to achieve a balance between the two by using case studies of three different networks that engaged with radical politics in the hope that they yield insights into wider trends that would not otherwise be obvious if they were to be examined in isolation to each other. Taken together, these networks show how Punjabi radicalism was in some ways, both born in and tied to the global arena. In doing so, these narratives enable us to envision the Punjab and its political arena in different ways.

There were of course a variety of networks that engaged with radical politics. These can also be understood as distinct trajectories to political radicalism. Some led through organizations formed by dissident intellectuals and activists who explicitly chose to settle outside British India in order to advance their anti-colonial agendas. Another important route went through political movements that initially had little to do with anti-colonial politics, let alone the leftist variant of it. This was true for political activists who emerged from localized struggles as well as those who circulated within the wider global arena in pursuance of their specific political aims. Moreover, political choices which led to radicalism were also available to those individuals who travelled beyond British India on account of their occupations. And last but not the least, the most important trajectory to

political radicalism went through diasporic communities scattered across the globe. Together, the lived experiences of individuals within these networks and their encounters with a global intellectual and political milieu attracted them to a variety of ideologies, not least of which was the project of anti-imperialism and ‘communism.’ All these trajectories fed into the development of the Left within the Punjab as well as British India in general. In what follows therefore, I will mainly focus on three networks that either emerged from the diaspora or circulated through the globe in an attempt to highlight how the ‘global’ interacted with the ‘local.’

### Diaspora

My own attempt at exploring the linkages between the two begins, predictably enough, with a story of migration. Indeed, this has been the standard way in which connections between the Punjab and the wider global arena have been analyzed. Generally though, migration has been a very significant part of modern South Asian history.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps, nowhere was this trend quite as ubiquitous as in the Punjab. In the British period, a crucial aspect of this movement was militaristic. As a highly militarized society, tens of thousands of Punjabis were deployed overseas as soldiers in the British Indian Army or as ex-servicemen employed in local police forces that geographically ranged from East Africa to South East Asia.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the earliest recorded instance of this movement dates back to 1867 when a hundred Sikh emigrants went to Hong Kong to bolster the colony’s

---

<sup>2</sup> Sugata Bose in *A Hundred Horizons* suggests a figure of thirty million from the 1830s to the 1930s. Of these, nearly twenty four million returned to India, pp 73. See also Judith M Brown, *Global South Asians*.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Thomas Metcalf, *Forging the Raj: Essays on British India in the Heyday of Empire* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

nascent police force.<sup>4</sup> This movement however was not merely restricted to serving or retired military personnel, as thousands of Punjabi labourers, peasants, small traders and students also ventured beyond South Asia to far flung territories. The vast majority of these migrants were driven by hopes of improving their economic conditions. This was particularly the case in central Punjab where fragmented landholdings and rural indebtedness, combined with the highest population densities in the region, worked as 'push' factors for many migrants.<sup>5</sup> As a result, Jat Sikhs from central Punjab made up the majority of immigrants who travelled to the Far East, East Africa and North America in search of better opportunities. These regions later proved to be cultivating grounds for disenchanted nationalists and committed revolutionaries alike.

The most important amongst these destinations was North America. Initially dating back to the 1890s, Punjabi immigration to Canada and the United States gathered pace during the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> This movement, though, came with its own set of problems. In both countries, Indians were gradually subjected to discriminatory official policies that were designed to discourage their immigration and settlement. This was manifested most starkly in the notorious *Komagata Maru* affair.<sup>7</sup> Matters were

---

<sup>4</sup> Darshan Singh Tatla, *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood* (London: U.C.L. Press, 1999), p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance, Harish Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organisation & Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983) pp 11-15. These factors are mentioned in virtually all official and unofficial accounts on Punjabi migration and the settlement and radicalization of Indians in North America. For a personalized account, see the biographical accounts of Sohan Singh Bhakna, one of the founders and leading lights of the Ghadar movement. See, Sohan Singh Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party* (New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1970) and the CPI pamphlet that was based on interviews with Bhakna, Randhir Singh *Ghadar Heroes: Forgotten Story of the Punjab Revolutionaries 1914-1915* (Bombay, Peoples Publishing House, 1945).

<sup>6</sup> D.S Tatla, pp. 51-52.

<sup>7</sup> The catalyst for this incident was a decision by the Canadian Government to restrict the immigration of Indians into the country. Outraged at this unfair treatment, the ship *Komagata Maru* was especially hired to transport Punjabi immigrants to Canada. Designed to exploit a loophole in the law barring Indian immigration, the ship docked at Vancouver in 1914 but the passengers were not allowed to disembark. Instead the ship was forced to sail back to Calcutta where the furious passengers got into a violent confrontation with the police which led to a number of deaths. This incident inflamed nationalist passions

further worsened by prevailing racial attitudes. This naturally increased the resentment felt by Indians for their host societies. Moreover, in Canada, this resentment was also fed by a palpable sense of disillusionment with the rhetoric of the British Empire which claimed that all its subjects were equal within its dominions and colonies.<sup>8</sup> This feeling was further exacerbated by the perceived favourable treatment accorded to other Asiatic races, such as Chinese and Japanese immigrants. The favourable treatment accorded to the latter led many Indians to attribute their persecution to their status as an 'enslaved nation.'<sup>9</sup> In many cases, the disenchantment with Empire was also fed by the gradual dissipation of racial stereotypes that had been carefully constructed by the British. Living in these societies had afforded Indian immigrants with a far more intimate view of 'white society' than had been possible back home. Viewed from up close, the 'white man' was no longer superior to Indians, both in moral and physical terms, and was in fact 'addicted to all sorts of vices.'<sup>10</sup>

Owing to the rapid crumbling of superior racial stereotypes and the daily experiences of ritual humiliation and official discrimination that one encountered in the diaspora, a

---

in India and North America alike. Its impact can be gauged from the fact that this incident has been the subject of some academic and numerous popular works. It is also the subject of at least one movie. See for instance Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru : the Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1979) and Malwinderjit Singh Waraich, Gurdev Singh Sidhu (eds.) *Komagata maru, A Challenge to Colonialism: Key Documents* (Chandigarh: Unistar Books, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> F.C. Isemonger & J. Slattery, *An Account of the Ghadr Conspiracy*, (Lahore: Punjab Government, 1919), pp. 12-14.

<sup>9</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Ghadr Party: A Short History Vol. 1* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1977), pp. 67-68. It is tempting to treat these explanations as simplistic, but the issue of race and discrimination stands out in virtually all accounts, official and otherwise, focusing on the inception of the Ghadar Party. There have been accounts that focus on class and intellectual borrowings but the issue of race is by far the most popular explanation. This is particularly the case for accounts authored by former Ghadarites themselves. This theme also runs prominently in an anthology of poems penned by Ghadar activists in *Ghadar di Gunj* (Echoes of Mutiny) available at, along with other Ghadar documents, the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) which accessible at <http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/>. For a relatively alternative, if unconvincing, account see, Harjot Oberoi, 'Ghadar Movement and its Anarchist Genealogy' *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XLIV No. 50 (2009) pp 40-46

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69. Also interesting as a comparison are the similar sentiments of Indian soldiers fighting in the trenches on the Western Front during the First World War.

loosely fashioned sense of an ‘Indian’ identity was formed, which soon channelled its way into an organized and radical anti-imperialist sentiment. This nascent anti-imperialist politics gathered momentum owing to engagements with leading Indian dissidents such as Lala Hardayal.<sup>11</sup> The result was the launch of the weekly *Ghadar* in San Francisco that was soon followed by the inauguration of a political party by the same name in 1914. Far more radical in its aims than the mainstream nationalist movement, which at the time was petitioning the British government for greater constitutional liberties; the Ghadar Party advocated nothing less than the complete independence of India from British rule. Subscriptions and donations to the party were obtained from immigrants in the US and Canada while the *Ghadar* was sent to Indian communities around the world. Needless to say, in India itself the paper was quickly proscribed by the British authorities.

Rather than the party itself – which has in any case been examined in depth by a number of studies<sup>12</sup> – what is more important for the purposes of this paper, are certain individuals who typify, in a sense, the journey to radicalism which for them began in the diaspora. One such individual was Santokh Singh. A son of an orderly of a colonel in the British Indian Army, Santokh Singh was born in Singapore in 1893. His family though, returned to their ancestral village in the Punjab following his father’s retirement in 1903. After being schooled there, he made his way to North America to pursue his higher education.

---

<sup>11</sup> A prominent intellectual, Hardayal was a lecturer in Indian Philosophy at Stanford University for a few years. He was renowned for his anti-imperial radicalism and his contacts with other radicals like Shyamji Khrishnavarma, Madame Cama, and revolutionaries from other regions. In California he was instrumental in mobilizing Indian workers, students and farmers. Together with Sohan Singh Bhakna he was also one of the co-founders of the *Ghadar* paper and party. See, Harjot Oberoi pp 41. Also see Emily C. Brown, *Har Dayal: Hindu Revolutionary and Rationalist* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> There have been numerous academic and (especially) popular works produced over the years on the Ghadar Party. Their list is so vast that the Ghadar Party could well be a sub field in its own right within South Asian Historiography. These accounts have been published by academics as well as former Ghadarites themselves. For the most useful, see the upcoming work by Maia Ramnath. For earlier works, see Harish K Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, and *Ghadar Party: Its Role in India's Struggle for Freedom* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1997), and SS Josh, *Hindustan Ghadr Party*. See the bibliography for a more extensive list.

Soon after reaching the United States, he got involved in the brewing discontent within the Indian community, and joined the Ghadar Party in San Francisco. Elected as the party's secretary, Santokh Singh was at the forefront of organizing a rebellion against British rule by thousands of returning Ghadar activists who travelled from North America to India for the purpose.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Santokh Singh himself proceeded to South East Asia in 1914 where he was entrusted with the duty of mobilizing Indian communities towards lending their support for rebellion against British rule in India. This endeavour however, like its counterpart in the Punjab, met with failure, especially since the German government was unable to deliver on its assurance of supplying the rebels with arms and ammunition. Consequently, Santokh Singh was compelled to return to the United States in 1916, where he was immediately arrested and convicted in the famous San Francisco Conspiracy Case on the charge of conspiring with the German government.<sup>14</sup> He was released from prison in 1919 and set himself to reorganizing the Ghadar Party, though by this time he was a committed Bolshevik, having been inspired and introduced to Marxism

---

<sup>13</sup> Most of these returned emigrants were soon arrested or incarcerated in their ancestral villages under an 'Ingress Ordinance' on account of their open rebellion against British rule. See for example, the Report on the Police Administration in the Punjab (henceforth referred to as RPAP) for the year 1914, 1915, 1916 (Lahore: Printed by the Superintendent, Government Printing, Punjab, 1915, 1916 and 1917) located in the Indian Institute Library at the Bodleian Library. But for significant period of time, they were the most potent threat faced by the Punjab Government during the war years. Returned emigrants were behind gang robberies, killings of Government loyalists and servicemen, and most worryingly for the Government, attempts to instigate a mutiny within regiments stationed in the Punjab and the United Provinces. They even succeeded in instigating a mutiny in Singapore. A number of military servicemen were sentenced to death for their participation in a Ghadar instigated coup. See for instance the account of the serving governor at the time, Michael O'Dwyer, *India As I Knew It*, pp 190 – 209.

<sup>14</sup> Nine German subjects, four 'German-American,' five Americans, and seventeen Indians were prosecuted during this case, and all but one, were found guilty. Ever since the launch of the *Ghadar* and the founding of the Party, the British Consul under directions from the Foreign Office, had repeatedly urged the United States authorities to act against Ghadarites, censor their letters and prevent their publications from wider dissemination. They were frustrated in their attempts by what they perceived to be an inexplicable reluctance of the US authorities to act against the party. All that changed however with the entry of the US in the First World War. The San Francisco Conspiracy case was an outcome of this changed policy. The Party returned to business as usual after hostilities ended and the US resumed its ostensibly indifferent attitude. For details into these discussions see IOR/L/P&J/12/148 (Anglo Soviet Relations: Communist Propaganda in India; Relationship between the Comintern and the Ghadr Party Jul 1933 – Jan 1935) Indian Seditious Activities in the US (P&J (S) 299 1934) pp 63

and the ideals of the October Revolution by fellow inmates, some of whom were professed communists, during his stint in jail.<sup>15</sup> The reorientation of Ghadarites towards Moscow led Santokh Singh to lead a two man delegation to attend the fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922. He stayed in Russia for almost two years where it was claimed he also attended the Communist University of the Toilers of the East. Sufficiently inspired by his stay in Moscow, Santokh Singh then proceeded to India through Central Asia, determined to start a vernacular journal that would be aimed at organizing workers and peasants in the cause of revolution. While attempting to infiltrate British India through the Northwest frontier of the subcontinent, he was arrested and incarcerated in his village for a period of one year.<sup>16</sup> Released in 1925 he continued from where he had left off and together with likeminded radicals, succeeded in bringing out the monthly *Kirti* (worker) in February 1926. Santokh Singh, however, did not live long enough to see his cherished dream reach fruition, for he died soon after in 1927 – a victim of tuberculosis that he contracted during his detention – a few months shy of the founding of the *Kirti Kisan* (Workers and Peasants) Party (KKP).<sup>17</sup> The Party he helped to organize, though, maintained its links with the Ghadar Party and continued to be the primary destination for returning radicals and Ghadarites from the Punjabi diaspora.

So how do we understand Santokh Singh then? While he was instrumental in the founding of Punjabi radicalism and later ‘Communism,’ both in the diaspora and in India, he was hardly untypical. For he typified in a sense, the political trajectory to radicalism that for many Indians began in diasporic communities spread across the Far East and

---

<sup>15</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh and on other Early Revolutionaries* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1976), p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> IOR/V/27/262/3, D. Petrie, *Communism in India 1924-1927* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1927), pp. 150-157.

<sup>17</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/300, Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha, File P&J(S) 1013 (1932), p. 1.

North America. Radicalized by their lived experiences in the diaspora and adrift from colonial systems of policing and control, individuals like Santokh Singh, adopted a politics, that while reflexive at the outset, soon assumed an uncompromising and radical character. A key part of these experiences was proximity to prevailing intellectual and political currents which included engagements with revolutionaries from other contexts as well as heady doses of anarchist and socialist thought.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, a number of Ghadr Party members started their political careers as members of the International Workers of the World, otherwise termed the ‘Wobblies,’ before they joined militant anti-colonial politics. Clearly, the diaspora had spatial advantages as compared to the subcontinent itself. Radical activists who emerged from such communities therefore, were very much a product of a particular moment and a political context where such ideologies were rapidly gaining currency. These individuals also benefited from engagements with other anti-colonial radicals and especially leading Indian dissidents who played a seminal role in politicizing and radicalizing Indians settled in diasporic communities. Crucially, however, these migrants were typically non elite in terms of their socio-economic background. In a sense then, the diaspora, unlike the subcontinent, offered a more level political field in which elite and (far more) non elite alike could be politically active according to their respective ideological inclinations. Divorced from the courteous and polite political culture of the nationalist elite in India, these individuals had far more space to adopt a more radical line of political activism which, on account of their modest socio-political background, could also have been influenced by their inaccessibility to imperial patronage. Driven by a radical anti-colonial sentiment, then, these individuals actively solicited support from the enemies of the Empire for the furtherance of their

---

<sup>18</sup> SS Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh*, p. 47.

political and militant objectives. Before the Bolshevik Revolution, the German government was a key, if ineffective, sponsor of anti-colonial radicalism in British India. With the Bolshevik rhetoric of national self-determination however, Punjabi radicals found a new centre of power that could assist them in the furtherance of their political aims.

The Ghadar Party, though, was not the only movement that operated within diasporic communities. Indeed, there were other networks of Indian radicals that were dispersed across the globe. Some of them even predated the Ghadar Party while others worked in conjunction with it. For instance, one of the first spaces for Indian radicals was founded in 1905 in London by the renowned revolutionary, Shyamji Khrishnavarma. Krishnavarma was both the founder of the *Indian Sociologist* and the 'India House,' which was a 'hostel' intended for Indian students. It was also a cultivating ground for many revolutionaries.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in Berlin, another group of Indian radicals led by Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (also the brother of Sarojini Naidu) founded an organization that became known as the 'Berlin India Committee.'<sup>20</sup> In Kabul, a 'Provisional Government of India' was formed by Raja Mahendra Pratap, Maulvi Barkatullah and Obeidulluah Sindhi.<sup>21</sup> Again, these networks were in addition to those that periodically operated in places like Paris, Geneva, Tokyo, and others, up until the end of the British Raj. Perhaps the most famous of these was the one run by Manabendra Nath Roy who operated from various centers and earned the distinction of founding the

---

<sup>19</sup> For more details see, Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Sanskrit, Sociology and Anti-Imperial Struggle: The Life of Shyamji Krishnavarma (1857-1930)*, (Delhi: Routledge India, 2008)

<sup>20</sup> See for instance, Nirode K. Barooah, *Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

<sup>21</sup> For a brief account of this experiment as well as the 'Silk Letter Conspiracy' see Michael O Dwyer *India as I Knew It* pp 172-182.

‘first’ Communist Party of India in 1920.<sup>22</sup> He also founded the Communist Party of Mexico which was ostensibly also the first Communist Party formed outside Russia.<sup>23</sup> The wider global arena, then, offered numerous opportunities for anti-colonial radicalism to thrive.

### Travelling

This was equally true for individuals who travelled beyond the shores of British India. In other words, the trajectory to radical politics was not merely restricted to those settled in diasporic communities. It goes without saying of course that mobile groups have been an essential part of South Asia throughout its history. In the colonial period though, opportunities for travelling grew rapidly owing to rapid industrialization and improvement in the means of mobility and communication.<sup>24</sup> These changes, however, also had the unintended consequence of providing many Indians with opportunities to engage with contemporary intellectual and political trends, both within the subcontinent and beyond it. This was true for all sorts of circulating networks that ranged from students and intellectuals to pilgrims and traders.<sup>25</sup> For the Punjab Left though, two networks in particular were of great importance. Both produced prominent leftists who

---

<sup>22</sup> There is a dispute between the CPI and CPI (Marxist) on whether the Party was ‘first’ formed in Tashkent in 1920 or in Kanpur in 1925.

<sup>23</sup> While there are numerous works available on MN Roy, there are a few that are particularly useful. See for instance the most recent biography on Roy by Kris Manjappa. Also see the writings of Roy, most of which are available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/roy/index.htm>. Conversely, see Sibnarayan Ray (ed.), *Selected Works of MN Roy* (4 vols., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1997). Also important are the memoirs of Roy himself: *M.N Roy's Memoirs*, (Bombay: Allied Publishers Private, 1964).

<sup>24</sup> See for instance, Judith Brown, *Global South Asians* pp. 11-23.

<sup>25</sup> For students, see in particular, S Mukherjee. ‘The Experience of the ‘England Returned’: The Education of Indians in Britain in the Early Twentieth Century and its Long Term Impact’, (University of Oxford, DPhil thesis, 2007)

remained engaged with the leftist movement in British Punjab as well as the post colonial states that succeeded it.

The first of these was the *Hijrat* Movement.<sup>26</sup> Formed by Muslim youths, this movement grew from the *Khilafat* agitation in 1919. This agitation, along with the Non-Cooperation Movement, was the first mass agitation against the British Raj. Its aims were the protection and restoration of the Turkish Caliphate – of great symbolic significance to Muslims worldwide – that was under threat of being dismantled following the victory of the Allied Powers in the First World War. Unsure of their position as subjects of a colonially administered territory that was deemed to be ‘hostile’ to Islam, thousands of Indian Muslims – mostly from the United Provinces (UP), Punjab and the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) – chose to respond to religious calls which called for an en masse migration from India. Aside from protecting their religious autonomy that was perceived to be under threat, many also migrated with the hope of making their way to Turkey to bolster the faltering Caliphate. Others aimed to agitate and fight against the British Raj. However, their travelling experiences were anything but pleasant. While initially welcomed by Amir Amanallah of Afghanistan, who intended to use this movement as a bargaining chip against the British, the *muhajireen*<sup>27</sup> soon overstayed their welcome. Thrown out of Afghanistan by the Amir they stumbled, half starved, cold and miserable, across Central Asia in their futile attempt of reaching Turkey. Along the way they were continually harassed and persecuted by ‘Turkomans’ who they had always imagined as their ‘Muslim brothers.’ During their journeys they also encountered a nascent Soviet Union which, at the time, was extending its power and influence in

---

<sup>26</sup> Derived from Arabic, the term means ‘migration.’

<sup>27</sup> Translated as, ‘migrants.’

Central Asia against the counter revolutionary forces.<sup>28</sup> Together, these encounters and experiences compelled many to reassess their political and ideological inclinations as well as their cultural and religious imaginations.

While these experiences obviously varied from one individual to the next, a glimpse into how they were interpreted by some is provided by an excerpt from Shaukat Usmani's memoirs. Reminiscing about his first encounter with a Soviet representative in Central Asia, Usmani wrote:

'A young man of 25 greeted us in English and shook hands with us. He was wearing the Bolshevik helmet, long boots and a military uniform. Some of us took him for a page, some took him for a soldier.

'One of us said 'Sir, we want to see His Excellency the Consul.' He at once replied. 'Comrades, do not say 'Sir' but 'Comrade'. I am the man you seek for. I represent the RSFSR and I greet you on behalf of the workers and peasants of Russia.

'We were lost in amazement. How could he be a consul! How could he address the slaves thus? He is a white man like our white masters in India. We could not recover soon from our amazement.'<sup>29</sup>

Here, then, was a fascinating glimpse into how these encounters shaped the understanding and world views of these individuals. Similar to many Ghadar activists, these experiences imaginatively inverted the racial hierarchies which many had grown accustomed to within the subcontinent. That said, these particular interpretations were far from uniform. This event for instance was viewed by some of Usmani's compatriots

---

<sup>28</sup> There are a number of useful accounts on the *Hijrat* movement and the journeys of the *muhajireen*. For a brief account see, See K.H Ansari, 'Pan Islam and the Making of the Early Muslim Socialists', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1986), pp 509-537. For a more extended treatment, see, K.H Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought among North Indian Muslims* (Lahore: Book Traders, 1990). Also see Dietrich Reetz, *Hijrat - The Flight of the Faithful. A British File on the Exodus of Muslim Peasants from North India to Afghanistan in 1920*, (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1995). Especially important are accounts of the *muhajireen* themselves. See the works of Shaukat Usmani, the famous communist from the UP. He was also a co-accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case and previous Conspiracy Cases. See Shaukat Usmani, *Historic Trips of a Revolutionary: Sojourn in the Soviet Union* (Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd: New Delhi, 1977), *Peshawar to Moscow: Leaves from an Indian Muhajireen's Diary* (Swaraj Publishing House, Benares, 1927) and *I Met Stalin Twice* (Bombay: K. Kurian, 1953)

<sup>29</sup> Shaukat Usmani, *Peshawar to Moscow*, pp 39

through different lenses. Far from being inspired, these men were irritated by the Bolsheviks and viewed them as a hindrance in their single minded determination to reach Turkey.<sup>30</sup> In other words, this was a powerful reminder of the contradictory possibilities that were latent in any encounter. Each had the potential to veer off in completely different trajectories.

For Usmani and his like minded comrades, these and other encounters inspired them towards 'Communism,' which varied according to each individual's interpretation. Thus, some of them actually ended up fighting for the Bolsheviks in the ongoing civil war. A significant number also went to Moscow to acquire political training. And these were the *muhajir* youths who, along with M.N Roy, formed the 'first' (though short-lived) CPI in Tashkent in 1920. This was therefore the first in a series of prolonged engagements between prominent leftists who emerged from the Hijrat network and the Soviet Union. In doing so, many explicitly made a connection between the egalitarian 'principles' of 'Islam' and 'Communism.' Indeed, this connection has been termed a 'paradox' and has partially been explained by branding the Muhajirs 'understanding of socialism' as 'limited.'<sup>31</sup> But this categorization raises more questions than it answers. For one, it assumes that there was an 'authentic' version of 'socialism' or 'communism' that was incompatible with 'Islam.' Far from extraordinary, these linkages were frequently made by 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' activists alike. Indeed there were a number of pamphlets issued by the CPI which explicitly associated the early history of Islam and its 'revolutionary' invocations of socio-economic justice with 'socialist' principles. M.N Roy himself made these correlations in his famous essay on the 'historical role of

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp 40-41

<sup>31</sup> K.H Ansari, 'Pan-Islam,' pp 537

Islam.’<sup>32</sup> An intimate engagement with ‘Communism’ therefore, was eminently possible for those who emerged from an ostensibly contradictory socio-political context.

Similarly, these prospects were also on offer for labour networks that stretched across the British Empire. Among these, the networks of sailors or *lascars*<sup>33</sup> were particularly well placed for intellectual and political encounters. In particular, from the turn of the century onwards, tens and thousands of Indian seamen constituted a dynamically mobile group that was present in most of the important shipping ports in the world, and particularly those in North America, the Far East and Western Europe. To a significant extent this was owing to their status as casual labour. Thus, lascars were sometimes employed for the duration of a single trip and were left to fend for themselves in ports spread across the world until they could find work onboard another merchant vessel.<sup>34</sup> These ports offered numerous opportunities for political engagement, especially after the turn of century, as union activity, often quite violent, increased rapidly. After the Bolshevik revolution and with the activities of the Comintern, some of the seamen unions were also suspected of being involved with communist ‘intrigues.’<sup>35</sup> Thus, through labour activism and

---

<sup>32</sup> M.N Roy, *Historical Role of Islam: An Essay on Islamic Culture*, (1939), accessed at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/roy/1939/historical-role-islam/index.htm>

<sup>33</sup> The term was derived from the Persian word *lashkar*, which can be translated as ‘army.’ From the eighteenth century onwards, the word was used by the British and other European shipping companies as a generic term for South Asian sailors. Another term, and one that was preferred by the sailors themselves, was *jehazis* (ship people). See, Ravi Ahuja, ‘Subaltern Networks under British Imperialism. Exploring the Case of South Asian Maritime Labour (c. 1890-47)’ in Jan-Georg Deutsch, Brigitte Reinwald (eds.), *Space on the Move. Transformations of the Indian Ocean Seascape in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*. Arbeitshefte 20 (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, date unknown) Pp 40

<sup>34</sup> For an excellent introduction into *lascar* networks see Ravi Ahuja, above. Also see Gopalan Balachandran, ‘Searching for the *Sardar*: The State, Pre-Capitalist Institutions and Human Agency in the Maritime Labour Market in Calcutta, 1880-1935,’ in Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.) *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp 206-306. In particular see, Frank Broeze, ‘The Muscles of Empire - Indian Seamen and the Raj,’ 1919 – 1939,’ *Indian Economic and Social History Review* vol. 18 no. 1. (1981) pp 43-67.

<sup>35</sup> A prominent example of this was the umbrella organization, the Red International Labour Union (RILU), otherwise known as the Profintern. Moreover, organizations like the Indian Seamen’s Union in London were also suspected of being affiliated or controlled by the Comintern. See for example, Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence (PPSAI) 1927, Departmental Notice No. 56, 8<sup>th</sup> October, No. 39, p. 437.

encounters with ideas and individuals on their travels, lascars had the opportunity to engage with radical politics.

An excellent example this was case of 'Dada' Amir Haider Khan, who later became one of the most prominent communist leaders in Pakistan. Born in a small village in the Potohar valley in Northern Punjab, Khan dropped out from his local school and made his way to Bombay where he found work on board a shipping vessel. Thereafter, he spent the next decade of his life visiting regions throughout the world and even spent a considerable amount of time in the United States employed as a worker in a car factory. Again the breakdown of imagined racial hierarchies was important in his experiences. In his case, this partly came through sexual liaisons with white women in brothels at various seaports.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, through his connections with the labour union at the factory and the New York port, where he was registered as a seaman looking for work onboard shipping vessels, he soon got in touch with the Communist Party of the USA, which, in collaboration with the Ghadar Party, made arrangements for Khan and five other Ghadarites to travel to Moscow for political training. After his stay in Moscow, he returned to India as a committed communist and frequently visited Russia in disguise as a sailor, and continued his work with the CPI in various capacities. Lascars like Khan, then, became the conduits through which alternative and crucially non-elite socio political

---

<sup>36</sup> See for instance, Hasan N Gardezi (ed.), *Chains to Lose: Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary – Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan* (2 vols., Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1988), pp. 189-91. It should be added that the Imperial Government was well aware of how white prostitutes would be viewed by their subjects. Thus, 'foreign prostitution' was banned in 1912 in Indian cantonments for an 'Imperial and very urgent reason.' It was held that the degradation of a white woman was tantamount to the degradation of the 'ruling and paramount power in India.' See, Janaki Nair, 'Imperial Reason, National Honour and New Patriarchal Compacts in Early Twentieth-Century India,' *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 66 No. 1 (2008), pp 208-226.

visions came into the subcontinent.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, this network could also be utilized by other radicalized Indians for political purposes. In this regard, the following excerpt from a police report in 1926 is worth quoting extensively:

‘One Kanshi Ram, son of Devi Chand, of Jalal village, Gujranwala district, arrived in Bombay from Liverpool on the 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1925, by the *SS Trafford Hall*, on which he served as a seaman. The Shipping Master, Bombay, described him as a seaman of an unusual type who had given a certain amount of trouble on board, and he was found by the Customs Authorities at Bombay to be in possession of literature of a decidedly anti-British nature.

‘According to his own statement Kanshi Ram matriculated at the Punjab University in 1916 and after doing various odd jobs....proceeded to America...There he claims to have earned sufficient funds to keep himself while obtaining degrees in Law and Oratory, as well as his M.A.

‘Reports received from abroad show that in March 1925 this man signed on at New York as a member of the crew of the *SS City of Shanghai* by which ship he travelled to Liverpool via Australia, under the assumed name of Abdul Rashid. He informed a fellow seaman that he had gone to America about 5 years before to work for the independence of India, but that, in view of the failure of the movements started by Messrs. Gandhi and Das, he had decided to return to India to start a new agitation. He is further alleged to have displayed two revolvers and to have claimed that he could arrange for the dispatch of arms and ammunition from America.’<sup>38</sup>

As far as the British were concerned, these incidents only reaffirmed their suspicion that travelling groups, whether Indian or otherwise, from Bukharan carpet traders to foreign circus performers,<sup>39</sup> were the primary means through which proscribed material, ‘seditious’ ideas and, of greater concern, arms and ammunition could be brought into India. This concern was driven by the perceived threat of a world wide communist network that had the ability to engage and recruit Indians or foreigners travelling to India. In part, this fear was also grounded in reality, as the visits and activism of individuals

---

<sup>37</sup> The Imperial authorities of course were well aware of the dangers posed by this network. They thus liaised closely with shipping companies as well as port authorities. See for instance the file IOR/L/P&J/12/52 (Conveyance of Seditious Literature to India – Correspondence with Shipping Companies)

<sup>38</sup> PPSAI, 1926, Look Out Notice, 27<sup>th</sup> March, No. 26, pp. 119.

<sup>39</sup> See the various ‘Departmental Notices’ in PPSAI 1926 and 1927 files.

such as Philip Spratt suggested.<sup>40</sup> But at times, this suspicion also extended to ostensibly innocuous travelling networks. Thus, it was mentioned in an official report from 1926, that the Soviet Union had established a consulate at Jeddah with the purpose of disseminating communist propaganda amongst pilgrims arriving for the annual pilgrimage of Hajj.<sup>41</sup> It was suspected that the Soviet consulate 'was using the *mutawwifs*<sup>42</sup> and their agents or *wakils* as one of the channels through which subversive propaganda (was) passed into India.'<sup>43</sup>

Notwithstanding the veracity of these claims, what is clear is the extent to which the Imperial Government was wary of the threats posed by a wider world in which individuals, ideas, and materials seemingly flowed more easily than under the watchful gaze of the intelligence services in India itself. The 'corrupting' influences of distant shores that opened a world replete with possibilities and ideas, had the potential to attract travelling groups of Indians to a brand of politics that was anathema to British officialdom. Thus, 'networks of subalternity'<sup>44</sup> or networks of subordination could also be converted into *networks of subversion*. Thus, it was to this end that a panoptical web of surveillance was laid across the land and maritime borders of the subcontinent so as to ensure that all materials and individuals coming into British India were suitably vetted before they were allowed in. This attempt at controlling the spread of ideas however did not completely succeed in achieving its intended effect, as the very *act* of travelling could

---

<sup>40</sup> A Member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Philip Spratt was sent to India in his capacity as a Comintern agent in order to reform and organize Indian communists. See for example, Overstreet and Windmiller, pp 82-100

<sup>41</sup> PPSAI 1926, Department Notice No. 14, 17<sup>th</sup> April, No. 16, pp 149

<sup>42</sup> *Mutawwifs* are agents who assist pilgrims in their logistical arrangements and performance of religious duties.

<sup>43</sup> PPSAI 1927, Look Out Notice, 8<sup>th</sup> January, No. 1, pp. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Term used by Ahuja, pp 55

constitute a political action that, aside from harming the interests of Empire, held out the, albeit remote, prospect of undermining the Empire in India itself.

### Zones of Engagement

For migrant communities and travelling groups, intellectual and political exchanges took place in spaces which could appropriately be termed as ‘zones of engagement.’<sup>45</sup> These localities provided unique opportunities which were either unavailable, or strictly policed by the British in South Asia. These spaces acted as conduits for the safe passage of individuals and proscribed materials while also providing refuge to those attempting to evade the imperial security services. What was more remarkable was how these zones, which were as spatially distant as San Francisco, Paris, Berlin, Tashkent, and Kabul, among others, were together tied through a unique geographical imagination which viewed them as connected centers of anti-colonial radicalism and revolutionary activism. In short, it was a novel way of perceiving the world and of contesting the political boundaries that cut across it. With the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the city of Moscow not only joined the group of localities where expatriate anti-colonial activists converged but also emerged as the new and undisputed centre for political radicalism.

It is perhaps impossible to understate the impact that the October Revolution had on virtually all movements that sought to end colonial rule in the subcontinent. According to Harikishen Singh Surjeet, the formal General Secretary of CPI (M), the October Revolution ‘awakened the oppressed peoples of the East.’<sup>46</sup> In the words of another Indian radical, Bejoy Kumar Sinha, it marked the ‘triumph of a people heralding a new

---

<sup>45</sup> I am indebted to Franz Roy for coining this term.

<sup>46</sup> Jyoti Basu (ed.), *Documents of the Communist Party of India, (1917-28) Vol. 1* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997), pp. xxvii

social order' and had the 'deepest impact' in 'the evolution of ideas.'<sup>47</sup> This event opened the doors to limitless possibilities for radicals around the world and provided a successful blueprint which could be emulated in their own socio-political contexts. More crucially, it also provided some much needed inspiration to anti-colonial activists who interpreted the Revolution as the first definitive blow to European Imperialism. Their optimism was not only driven by the seemingly rapid decline of the old world order, but was also predicated on Lenin's declaration of firm support to national liberation struggles around the world. This promise was most clearly articulated through the founding of the Communist International, or Comintern, in 1919. Accordingly, and in addition to aspiring revolutionaries and diehard radicals alike, this singular event also had a profound effect on the politics and thinking of constitutionally inclined nationalists as well as individuals long associated with parochial politics.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, the paths of leading Indian exiles and activists such as M.N Roy, Maulvi Barkatullah, V. Chattopadhyaya, and others, frequently crossed through Moscow.

Consequently, hundreds of individuals from the Ghadar, Hijrat, Lascar and other networks travelled to Moscow from the 1920s to the 1940s. From the Ghadar network for instance, aspiring revolutionaries came from cells which had been established in Punjabi dominated communities spread across the globe. An idea of the sheer expanse of this network can be gauged from an intelligence report issued in 1933. According to the report, an estimated thirty five cadres of the Ghadar Party were undergoing doctrinal and military training at Moscow that year. More than the numbers however, what was remarkable was the fact that aside from California and India, Ghadar activists had come

---

<sup>47</sup> Shaukat Usmani, *Historic Trips of a Revolutionary*, pp 87-88.

<sup>48</sup> Madan Mohan Malaviya was but one among many noteworthy individuals, *Ibid*, pp 90

from regions as distant as ‘Argentine,’ Panama, Fiji, New Zealand and Kenya.<sup>49</sup> There were of course a variety of ways through which these individuals reached the Soviet Union. Most involved arriving at Western European ports, and in particular Hamburg, from where the cadres of local Communist parties, in liaison with the nearest Soviet missions, made arrangements for their travel onwards to Moscow. These arrangements were more complicated for activists coming from India. Such individuals either obtained employment as lascars on board shipping vessels bound for Western European ports or managed to smuggle themselves across the British Indian border into Central Asia from where they made their way to Moscow.

Once in the Soviet Union, the first point of contact for these individuals was the Comintern. Theoretically, the Comintern was a global organization for communist parties from across the world which was independent from the Soviet Government. In practice, though, it often functioned as a very effective arm of Soviet foreign policy. That said, the founding principles of autonomy often proved to be a convenient excuse as the Soviets pled helplessness when confronted by other Governments irritated at the Comintern’s activities within their territories.<sup>50</sup> For the British too, the intervention of the Comintern in India and other colonies was a source of perpetual anxiety. Conversely, for Indian and other anti-colonial radicals, this institution was invaluable for the support it promised and lent to liberation struggles in colonies around the world.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, it was the only powerful body willing and able to support anti-colonial activism after the defeat of

---

<sup>49</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/148, (Anglo Soviet Relations) Secret Letter to H. Williamson 2nd August, P&J (S) 1933 pp 1-2

<sup>50</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/412, (Communist training schools for Indians in Moscow and Tashkent) Letter from Sir E Ovey to Mr. A Henderson (Received July 7) dated Moscow, July 1, 1930 (Russia, confidential)\_P&J 1396 1930 July 7 1930, Pp 2

<sup>51</sup> See for instance, Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp 51-55.

Germany in the First World War. It was in this context, then, that radical networks maintained contacts with the Comintern with the latter providing material support and political training to party activists.

A key part of this political training was the enrolment of party activists and other Indian radicals at the famous Communist University of the Toilers of the East. The 'University' was run under the direct auspices of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Before enrolling, aspiring students were interviewed to ensure that they had an acceptable class background and political potential. Their educational qualifications were apparently of little concern to the administrators as highly qualified students were accepted along with the completely illiterate. Generally, students from the ages of 16 to 50 were accepted for enrolment and housed in communal quarters. They were also divided into two distinct classifications. The majority belonged to the Soviet Union whose main task was to 'consolidate the power of the Soviets and to build Socialism.' The second group was 'primarily from the colonial and semi-colonial east.' Among other countries, these included activists from Japan, Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and 'a few Negroes from the USA.' The largest group among foreign students came from China. These 'students' were tasked with working for national liberation movements and organizing communist parties in their regions. With the diversity of this institution and others like it, these activists benefited from political and intellectual exchanges with radicals from other contexts while being involved in the euphoria of what seemed to be an exciting, and truly global, project.

For their political training, 'students' were required to learn Russian and keep themselves abreast with the latest political developments. Thus, a key part of their course was the

daily reading of newspapers which, in the case of Indian students, were translated and discussed by their Indian interlocutors at the University. Additionally, students were taught political and economic geography, anthropology, Marxist philosophy, history – with a focus on the history of the Bolshevik Revolution and the First, Second and Third Internationals – and provided information about the Soviet State and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s structure. Activists were also taken for educational ‘excursions’ and camping trips during the summer where group discussions on politics and training in military tactics took place. Confirming the worst fears of the colonial authorities, these activists were regularly trained by Red Army officers in the use and maintenance of various rifles, heavy machine guns, pistols, revolvers and hand grenades. They were also required to draw topographical maps and demonstrate their familiarity with military science and warfare.<sup>52</sup>

The University of Toilers, however, was but one of many institutions on offer in Moscow for anti-colonial radicals. Among the more important ones was the Lenin University for Marxian and Leninist Studies which was said to specialize in ‘advanced theoretical studies’ and, predictably enough, ‘agitation.’ Also on offer were specialized institutes like the Chinese University for the Toilers of China, also known as the Sun Yat Sen University, which catered primarily for Chinese and Korean students. Additionally, there were other organizations like the ‘International Society for Assistance to Fighters for the Revolution.’ This organization was founded in 1922 by the Comintern. It had branches in ‘nearly all countries’ and was especially concerned with ‘agitation and propaganda, especially by means of journals, and pamphlets.’ Lest its’ original purpose be forgotten, the Society also assisted political prisoners in other countries and provided their families

---

<sup>52</sup> Gardezi (ed.), *Chains to Lose* pp 538-98

with financial assistance and legal advice. All these institutions were of course in addition to other branches of the Comintern such as the Profintern (International of Syndicates chiefly devoted to the Pacific, India, China, Australia and Polynesia), KEM (Communist International of Youth) Krestintern (Peasants International), Sportintern (Sport International) and others.<sup>53</sup>

Moscow, then, had the necessary infrastructure for being the centre of a world revolution that was predicated on the freedom of colonies from imperialist subjugation. No wonder then, that aspiring Indian revolutionaries from a variety of networks either stayed at or crossed through Moscow. In most cases, Indian activists attempted to infiltrate British India after undergoing their training in Moscow where they had been equipped to explain the world to themselves and others. As a precaution to prevent their detection by the imperial security services, they were all given false names and were not allowed to disclose their identities to each other. Much to their misfortune however, the imperial intelligence services, through the rigorous interception of correspondences and reporting from spies, were mostly aware of their identities, and even on occasion their false names.<sup>54</sup> As far as infiltration into British India was concerned, there were three possible routes that could be taken. The first two were land routes through Central Asia either into the mountainous passes in the northwest or through the Persian border with British India. The third was a riskier sea route through steamers bound from Western European ports to India.

If they were lucky enough to avoid being arrested and promptly tried, these revolutionaries joined the various communist groups which proliferated in British India

---

<sup>53</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/412, (Communist training schools for Indians in Moscow and Tashkent) Letter from Sir E Ovey to Mr. A Henderson Pp 2-4

<sup>54</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/148, (Anglo Soviet Relations) Secret Letter to H. Williamson pp 1

during the 1920s and 30s. Not only did they act as emissaries of the Comintern which regularly issued instructions and advice to committed communists but they also brought their 'expertise' to bear in bolstering the fledgling Indian communist movement. It was an entirely different matter, however, whether this 'expertise' was of any use at all. Ever since its inception, the Indian communist movement had been plagued by 'sectarianism' and split along regional lines in parties working with a range of peasant associations and trade unions. Other questions of dispute centered on the extent to which the communists should work with the mainstream nationalist movement. That was in addition to the fact that most communist and radical parties moulded their politics in accordance with the specific socio-political circumstances they operated in. That often meant that politics was conducted with considerations other than the latest Comintern dictates. To complicate matters further, and much to the frustration of their interlocutors in Moscow, most individuals who identified themselves as communists were not orthodox Marxist-Leninists.<sup>55</sup> This was true even for individuals who had graduated as trained cadres from Moscow. On occasions, therefore, the Comintern was so disappointed with the 'quality' of students sent from India as compared to those from North America, that it ordered the cessation of recruitment in the subcontinent until prospective candidates could be vetted properly.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the tendency of Indian communists to chart an autonomous course, the Comintern still played a crucial role in the Indian communist movement. At one level, its influence came down to the issue of what passed for a language of legitimation in

---

<sup>55</sup> This was particularly evident in the repeated use of religious idioms coupled with the notions of martyrdom and resistance in their writings. Many in fact were religious figures in their own right who emerged from Sikh and Muslim communitarian movements.

<sup>56</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/148, (Anglo Soviet Relations), Extract from Weekly Report, No. 24, dated Simla, 22.6.33. Serial 6, Foreign Intelligence, P&J (S) 834 1933,

communist political discourse. Thus, individuals who had the backing of the Comintern, or those who had passed through Moscow, commanded considerable influence within radical political circles. In part, this was owing to the reverence accorded to the Soviet Union's undisputed position as the progenitor of the perpetually impending world revolution. As a result, all self-styled communist organizations ensured that they maintained their contacts with the Comintern. This often boiled down to correspondences with lengthy diatribes on topics ranging from the suitability of aligning with the Indian National Congress in its struggle against the British Raj to the womanizing habits of members from an opposing faction.<sup>57</sup> Often, these correspondences also included detailed reports of peasant agitations, workers' strikes, local politics, and sensitive information relating to the location of military installations.<sup>58</sup> This was in addition to regularly sending party pamphlets, newsletters, and other publications to Moscow. On a more practical note, however, maintaining relations with the Comintern, irrespective of whether its dictates were followed to the letter or not, was important for ensuring that Indian radicals continued to receive its support. A key part of this support was financial. Indeed, what the British dubbed as 'Moscow gold,' was crucial in sustaining the leftist movement that was constantly persecuted by a hostile colonial state. It was for this reason why a Ghadar Party leader cautioned his comrades against criticizing Russian officials and impressed upon them the necessity for maintaining good relations with the Comintern 'in spite of the fact that the latter had made promises which they had not kept.'<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> See for instance, Comintern Archives (CA), Library of Congress (LOC), F. 495, Inv. 16 File 50 pp 168-173.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance, CA, F. 495, Inv. 16, File 57a

<sup>59</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/148, (Anglo Soviet Relations), Extract from the Weekly Report

Notwithstanding this mixed relationship and the varied understandings of 'Communism,' Indian radicals had the same broad objectives as their interlocutors in Moscow. At the core of their struggle was an aspiration for the complete independence of India from foreign subjugation. In this demand, Indian leftists were often ahead of the mainstream nationalist movement, which only settled on the demand for complete independence in 1929-30. But independence for the Left also meant the freedom from various internal systems of exploitation such as class, religion, ethnicity and gender. Crucially, however, these political objectives were intrinsically tied in with the global project of Communist Internationalism. In this however, the Left was part of a wider political culture which was eloquently summed up by Jawaharlal Nehru's call for the 'spirit of Internationalism to replace the spirit of Nationalism.'<sup>60</sup> Within the context of Indian and international politics, this spirit was very much evident in the early interwar period which was burdened by the expectation of the impending world revolution. Internationally however, the dream of Communist Internationalism petered off during the late 1930s with the Stalinist purges and came to its lowest point with the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943; though it continued in other forms in the post war period. In the Indian context, with the Second World War and the colonial end game, the Indian communist movement was compelled to choose between Internationalism and Nationalism, as defined by the inheritors of the British Raj.<sup>61</sup>

Moscow therefore, offered opportunities for political and intellectual exchanges for Punjabi and Indian radicals that were unparalleled in the rest of the world. More than a mere locality however, Moscow also embodied many meanings, but none more important

---

<sup>60</sup> PPSAI 1928, Lahore, 18<sup>th</sup> February, No. 7, pp. 71

<sup>61</sup> This is covered more extensively in later chapters.

than the inspiring ideal of Communist Internationalism. In another sense, Moscow symbolized the potential that certain spaces across the world held for Indian radicals. Whether welcoming individuals from diasporic communities or from networks of subordination, these zones of engagements offered a space beyond the subcontinent from where Empire could be subverted, not just in India, but globally as well.

### Contesting Empire Globally

Subverting Empire however, required a profound understanding of its distinctive features. In this respect, there were two main aspects of resistance that were formulated by Punjabi radicals. Firstly, given the global expanse of the British Empire, radicalized individuals could work for the liberation of India from spaces beyond the subcontinent itself. In part, this is the function that certain zones of engagements played. There was however another element to the equation. It was understood by these activists that Indians, and particularly, Punjabis, were complicit in sustaining and perpetuating the Imperial project. As part of the British Indian Army, they were involved in pacifying and conquering regions from East Africa to South East Asia and beyond. Moreover, they were also employed in defending the British Empire as the numerous Punjabi and Indian casualties in the First World War – sustained from the trenches of the Western front to the deserts of the Middle East – testified. Given the seminal contribution of Punjab in these campaigns, this issue struck a particular chord for Punjabi radicals. Time and again, their pronouncements and writings reflected a sense of embarrassment at the collusion of their fellow Punjabis in the project of Empire. Indeed, the very project of Empire would not have been possible without the active collaboration of Indians within it. At the same time,

they also actively encouraged and called upon their compatriots to desist from offering their services in the cause of British Imperialism.

It is for this reason that spreading disaffection within the Army and the police forces was a key element of the wider political strategy employed by Punjabi radicals, whether in the subcontinent or beyond it. Given the wide deployment of Indian personnel around the globe in the service of Empire, the latter was not particularly hard to accomplish. Moreover, this approach was also driven by more pragmatic concerns, since many of these radicals could not possibly return to India without being arrested or incarcerated in their villages. In this respect, the activities of a few Ghadarites in Shanghai provide an excellent example of this strategy. The most prominent amongst these activists, Dasaundha Singh, joined the Ghadar Party as a student in the USA. He deserted his studies in 1925 to join Mahendra Partap who intended to lead a foray into British India through Tibet. Following the abject failure of this mission, Dasaundha Singh headed to Peking, Hankow, and lastly in 1927, Shanghai, where he was entrusted with 'spreading sedition and disaffection among the Indian troops in China, tamper(ing) with their loyalty and promot(ing) strikes among the Indian Police.'<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, he issued calls for the Sikhs 'to rise, unsheathe the sword and kill the English everywhere.'<sup>63</sup> In between, he also edited the *Hindustan Ghadar Dhandora*, which was published in Gurumukhi and typically described as 'highly seditious.' Accordingly, his activities soon attracted the attention of the British, and he was duly arrested and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment with deportation to India on the expiration of his sentence. Nevertheless,

---

<sup>62</sup> IOR/V/27/262/6, Intelligence Bureau, The Ghadr Directory (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1934), pp. 64-65. It should be also mentioned that Indian troops and police were in Shanghai to guard the commercial interests of the British from the advancing forces of the Kuomintang and generally from the ravages of the Chinese Civil War.

<sup>63</sup> PPSAI 1929, 22<sup>nd</sup> June, Simla-E, No. 25, pp. 325.

the activities of Dasaundha Singh and other revolutionaries did not fail to have an impact. Thus, for instance, a factional dispute within the ranks of prison warders, in which ‘well-known seditionists’ were fully involved, resulted in the decision of the Shanghai Municipal Council to cease recruitment of Indians in the police force. As far as the Council was concerned, it was ‘a bad policy to recruit from a country which is as restless as India...where disobedience has been elevated into a political creed.’<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, there were other considerations in play over and above this strategy, which point towards the second aspect related to the understanding of Empire. For many Indian radicals, Empire was a profoundly global phenomenon and it thus had to be combated in its wider global manifestation, whereby the focus of struggle would not merely be restricted to the liberation of India from British rule. To better illustrate this sentiment, an excerpt from a proclamation of the Ghadar Party in response to British actions in China is worth quoting at length<sup>65</sup>:

‘India’s nationalists, all over the world, in co-operation with the oppressed humanity, are interested in the destruction of British Imperialism. They know full well that unless it is destroyed, there can be no peace on the face of this earth; there can be no freedom for India and other enslaved countries. It was Lincoln who said that there cannot be such a thing as a nation half free and half slave. *What was true of one country then, is true of all humanity today. Due to modern means of communication, mankind is functioning as one organism. Any one part of this organism cannot grow healthy while other parts are paralysed and diseased.*<sup>66</sup> A large part of humanity is suffering under the bondage of slavery on account of British Imperialism.’<sup>67</sup> It was therefore ‘in the interest of humanity at large that British Imperialism (was) destroyed at all costs.’<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> PPSAI 1930, 8<sup>th</sup> Nov, Lahore, No. 43, pp 785.

<sup>65</sup> Also important to this pamphlet was an impassioned appeal asking their fellow Punjabis not to fire upon the Chinese.

<sup>66</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>67</sup> PPSAI 1927, Departmental Notice No. 43, Simla, A protest Against British Imperialism in China by the Hindustan Ghadr (India’s National) Party, 13<sup>th</sup> August, pp. 320.

<sup>68</sup> PPSAI 1927, Simla,-E, 2<sup>nd</sup> July, No. 25, p. 246.

This view perhaps reflected a more profound understanding of Empire than that which existed in mainstream nationalist circles within India. While in practical terms, such rhetoric may have remained just that, the references to humanity as an organic whole indicated that at the heart of such sentiments was a universalism founded on solidarity with the oppressed nations and peoples of the world. In fact, this internationalism also expressed solidarity with the Englishman who was ‘conscripted against his will.’ After all, it was only ‘a small number of Englishmen (who) have constituted themselves into the so-called British Empire’ and destroyed the ‘best element in England’ and ‘extracted the very life of the people in subjected countries.’ Resistance to imperialism therefore, had to be undertaken on all fronts, and not least from within British society itself. It was in this sense then, that the Empire was contested beyond the shores of the subcontinent, not simply to liberate India from British rule, but to rid humanity as a whole of the ‘curse’ of Imperialism.<sup>69</sup>

### Funding

A crucial element in liberating India from beyond related to the flow of funds from diasporic communities in support of resistance movements in the Punjab and the wider subcontinent. Indeed, aside from Moscow, foreign remittances from the Ghadar Party and migrant communities were crucial in sustaining the Punjabi Left. These sums enabled the Left to function despite numerous proscriptions, fines, and security bonds. In this respect,

---

<sup>69</sup> The British were all too aware of this potential. Thus for China they routinely expressed the fear that ‘the Indian revolutionary element will find a footing in a disordered China, and the Ghadar plotter and the Soviet emissary will join forces’ to subvert the British Empire, IOR/V/27/262/5, Intelligence Bureau, India and Communism (Home Department, Government of India, 1933 Reprinted 1935) pp. 12.

the main beneficiary of foreign remittances was generally assumed to be the KKP.<sup>70</sup> Notwithstanding the certitude of these claims, what is fairly clear is that the Punjabi Left and the KKP, in particular, benefitted from substantial remittances from North America and other regions with a large Punjabi, and especially Sikh, diaspora. Indeed it was primarily for this reason that the KKP was generally assumed to be the 'Punjab branch of the Ghadar Party.'<sup>71</sup>

The Kirti Party though, was not the only political body receiving financial support from abroad. In the 1920s, a number of Punjabi, and primarily Sikh, bodies were founded in North America and elsewhere, with the explicit purpose of supporting political struggles in India. These were mostly formed during the *Akali* movement<sup>72</sup> and the leaders of this struggle were quick to tap into a source of financial assistance that was clearly forthcoming owing to enmity with British imperialism or communitarian sympathies. One of the best means in which this money was subscribed was the founding of societies aimed at securing the welfare of the dependents of those who had been imprisoned during the Akali struggle. One of the most prominent of such societies was then appropriately named the *Desh Bhagat Qaidi Parwar Sahaik* (Welfare for Families of Patriotic Prisoners) Committee.<sup>73</sup> At the other end, a cursory examination of the societies in North America alone provides an idea of how extensive this funding network was. For instance, aside from the Hindustan Ghadar Party, there were the *Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society*, *The Malwa Sudharak Society*, *The Sikh American Doaba Educational Society*, and *The Sons of Bharat*, each of which were founded or had a branch in California,

---

<sup>70</sup> While I refer to the Kirti Sabha in this section, I treat it more comprehensively in the next chapter.

<sup>71</sup> PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 12th September, No. 36, pp. 547.

<sup>72</sup> See the chapter on the Akalis

<sup>73</sup> PPSAI 1926, Lahore, 27<sup>th</sup> November, No. 46, pp. 569.

mostly in Stockton city. In Vancouver alone there were three societies by the name of: *Canadian American Press Society of the Doaba*, *The Khalsa Diwan Society*, and the *Hindustani Young Men's Association*. While most of these societies liberally subscribed to funds set up for the dependents of the *Babbar Akali* prisoners, they also had their own objectives. For example, the *Malwa Sudharak Society* had as one of its aims, 'the collection of funds with a view to starting a newspaper in India for the purpose of anti-Government propaganda.' To that end it financed the *Asli Qaumi Dard*<sup>74</sup> newspaper of Amritsar, which was labeled a 'consistently anti-Government production.'<sup>75</sup>

The Kirti Party therefore was also a beneficiary of 'the underwriting of political revolution.' The extent of this can be gauged from the fact that it was estimated in 1927 that its flagship journal, the *Kirti* had to its credit a sum of 40,000 Rs.<sup>76</sup> While the credibility of this figure may be suspect, what is certain is that there were repeated instances when money was reported to come from the diaspora. A number of small subscriptions to the *Kirti* newspaper and donations to the KKP kept pouring in, even sums as relatively substantial as 50 pounds, from diverse and distant regions such as Fiji,<sup>77</sup> Hong Kong, Java, Uganda and Panama.<sup>78</sup> Typically, this support was in response to news or propaganda material received from India. Thus, the *Kirti*, for example, was regularly smuggled to diasporic communities who in turn expressed their approval of it through their remittances.<sup>79</sup> These were typically delivered through returning migrants in order to prevent its confiscation by the British authorities. In some cases, returning

---

<sup>74</sup> Meaning, 'Real/Genuine/True National Pain'

<sup>75</sup> PPSAI 1927, Simla-E, 2<sup>nd</sup> July, No. 25, pp. 245-7.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>77</sup> IOR/V/27/262/5, India and Communism 1935 pp. 277

<sup>78</sup> PPSAI 1927, Lahore, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, No. 47, pp. 611-13.

<sup>79</sup> PPSAI 1928, Supplement 1, Lahore, 5<sup>th</sup> of May, No. 18, pp. 200.

migrants arrived with the explicit purpose of overseeing whether foreign remittances were being disbursed appropriately or not.<sup>80</sup> As far as the British were concerned however, Moscow remained the most prominent source of funding for the party. Reports, mostly unverified according to the British themselves, kept coming in of the transfer of significant sums of money, which on one occasion was estimated to be 8000 Rs.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, whether received from Moscow or from the substantial diasporic communities across the world, the flow of funds clearly indicated that radical politics in the Punjab was firmly tied to the wider global arena and was part of a relationship that extended to the movement of individuals, propaganda materials, and, not least, ideas.

#### From the Regional to the International

It was the flow and exchange of ideas between the Punjab and the wider world that in many ways cemented the ties between the national and the international. It was thus perfectly possible to be in touch with global developments and be engaged with a wider internationalist struggle without necessarily being physically located or having to travel in the global arena. In this sense, the flow of ideas and the imaginative reworking of the regional or the national as part of the international, provides a necessary corrective to a trend in transnational history which has tended to focus more on diasporic communities and the flow of individuals or goods across (retrospectively reified) borders. This imbalance may probably derive from an underestimation relating to the flexibility and adaptability of ideas in contexts far different from the ones from which they 'originated' from. In this sense, Punjab provides a fascinating insight into the reworking and

---

<sup>80</sup> PPSAI 1927, Lahore, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, No. 47, pp. 612.

<sup>81</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/300, No. 3/Soc/32, Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, GoI, Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1932.

development of ideas, ranging from communism to fascism, which were both a part of and fed into wider intellectual and political networks that did not observe the sanctity of geographical demarcations.

The case of the KKP for instance provides, to a certain extent, the applicability of this framework to the Punjab. This organization drew on political networks that were founded in the international arena, either through Ghadarite or Hijrat connections, but more crucially, it grew on and appealed to a constituency which emerged from an organic political context in which the idioms of anti-colonial resistance were largely developed and perfected during the recently concluded Akali movement which in turn drew on various struggles in the past such as the 1907 agrarian agitation.<sup>82</sup> The 'genealogy of radicalism'<sup>83</sup> was thus tied in with emerging political and intellectual networks, not just in India but beyond it as well, that significantly influenced its eventual trajectory. A clue to this political and intellectual milieu can be found in the statement to the press announcing the launch of the *Kirti*:

'The journal will be the voice of Indian workers living in American and Canada and will be dedicated to the sacred memory of those heroes and martyrs who awakened sleeping India and whose ideal was regarded by our own people as well as by outsiders as the dream of Alnaschar<sup>84</sup>...at a time when the price of service and sacrifice was much higher than it is now. The journal will work for all the workers throughout the world, the entire female sex, the subjugated, weak and oppressed nations and subjugated India.<sup>85</sup>

Here then was a fusion of broadly two varying political strands. At the one end this announcement and the paper itself drew on and glorified the ideals of its Ghadrite

---

<sup>82</sup> From its inception as an agitation against the raising of canal water rates, this movement quickly became anti-Government in nature. See for instance, N. Gerald Barrier, 'The Punjab Disturbances of 1907'

<sup>83</sup> Shalini Sharma, 'The Radical Response to Colonialism: The Organized Left in Punjab 1920-1947,' (School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Ph.D. thesis, 2005) pp. 12.

<sup>84</sup> IOR/V/27/262/3, Communism in India 1924-27, pp. 157. Also, the part about the dream of Alnaschar' is a reference to a fable in the Arabian Nights. The phrase itself, as used in this passage, refers to an impossible dream or a fantasy.

<sup>85</sup> SS Josh, *My meetings with Bhagat Singh*, pp. 73

precursors, most notably in the 1914-15 rebellion, and the sacrifices of the Babbar Akalis.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, not only did many of its activists emerge from the Akali movement itself, but some remained actively involved in organizations like *Desh Bhagat Qaidi Parwar Sahaik* Committee, formed for the explicit purpose of supporting the dependents of Akali prisoners.<sup>87</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, the Kirti movement also derived its inspiration from the success of the Bolshevik revolution and its accompanying emancipatory ideals that espoused an internationalism founded on the solidarity of the working classes and the oppressed around the world which, significantly, also included 'the entire female sex.' Moreover, on a more practical note, the journal was also intended for its primary support base of Punjabi migrants living in North America (perhaps as a means for soliciting further subscriptions and funding) and claimed to express and represent their solidarity and, albeit tenuous, linkages with movements against injustice and oppression. In this respect, tangible indications to such universalist ideals and linkages came at a Kirti conference held in 1927 which began its proceedings with a message of solidarity from the 'labourers of Berlin.'<sup>88</sup> Far from being unusual, expressions of this sort of international solidarity were replete in Kirti publications and public meetings which routinely glorified the Bolshevik revolution and other nationalist struggles, such as the movements in China and Ireland, and repeatedly called for strengthening alliances with organizations such as the League Against Imperialism. The KKP however, was hardly unique in this stance as these sentiments were routinely expressed by other Leftist parties as well as a section of the nationalist movement.

---

<sup>86</sup> PPSAI 1928, Supplement 1, Lahore, 5<sup>th</sup> of May, No. 18, pp. 200.

<sup>87</sup> Baba Wasakha Singh and Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna are examples of this. See for instance PPSAI 1931-32

<sup>88</sup> PPSAI 1927, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> October, No. 40, pp. 447.

Sustaining and feeding this internationalist sentiment was the regular flow, both to and from the Punjab, of political developments and prevailing intellectual currents. Aside from the standard journalistic outlets and a thriving print culture, the flow of information was made possible through the regular movements of individuals connected with diasporic communities and radical networks. Important too was the transfer of propaganda materials, such as party publications, books, radical newsheets and much more. Most of this outgoing and incoming material was proscribed and intercepted respectively at the very outset, a fact to which numerous police and intelligence reports testify to. Thus, a regular week's report in 1929 stated that the following literature was intercepted by the Special Branch: *Daily Worker*, *Hindustan Ghadr*, *New Republic*, *League Against Imperialism*, *Sunday Worker*, *The Worker*.<sup>89</sup> This interception was also supplemented by a blanket prohibition of any communications emanating from black listed organizations, such as the Kuomintang, Pan-Asiatic League, Union of the Oppressed Peoples of the East,<sup>90</sup> Pan Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, Workers Welfare League of India, the Comintern and all organizations affiliated with it, and many others.<sup>91</sup> However, despite their efforts in trying to create a panoptical state, the British were unable to stem the flow of ideas. Thus Punjabi radicals continued to benefit from contemporary intellectual trends and literature which included seminal works such as *The State and Revolution*, *The Proletarian Revolution*, and so on.

It was therefore perfectly possible for radicals who had emerged from an 'organic' political context to draw on global political and intellectual currents. Indeed, in this sense, the idea of politics, as inhabiting an arena that was simultaneously regional as well as

---

<sup>89</sup> PPSAI 1929, Lahore, 21<sup>st</sup> December, No. 50, pp. 769.

<sup>90</sup> PPSAI 1927, Departmental Notice, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, No. 16, pp. 119.

<sup>91</sup> PPSAI 1927, Departmental Notice, Lahore, No. 56, 8<sup>th</sup> October, pp. 437.

global in its spatial dimensions, was an unparalleled development in South Asian history that was already rife with instances of modern and pre-modern movements of individuals, materials and ideas. Viewed from another angle, the very nature of empire and its socialist nemesis, with both their global manifestations, had necessitated the emergence of such a politics. Viewed this way, the Empire was also an enabler of radical politics. The condition of travelling or belonging to a diasporic community therefore really did not apply if one were to engage with this global political paradigm. Rather, it was perfectly possible to be international, or ‘transnational’ as per modern historiography, by remaining firmly rooted in a particular political context. It is then sense then that the regional or the national was firmly tied in with the international.

## **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, each of these narratives may appear disjointed if viewed in isolation to each other. And yet, once woven together, they reveal some important insights about the interwar ‘internationalist moment.’<sup>92</sup> For one, this period is remarkable for providing a space in which a distinct political trajectory to radicalism emerged and thrived. For an entire generation of Punjabi radicals, this journey began in locations far removed from the subcontinent. For many, this trajectory led through diasporic communities and the very *process* of travelling. For both cases, intellectual, political and personal encounters were instrumental in compelling potential radicals to reassess their place as subjects in a global Empire, and to rework methods through which their sovereignty and, crucially, an amorphous, but very real, sense of dignity and self respect could be regained. For many, this entailed combating Empire, not only in a specific regional or national sense, but in

---

<sup>92</sup> Thanks are due to Ben Zachariah and Franz Roy for coining this term.

the entirety of its global manifestation. At the other end of the spectrum, this method of combating Empire could just as well be adopted by individuals who emerged from a localized political struggle. For both types of radicals however, a unique form of universalism was adopted that, while being unprecedented in the Punjab and the wider subcontinent, was certainly typical of an internationalist moment that was global in scope. Thus, in doing so, these individuals also defy the often unimaginatively used dichotomy of 'elite' and 'subaltern,' for non-elites, at the margin of both the Nation and Empire, were often at the forefront of this political and intellectual milieu. In this reading, then, their experiences and activism also contest the narratives of subordination and oppression that tend to delimit the agency of these historical actors. And on a rather obvious note, the politics of these individuals also challenge the territorially bound narratives of Indian anti-colonial struggles.

Secondly, it is worth bearing in mind that the internationalism to which many Punjabi radicals swore allegiance to was but one of many internationalisms that percolated during the inter-war period. Among these were diverse movements, associated with national liberation, feminism, universal suffrage, self-determination and others, that in many cases converged and drew their inspiration and ideological formulations from each other. Thus, in a related sense, while not strictly internationalist in either spirit or practice, fascism too was part of the spectrum of ideologies that permeated the global political and intellectual landscape, and Punjab too was no exception to this trend. The Punjabi Left then, viewed within the regional political and intellectual space, was but one of many political impulses that ranged from openly communal and fascist trends, epitomized in organizations like the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) or the *Khaksar Tehreek*, to

ideas of revolutionary terrorism, which were articulated in both theory and practice by organizations like the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA). In between these extreme trends could be located an entire array of 'loyalist,' 'nationalist,' 'leftist,' and 'communitarian' movements – each of whom came with a multiplicity of variations – which all competed with each other for political dominance. In doing so, these impulses also drew from and appropriated, not only from each other's political languages, but also from the wider global milieu of competing intellectual and political trends. The Punjabi Left therefore, in line with the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, situated its politics simultaneously within the global and the regional, in which ideas of international working class solidarity and anti-imperialist struggle could easily be blended in with religiously inspired notions of martyrdom and resistance.

Normally these competing formulations are understood to be mutually contradictory. But the politics of Punjabi radicals showed how these strands could come together in an apparently seamless manner. Similarly, it is owing to such conceptual determinism that the binaries of the 'universal' and the 'nation,' or even the 'local,' are rarely, if ever, bridged. The journeys of these individuals showed that the 'global' and the 'local' had an intimate relationship in terms of lived experiences. Moreover, in political and intellectual terms, it was perfectly possible for many to ascribe to a politics of internationalism that was at the same time rooted and directed towards a specific socio-political context. Thus, far from being static and mutually exclusive categorizations, the politics of Punjabi radicals in the interwar period indicated that the impulses of 'internationalism' and 'nationalism' or even 'regionalism' frequently overlapped, drew from, and fed into each other. In contemporaneous terms then, there were few, if any, reified conceptual and

geographical boundaries that prevented Punjabi radicals from regularly transcending them. And it is partly in this sense that Punjab, and by extension, British India, ceases to be a territorially, and hence, conceptually bound unit of historical analysis.

### **The Left in the Local Arena: The Case of the Kirti Kisan Sabha**

As the last chapter indicated, the growth of radicalism in the global arena was intimately linked to the leftist movement within the province as well as British India in general. As was to be expected, there were both similarities and divergences between the two trajectories. In contrast to the earlier section therefore, this chapter will focus on the regional and local arena by examining the trajectory of leftist politics within the province itself. In part, this is another attempt at reimagining Punjab, but in this instance, as a space, which in certain periods, offered a space for radical politics to emerge. My purpose then is to examine both the nature of this politics as its well its general trajectory in pre-partition Punjab.

In doing so, this chapter will highlight the untidiness and heterogeneity of the Leftist movement within the Punjab. In doing so, I hope to dent an image of individuals and organizations that are easily understood and hence neatly labeled. Rather I view the Left, or at least a significant section of it, through the theme of acculturation in which I examine its social, cultural and political moorings and firmly situate it within the context in which it developed. This is not, therefore, a straightforward political biography or chronology of the Punjabi Left. That, in any case, has been done with varying success in other studies.<sup>1</sup>

As a preliminary, however, it is important to unpack the notion of the 'Left.' Briefly, there were a variety of organizations and individuals who were characterized by various actors as the 'Left.' These classifications in turn were contingent on certain periods and

---

<sup>1</sup> See especially the first three chapters of Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab*.

contexts. Given this variety, it will not be possible to provide a comprehensive survey of the Punjabi Leftist movement as a whole. Rather I will only allude to its varying constituents and instead examine in detail an organization that was briefly introduced in the preceding chapter: the Ghadarite affiliated *Kirti Kisan Sabha*. The Sabha was one of the most prominent organizations within the Punjabi Left and epitomized the differentiated and regionally variegated character of the leftist movement in British India. Tracing organizations though has its own problems. For one, virtually all leftist organizations had short political lives. In examining the Sabha, therefore, I mostly limit myself to the period that ranges from the organization's inception in 1926 to 1934, when it was officially banned by the Punjab Government along with other leftist parties. Being proscribed, however, did not prevent the Kirti group, as it became known, from continuing their politics and forming other organizations. Indeed, many individuals who emerged through the Ghadar and Kirti movement continued their work till Partition and beyond. This in turn raises the question of whether it is more pertinent to trace organizations or individuals. Clearly, studying organizations is more convenient than the inevitable, and occasionally, impossible complexity involved in analyzing individuals. In what is an underlying theme of this thesis, therefore, I try to achieve a balance between the two. In addition to producing a coherent narrative, this exercise will also highlight how 'organizations' and 'individuals' were tied to each other.

Before turning to the Sabha, it would be useful to broadly examine the state of radical politics in the Punjab. Prior to the emergence of 'leftist' politics as such, the province had been periodically affected by movements and agitations directed against the state. After quelling the abortive Ghadar uprising during the First World War, the provincial

government was then faced with the Rowlatt, Khilafat and Non-Cooperation agitations.<sup>2</sup> Together, these agitations, along with later ones, were training grounds for political activists belonging to various shades of the ideological spectrum. This was also true for certain localities like Taran Tarn in Amritsar district for instance, which became associated with radical politics. Meanwhile, the Bolshevik Revolution had permanently altered global politics and fired the imaginations of radical nationalists in the subcontinent and beyond. Indeed, this heady atmosphere and the rapid pace of global and national events have been evocatively conveyed in a number of memoirs.<sup>3</sup> Faiz Ahmed Faiz for instance recalled how the coming of the Revolution precipitated discussions in houses, schools and local mosques. ‘Everywhere,’ he writes, ‘it is the talk of the town. How did the Revolution come about? Will the revolutionary forces also come to India to get us freedom? What is a government of workers and peasants like?’<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, activists proclaiming themselves as part of the ‘Left’ soon established a presence in the Punjab. The first instance of this was a short lived experiment in Lahore by one Ghulam Hussain, a contact of the Hijrat Movement and M.N Roy, who started the an Urdu paper in 1922 called the *Inquilab*.<sup>5</sup> Other attempts were made by returning Hijrat activists but most were successfully apprehended as they tried to smuggle themselves into India from Central Asia and other routes. These individuals were then tried and convicted in a series of ‘conspiracy cases,’ five in Peshawar and one in Kanpur, which ran from

---

<sup>2</sup> After the abortive Ghadar rebellion, this was the first serious uprising against colonial rule in the province. For a detailed account see the *Memorandum on the Disturbances in the Punjab April 1919* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997; originally published, Lahore: Government Printing Punjab, 1920).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Horst Kruger Archives (HKA), Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Shaukat Usmani, ‘The Life Story of an Unknown Revolutionary,’ Shaukat Usmani Papers, Box 10, No. 58-1

<sup>4</sup> These accounts are currently being compiled by Ahmad Salim who is producing Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s biography. They can be accessed in part at <http://www.viewpointonline.net/faiz-on-faiz.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Translated as ‘Revolution.’ See for instance IOR/V/27/262/3, Communism in India 1924-1927, pp 164

1922-27. On another front, returning Ghadar inspired migrants joined a brewing Akali struggle, which posed perhaps the most serious challenge to colonial rule in the province's history.<sup>6</sup>

These nascent attempts were coupled with a rise in revolutionary activities. These were led by activists – in most cases youths – who were disillusioned by the sudden end of the Non-Cooperation movement. As a result, revolutionary bodies soon emerged in the Punjab, as elsewhere, as an outlet for disaffected radicals. One of the most important of these was the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NJBS) that was formed in 1926.<sup>7</sup> The Sabha became renowned for one of its members who became inarguably the most iconic figure in the Punjabi and South Asian leftist movement. Born in 1907 in Lyallpur district, Bhagat Singh's life epitomized the political journeys of many youths who took to revolutionary and militant activism in response to the perceived failures of mainstream nationalism. Also a member of the HRSA and an affiliate of other revolutionaries like Chandrashekar Azad, Bhagat Singh was involved in the assassination of a police official in Lahore. Later, he courted arrest after throwing a bomb in the Central Legislative Assembly in a protest against the passing of the draconian Public Safety and Trade Disputes Bills. After being promptly tried and sentenced, Bhagat Singh and his compatriots were hanged in Lahore in March 1931.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See the chapter on Akalis.

<sup>7</sup> Translated as 'Indian Young Men's Association.' For an excellent account on the Sabha, see, Shalini Sharma, 'Developing a Communist Identity: The Case of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha' *Journal of Punjab Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2007) pp 167-187.

<sup>8</sup> It is not my intention here to recount the activities of Bhagat Singh in detail. That in any case, has been exhaustively covered in scores of academic and popular accounts. His life has also been the subject of a number of Bollywood films and theatre performances. That is in addition to public memorials and museums dedicated to the memory of Bhagat Singh. For a detailed and useful account of his life and politics see, Irfan Habib, *To make the Deaf Hear: Ideology and Programme of Bhagat Singh and his Comrades* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2007). To understand one of the ways in which his memory has been appropriated see Ishwar D. Gaur, *Martyr as Bridegroom: A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh*

Bhagat Singh's death earned him the title of *Shaheed-e-Azam*.<sup>9</sup> It also further galvanized radical and nationalist politics that had already been in a state of ferment from the mid 1920s onwards. This was an atmosphere in which cries of *Inquilab Zindabad*<sup>10</sup> dominated public rallies and political conferences. This was given a further impetus by the onset of the Civil Disobedience Movement. With passions running high, a plethora of 'revolutionary' cum 'terrorist' groups – often comprising of no more than a few men – surfaced across the province. These groups engaged in activities which ranged from dacoity and sabotage to seemingly innocuous acts like pouring acid down letter boxes.<sup>11</sup> This was coupled by a spectacular rise in the use of (often ineffective) bombs against state functionaries and political opponents. Stretched to the limit, provincial security services repeatedly expressed their fears about the 'cult of the bomb' or the 'cult of violence' or indeed the 'cult of revolution.'<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a sense of this atmosphere can be gauged by a poster issued by an obscure 'Youngmen Association' which read as follows:

'Prescription for Preparing Bomb.

'We by means of this poster, inform the Police who come to the Jallianwala Bagh that they should come prepared. We must attack them. We have rung the danger bell. The public should use the following prescription for the making of bombs:

1. Picric Acid
2. Nitric acid
3. Sulphuric acid
4. Carboic acid
5. Aluminum acid
6. Potacium (? Potassium) chlorate
7. Kamila
8. Picrics
9. Blades of safety razor
10. Pieces of glass

---

(New Delhi: Anthem Press, 2008). For his own writings see, D.N Gupta (ed.), *Bhagat Singh, Select Speeches & Writings* (New Delhi : National Book Trust, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> 'Great Martyr'

<sup>10</sup> 'Long Live Revolution'

<sup>11</sup> PPSAI 1932, Simla-E, 28<sup>th</sup> May, No. 22, pp 291

<sup>12</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 17<sup>th</sup> January, No. 3, pp 43 and PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 24<sup>th</sup> January, No. 4, pp 57

## 11. Case (case is of tin)<sup>13</sup>

### **Kirti Kisan Party**

While the state was able to clamp down on the more violent expressions of radical politics, it was relatively less successful in managing a political arena in which ‘leftist’ idioms of politics enjoyed a wide currency. This was particularly true for much of the 1920s and 30s. There was thus a greater space for leftist organizations to emerge and create an impact in provincial politics. In this regard, the case of the KKP clearly demonstrates this trend.

There are a number of diverse narratives – ranging from colonial reports to personal accounts – which trace the origins of the Kirti Kisan Party. However, there are a few common threads that run through all such narratives. For one, they all attribute the founding of the KKP to the activities of prominent Ghadarites, though the extent to which these individuals were acting in pursuance of official Party directives remains unclear. As outlined in the previous chapter, this narrative begins with an attempt by Santokh Singh to infiltrate British India through Central Asia in 1923, following his lengthy stay in Moscow. After his incarceration, he founded the monthly *Kirti* which became the most iconic leftist journal in the Punjab. In addition to the Ghadarites present in Punjab, Santokh Singh also allied himself with radicals who emerged from the Akali movement. This was a continuation of previous attempts by Ghadarites during the Akali agitation to ally themselves with the leading Sikh body, the *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (SGPC). According to police reports, two prominent Ghadarites, who were convicted in the Lahore Conspiracy Case of 1915 but managed to escape to Afghanistan,

---

<sup>13</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 25<sup>th</sup> April, No. 17, pp 265-66

secretly approached the SGPC in Amritsar in 1923 with a series of audacious proposals. Prominent among them were proposals for fomenting 'trouble' amongst the frontier tribes, initiating a campaign of terrorism and assassination, dispatching young men to foreign countries for military training, and forming secret societies for revolutionary work that could operate under the cover of religious and communal organizations. None of these proposals however actually materialized according to plan, though contact was established with the Bengali revolutionary Sachindra Nath Sanyal's party.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding their lack of success however, these proposals provided a glimpse into the discontent prevailing in the central and eastern tracts of Punjab. Accordingly, when Santokh Singh initiated his activities, he was joined in his endeavour by activists from the Akali movement like Sohan Singh Josh, who later became a renowned leader within the Punjabi Left.

Following Santokh Singh's death, the remaining proprietors of the *Kirti* continued with laying a foundation for a radical movement in the Punjab. Thus in 1927, at a meeting in Amritsar, it was decided to organize a workers and peasants' party on the lines of labour parties in England and America. This party was to work independently of the Congress, or any other political body. Along with other provinces, it was also intended to be a cover for the CPI that was founded (for the second time according to some) in Kanpur in 1925. A 'Karl Marxian' manifesto was drawn up and officeholders were nominated,<sup>15</sup> though it wasn't before April 1928 that the Kirti Kisan Party was formally founded and affiliated with the CPI. Sohan Singh Josh and M.A Majid, an activist who emerged from the Hijrat

---

<sup>14</sup> PPSAI 1928, Lahore, 5<sup>th</sup> May, No. 18, pp 199

<sup>15</sup> PPSAI 1927, Lahore, 24<sup>th</sup> September, No. 37, pp 399-400

movement, were appointed the General Secretary and Secretary of the Party respectively, whilst a special committee was constituted to frame a constitution.<sup>16</sup>

### Ideology

As far as the general ideological outlook of the party and its members was concerned, indications to it had already been made by the launch of the *Kirti*.<sup>17</sup> The first issue was adorned by a title page which bore an illustration ‘of a dead labourer lying on his funeral pyre, amidst factories, fields etc – the scene of his labours when alive – and surrounded with tools such as the hammer and pickaxe, the whole obviously intended to convey the idea that the deceased had succumbed to the hard tasks he had to perform during his lifetime’<sup>18</sup> Additionally, this illustration was also intended to convey that the labourer had possibly died from the bullets of the imperialist police while on strike for higher wages. In this imagery, the hands of *Kirti* were placing a garland on his dead body.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly then, the founders of the *Kirti* envisioned it as laying ground for a movement that would build on previous struggles against Imperialism through the advocacy of downtrodden classes. The brief founding aims and objectives of the Kirti Kisan Party made this much clear:

- 1) ‘To achieve complete independence from British imperialism by employing every possible method in order to liberate the workers and peasants from political, economic, and social serfdom and to establish their united democratic power.
- 2) To organize the workers and peasants (for achieving this objective).’<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> PPSAI 1928, Lahore, 21<sup>st</sup> April, No. 16, Pp 176

<sup>17</sup> See the press release accompanying the journal’s launch in the previous chapter.

<sup>18</sup> IOR/V/27/262/3, Communism in India 1924-1927, pp 158

<sup>19</sup> SS Josh, *Hindustan Gadar Party: Volume II* pp 225

<sup>20</sup> IOR/V/27/262/5 India and Communism (Revised up to 1935), Pp 271

Beyond these broad objectives however, the ideology of the KKP – in terms of it being a viewpoint widely adhered to and accepted by all its members – becomes much harder to pin down. Though, in some senses it was intended as a proxy for the Communist Party of India, its ranks were composed of Ghadarites, Akali ‘extremists,’ Moscow returned Communists, and radicals of assorted shades and colours. Not all therefore adhered to orthodox Marxist doctrine, though they were certainly inspired by ‘communist’ ideology, whatever that may have meant. Moreover, to a great extent, the KKP provided an outlet for those who were dissatisfied with the illusionary promises and conservative politics of mainstream nationalism. This aspect was aptly brought out by Sohan Singh Josh’s testimony during the Meerut Conspiracy Case in which was a co-defendant. Josh was quite emphatic in denying that the KKP was a communist body. Rather it was an ‘Independence Party’ that ‘aimed at the establishment of the national democratic (republic) through revolution.’ In sum, it was a ‘revolutionary body of militant workers and peasants, who being disillusioned by the Congress’s defeatist politics, had risen in revolt against it.’<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, despite being an umbrella organization for disenchanted radicals, there were some broad ideological denominators that were widely accepted and shared by KKP activists. Generally speaking, these can be reduced to ideas relating to largely four issues that at the time, dominated much of the political discourse in British India. The most important of these was related to the hegemony of Imperialism and Empire. The other two were concerned with the role of mainstream nationalism in combating Empire and the pervasive and divisive role of religion in society, which was widely viewed as an

---

<sup>21</sup> A *sahukar* is a money lender. National Archives of India (NAI), Meerut Conspiracy Case Papers (MCCP) Vol. no. 213, File No. 218 Sohan Singh Josh, (pp 292 -361), pp 295. I am grateful to Michele Louro for her generosity in providing me with this file.

obstacle to be navigated on the road to independence. The last issue was related to the broader socio-political objectives that were expressed by every shade of political opinion. For the Kirti Party, all these issues were of monumental importance and they were frequently merged with and articulated through the medium of localized grievances. The following sections will now examine each of these issues in much greater detail.

### *Imperialism*

Insofar as the first issue of the British Indian Empire was concerned, KKP activists, in line with their Ghadarite antecedents, argued for nothing else than complete independence at a time when the Congress was lobbying for an ill defined and much disputed *swaraj*. For them British Imperialism was a system intended for ‘robbing’ India of her wealth. India, according to this materialist interpretation of colonialism, was made a colony for the purpose of extracting the greatest possible profits through the ruthless exploitation of indigenous labour. To facilitate this great theft, all inalienable rights of independence, sovereignty, self respect and dignity had been taken away from Indians. To make matters worse, they were required to subsidize this oppressive system through the State’s imposition of direct and indirect taxation, which for peasants in the countryside, was further exacerbated by the oppression of the *zamindar* and *sahukar*.<sup>22</sup>

While such rhetoric was representative of radical and even mainstream nationalist opinion in the late 1920s, what was far more unique was the extent to which the Punjabi Left viewed Imperialism as a global phenomenon that was closely tied to their newly found nemesis of Capitalism. Herein lay an idea of an internationalism founded on the spirit of working class solidarity. For the more sophisticated, this idea stemmed from the

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid Pp 296 - 7

recognition that Capital was ‘internationally organized’ and was ‘suppressing labour movements in all countries.’<sup>23</sup> Combating Empire and the system of capitalism that it bequeathed, therefore, entailed agitating for an end to Empire globally and not just the Indian subcontinent. India in this view could never really be free until the global system of imperial exploitation, of which it was an integral part, was completely uprooted. It was for this reason that leftist leaders consistently advocated the need to build and maintain international connections, for internationally organized Capital could only be defeated through the international organization of workers. Typically, these international connections were to be maintained with organizations such as the League Against Imperialism, the Communist International and Krestintern, the Peasants International ‘because these internationals (were) the real supporters of the political, economic and social emancipation of the proletariat and (had) shown by (their) attitude that they (had) been unceasingly fighting against Capitalism and Imperialism.’<sup>24</sup>

If the Punjabi Left, and in particular the KKS, did have such connections, it was always careful in restricting itself to merely highlighting the need for building them. That however, would hardly prove sufficient to dispel the suspicion of the colonial government and certain sections within the nationalist mainstream that the KKS was part of a communist conspiracy in India that was directly financed and supported by Moscow. Matters were worsened by the repeated references to Bolshevik Russia in the public meetings and conferences organized by the Punjabi Left in which slogans like ‘long live the Russian Kirti Raj’<sup>25</sup> permeated the air. Moreover, events were explicitly organized for

---

<sup>23</sup> Presidential Address of Sohan Singh Josh at the Formation of the All India Workers and Peasants Party 1928 in Calcutta, Documents of the Communist Movement in India – Vol. 1 (1917-1928), pp 352

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp 352-3. Also see, MCCP 219 SS Josh, pp 302-3

<sup>25</sup> PPSAI 1933, Lahore, 16<sup>th</sup> September, No. 36, pp 440

the support of the Soviet Union, one of which was aptly titled the 'Friends of Russia week.'<sup>26</sup> The Soviet Union was frequently held up as a model society worth aspiring to. Typical accounts lauded the success of the Russian people in overthrowing the Czar<sup>27</sup> and building a society where workers and peasants prospered without any distinction of wealth, caste and creed.<sup>28</sup> To the critics who frequently asserted that Russia would, if the opportunity arose, try to conquer India, it was pointed out that 'Russia only wanted to establish the rule of workers and peasants and to destroy imperialism.'<sup>29</sup>

References to the ideal Russian society however were hardly the sole preserve of the Left in general. Political opinion of all shades, from the younger guard of the Congress to explicitly communitarian organizations such as the Central Sikh League, repeatedly made references to the success of the Bolshevik Revolution, albeit with distinctive interpretations that were tailored to suit the party line. For leftists specifically however, and for much of the political environment in general, inspirations were also to be gained from struggles elsewhere, especially those in Ireland and China. References were frequently made to the nationalist/socialist struggles in these countries during public meetings and conferences in an effort to motivate their audiences to work for the cause of revolution. Moreover, this being Punjab, such accounts were also interspersed with a sense of embarrassment and lamentation that their fellow compatriots, employed in the service of Empire, were actively involved in crushing freedom struggles in places like China. This was coupled with a palpable fear of an inevitable clash between Russian Communism and Western Imperialism in which Indian troops would surely be used to

---

<sup>26</sup> PPSAI 1928, Simla-E, 11<sup>th</sup> August, No. 31, pp 337

<sup>27</sup> PPSAI 1928, Lahore, 16<sup>th</sup> February, No 7, pp 74

<sup>28</sup> PPSAI 1929, Lahore, 16<sup>th</sup> March, No. 11, pp 131

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp 130

fight for the cause of Empire. For Punjabi radicals therefore, Indians ‘could commit no greater sin than to side with the British in the event of war, for by doing so they would...only strengthen their own chains of slavery...’<sup>30</sup> Opposition to war and the recruitment of Indian troops was therefore frequently voiced from leftist publications to public meetings.

The global phenomenon of Empire was also tied to other developments which the Punjabi Left was closely affected by. Foremost among them was a concern over how Indians in the diaspora were treated by foreign governments. In the provincial context, this was an especially relevant issue since Punjabis comprised a significant section of the Indian diaspora. Indeed, as the previous chapter pointed out, this was one of the issues which provided a rallying cry for the Ghadar movement. Public meetings were routinely held by the KKS and its sister organization in the late 1920s, the NJBS, in which such issues were highlighted. The following excerpt from a police report of an NJBS meeting held in Lahore is typical in this regard:

‘A public meeting was held...under the auspices of the *Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha* to protest against the exhibition of a party of Indian jugglers by Karl Hagenbeck, the famous showman of wild beasts...L. Prithi Raj delivered a speech in which he said that they could not complain of the exhibition of Indians in a zoological garden in Berlin when they were treated like beasts in their own country, for they had been made to crawl like serpents at Amritsar and had been shot like wild animals in the Jallianwala Bagh.....’<sup>31</sup>

Such accounts were also supplemented by the personal experiences of many during their sojourns abroad, which undoubtedly played an important role in their being radicalized.

The following excerpt of another public meeting is typical in this respect:

‘Abdul Majid (M.A Majid) gave an account of his adventures on his way to Moscow (during the *hijrat* movement). He dwelt at length on his sufferings

---

<sup>30</sup> PPSAI 1928, Simla-E, 11<sup>th</sup> August, No.31, pp 338

<sup>31</sup> PPSAI 1926, Simla-E, 25<sup>th</sup> September, No.38, pp 459

among the Turkomans, who, he said, had beaten him and his companions, addressed them as *kafirs*, and treated them as though they were animals in a zoological garden. The chairman (of the meeting) drew from this the moral that reasonable treatment could not be expected from any foreign Government whether Christian or Muslim, and that it was therefore necessary to get Swaraj without delay.’<sup>32</sup>

Here then was an intellectual quest that sought to comprehend the experiences, both personal and anecdotal, of the loss of ‘prestige,’ ‘respect,’ and ‘dignity’ whilst travelling abroad through the reality of being a part of a colonized ‘nation’. The global reality of Empire and the sense of being a ‘subject,’ irrespective of location, in the international arena, were reinforced through such narratives and experiences. For many therefore, this loss of ‘self’ could only be recovered by reclaiming their inalienable rights, and hence dignity and respect, through independence. But the wider reality of Empire meant that independence would be an unfulfilled project unless Indians worked for the overthrow of Imperialism on the global scale. The ‘international’ and ‘national’ then were concepts that were geographically not demarcated in the world view of the Punjabi Left insofar as the issue of Imperialism and Empire was concerned.

### *Nationalism*

Insofar as the role of mainstream nationalism in combating Empire was concerned, the KKP held a view that was highly critical of the mainstream nationalist movement led by the Congress. The view that the Congress from its very inception had ‘been fighting for the class interest of the bourgeoisie’ and had never placed a programme that articulated the needs of the masses was common among many leftists, though certainly not all.<sup>33</sup>

This frustration with what was quickly dubbed ‘bourgeois nationalism’ was in large part

---

<sup>32</sup> PPSAI 1926, Simla-E, 18<sup>th</sup> September, No.37, pp 454

<sup>33</sup> Presidential Address of SS Josh, Documents of the Communist Movement, pp 343

a result of the unfulfilled promise and potential that many optimistically saw in the Congress. Incidents like the Bardoli agitation<sup>34</sup> only served to reinforce the perception that the Congress, and specifically Gandhi, acting in consort with landlords and capitalists, was content with a prevailing order that left cultivators at the mercy of the former.<sup>35</sup> Matters were made worse by the Bardoli Resolution adopted by the Congress which advised the *ryots* that withholding rent payment from the *zamindars* was ‘injurious to the best interests of the country.’ In such circumstances, a leftist radical like Sohan Singh Josh could then be excused for wondering ‘how strange (was) the ‘interest of the country’ that require(ed) that millions should suffer the pangs of hunger and want in order to support the luxury of a few.’<sup>36</sup>

This cynicism even extended to times when the Congress actively agitated against the British Government. In such instances, ulterior motives that were inevitably related to class interests were suspected. The following extract from a police report on a poster – suspected of having been issued by the KKP during the height of the Civil Disobedience movement – is typical in this regard:

‘An Urdu poster which appeared in Amritsar contains a bitter condemnation of the Congress for desertion of the cause of the peasants and workers and for consolidating the position of the Indian capitalists. It describes how the foreign cloth boycott was cunningly devised for this very purpose, with the result that volunteers have been sent to jail, petty shopkeepers had suffered great losses, while the only people who benefitted were the proprietors of the Indian mills. The assertion is made that the boycott was responsible for the general drop in trade which led to the fall in the price of corn, and here again the peasants have lost by the Congress movement.’<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> This was an agrarian agitation in Bardoli, Gujarat, against the enhancement in land revenue rates. See Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) pp 278

<sup>35</sup> Also see, MCCP 219 SS Josh, pp 309

<sup>36</sup> Presidential Address of SS Josh, Documents of the Communist Movement, pp 344

<sup>37</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 17th January, No. 3, pp 46

Additionally, the leftist critique of Congress, and specifically Gandhian, politics was perhaps most pronounced when it came to the policy of non-violence. In their view, non-violence was a ‘creed of the weak, of the reformists and defeatists’ and a convenient tactic for those who were satisfied with the present order of things and did not want to ‘dare and die for the creation of a better world.’<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the masses had nothing to gain from this creed because it could not solve their immediate problems of poverty and hunger. Indeed, nowhere in history had non-violence ever succeeded and it would not succeed in India. Rather, violence was essential for the real progress of mankind and was a ‘mid-wife to all social changes, new births and new orders.’<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, there was an important qualification to the enthusiastic endorsement of violence. Most leftists were always careful in making a distinction between terrorism and revolutionary violence. Terrorism, through acts such as lobbing bombs and grenades or carrying out targeted assassinations, was disapproved as a tactic, if only because it was ineffective and had not succeeded anywhere. In this view, a murder of a few persons was pointless, because they could always be replaced by other ‘tyrants.’ Systemic change therefore could hardly be brought about in this way. Emphasis on the other hand was laid on organizing for revolutionary mass action, which could resort to violence if necessary. Acts of individual terrorism, of which there were many in Punjab, were dismissed as the acts of impatient and misguided middle class young men who were disgusted with the brand of reformist politics practiced by the Congress.<sup>40</sup> Which is why, while such individuals were lauded and idealized, their actions were rarely emulated by the leftist mainstream. This was all the more plausible, since, crimes of rhetoric and incitement

---

<sup>38</sup> MCCP 218 SS Josh, pp 328

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp 329

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp 333-444

aside, no evidence was ever uncovered by the state that would directly implicate any leftist movement in acts of violence, though it was always keen to persecute them on this basis.

In sum then, the Kirti Party, in line with much of radical opinion, was highly critical of the tactics and politics adopted by the Congress. To a great extent, much of this resentment was directed towards the very idea of an inclusionary nationalism which ignored existing cleavages within Indian society rather than aiming to rectify them. Nationalism therefore was a double edged weapon: having both the power to arouse and betray legitimate aspirations. And yet, as the political tactics of the KKP and other leftist organizations made clear, it was also a force that had to be engaged with if the Left was ever to be a viable political entity.<sup>41</sup>

### *Religion*

The role of religion in society was one issue where the Left in general was unequivocal about where it stood in relation to it. To some extent, the strength of their antagonism towards the prevalence of 'communalism', religion and superstition in the areas they worked in was driven by a palpable frustration in being unable to effectively deal with the force of these ideas. In all public meetings and conferences, a standard plea for communal unity was followed by a vociferous condemnation of all those who manipulated religion for their own purposes. Foremost amongst those condemned was the state itself and its policy of 'divide and rule' that was institutionalized through the communalization of politics. Thus, frequent exhortations were made to the effect that 'Hindus, Muhammadans, and Sikhs could not hope to live in peace until India was free'

---

<sup>41</sup> See the chapter on the Congress movement

because ‘communal differences would continue so long as they were under the yoke of a foreign nation.’<sup>42</sup> Also condemned in a similar vein were communitarian organizations belonging to all sections of the communal and sectarian divide who instrumentalized religion for their political purposes. A significant portion of the Left’s fury was also reserved for religious preachers of all kinds such as *Maulvis*, *Pandits*, *Granthis*, and *Updeshaks* who were repeatedly warned to ‘confine their preachings to themselves and their families, and to leave other people alone.’ After all, ‘the quarrel of the labourers and peasants was with the big *zamindars*, and the loyalists and agents of the bureaucracy who fed fat on the labours of poor people.’<sup>43</sup>

But perhaps a bigger challenge in this respect was conducting politics in areas, especially in the rural sphere as far as the KKP was concerned, where myth and superstition played a major role in the organization and functioning of society. The prevalence of these ideas was seen as big impediment towards the organization of workers and peasants along class lines. Thus, frequent refrains were made in speeches that ‘no Imam Mehdi or any Avatar will come down to free (peasants) from bondage.’ And while patient efforts to dispel the power of myth and superstition were constantly made, frustrations often boiled over; though care was taken not to express them so bluntly in the public sphere for fear of alienating the audience. The following remark by Sohan Singh Josh at his trial is quite illustrative of this frustration:

‘Disorganized individuals and religious maniacs, not knowing the strength of disciplined organization, indulge in this sort of maudlin sobstuff or sloppy sentimentalism, which is a great blocking stone to the development of the Workers’ movement and stands in the realization of our objective...The mass movement cannot develop unless such nonsensical ideas are given the go-by’<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> PPSAI 1928, Lahore, 18<sup>th</sup> February, No. 7, pp 73

<sup>43</sup> PPSAI 1929, Lahore, 16<sup>th</sup> March, No. 11, pp 129

<sup>44</sup> MCCP 218 SS Josh, pp 296

It should be pointed out though, that this rhetoric was mostly directed against the use of religion for divisive purposes. For the most part – and leaving aside the doctrinaire – Punjabi leftists regularly used religious idioms in their politics. This was both a function of personal beliefs as well as a demand of practical politics. Santokh Singh, for example, was reported to recite the *Gurbani*<sup>45</sup> even after he ‘became’ a ‘Marxist.’<sup>46</sup> Similarly, as with the connections that were made between ‘Islam’ and ‘Communism,’ a linkage was also made between ‘Sikhism’ and ‘Communism.’ Thus, the *Kirti* often contained references to the teachings of Gurus and the egalitarian ideals of Sikhism. Indeed, invoking religion was an effective way of contextualizing and translating ‘communism.’

#### *Socio Political Objectives*

As with other leftist organizations, the Kirti Party too articulated a set of socio-political objectives, which were incongruent with the vision proffered by other forces in the political mainstream. Certainly, and notwithstanding the diverse political leanings within the Sabha itself, the KKP was far more specific in its goals in relation to the vague objective of *swaraj* that offered as many meanings and interpretations as there were political interests and groupings. To begin with, the *swaraj* envisioned by the Sabha was the formation of an independent republic of workers and peasants. Embedded within that overarching ambition was a political programme espousing far more pragmatic objectives that primarily reflected the socio-economic concerns of the constituencies the party operated in. Nevertheless, these objectives were not expressed by the KKP alone. They were in many ways not only similar to those expressed by other parties in the Left, but

---

<sup>45</sup> The daily service of Sikhs.

<sup>46</sup> Bhagwan Josh, *Communism in Punjab* pp

also to those articulated by a variety of constitutional and quasi-constitutional bodies, such as the Zamindar League and the Zamindar Sabha. The difference between the two forms of politics, though, lay in the connection established by the KKP, and other parties of the Left, between immediate socio economic issues and larger systemic concerns, such as ‘Imperialism,’ ‘Capitalism’ and the duplicity of ‘Bourgeois Nationalism.’

Perhaps the best illustration of that lay in the Sabha’s interpretation of what lay behind the ‘pitiable’ condition of the peasantry. As far as the leading radicals of the Sabha were concerned, agrarian problems stemmed from a systemic crisis that could not be resolved by mere administrative reforms, of which the Punjab had more than its share. These were typically characterized as ‘weak palliatives’ which did not resolve the root issue of the rights and powers of the ‘intermediary parasitic classes.’<sup>47</sup> While it was acknowledged that Imperialism was interested in granting stability to the actual cultivator in order to secure areas which were equally vital for agrarian production and military recruitment, it was also anxious to uphold the interests of local elites such as *zamindars*, *sahukars* and local intermediaries such as *patwaris*, *lambardars*, *zaildars*,<sup>48</sup> whose support was necessary to maintain a loyalist rural hierarchy subordinate to the interests of Empire. As far as the Sabha was concerned, these local elites were ‘bulwarks of reaction and counter reaction.’<sup>49</sup> Clearly then, the State was unwilling to bring out a more fundamental and systemic change in the rural arena through a shift in property rights and relations of production. Thus, even if superficial changes and technical improvements were made to the existing structure, they would only benefit a thin stratum of rich peasants, leaving untouched the misery and poverty of the poor peasantry who formed the overwhelming

---

<sup>47</sup> MCCP 218 SS Josh, pp 318

<sup>48</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 14<sup>th</sup> March, No. 11, pp 172

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

majority of India's population. What was required therefore, was nothing short of an 'agrarian revolution.'<sup>50</sup>

In the short term however, the Sabha put forth a series of demands, which were contingent on the prevailing socio-economic conditions and were aimed at mitigating the poverty and indebtedness of the cultivator. While such conditions could and did vary across districts in the Punjab, they did have certain common denominators, chief amongst which was the appropriation of the State. In this view however, the Sabha was joined by other agrarian bodies that were 'loyalist' as well as 'nationalist' in their political orientation. Together, these bodies frequently demanded a substantial remission in land revenue, which was a request that grew all the more urgent with the onset of the Great Depression and the consequent fall in prices of agricultural produce.<sup>51</sup> Broadly speaking, the Government was asked to levy land revenue on the principles of income tax, wherein there would be a certain amount of income that would be subjected to revenue collection. Thus, it was proposed by the Sabha that individuals earning less than Rs. 200 per month should be free from any payment. Redress was also demanded from other exactions by the state such as canal water charges, *chaukidara* tax, and *thikri pehra*. Also proposed was a fixed rate of interest, payable at 7% of interest per annum, to protect cultivators from the 'avarice of money lenders.' Moreover, assistance by means of credit to cultivators was also demanded from the State.<sup>52</sup> All these issues were of crucial importance to the Sabha's primary constituency and membership base, which is precisely why the overwhelming emphasis of the Sabha lay on securing redress for agrarian problems.

---

<sup>50</sup> M CCP 218 SS Josh, pp 320

<sup>51</sup> Malcolm Darling, *Wisdom and Waste in the Punjab Village*, pp 1-2

<sup>52</sup> Presidential Address of SS Josh, Documents of the Communist Movement, pp 349

And yet, despite this emphasis, the Sabha had to live up to its claim as a broad based ‘workers and peasants party.’ To that end, it advanced a programme for industrial labour, though it was perhaps less imaginative than their proposals on agrarian issues. Interspersed with regular leftist rhetoric, were the standard invocations for better wages and an eight hour working day. Also demanded was the right of workers to unionize and to resort to mass action and sympathetic strikes if need be.<sup>53</sup> Thus, as far as the unimpressed British were concerned, the clauses aimed at securing better conditions for the working classes in the Kirti manifesto could be ‘found in the prospectus of any trades union anywhere in the world.’<sup>54</sup>

### Organization

Regarding the organization of the Kirti Kisan Party, there is precious little that can be gleaned from the official sources. Even the accounts of leaders like Sohan Singh Josh do not shed much light on the organization of the KKP or for that matter any other leftist party in the Punjab. Nevertheless there are certain conclusions that be reasonably reached through tangential accounts which yield some fragments on how parties within the Left were structured and organized. For analytical purposes then, the following section will be divided into the themes of structure, outreach, membership and finance.

### *Structure*

The KKS, like other parties in the Left, and indeed even the political mainstream, was characterized by a loose organizational structure. At the top of the hierarchy was the

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pp 348-9

<sup>54</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 17<sup>th</sup> October, No. 40, pp 596

‘provincial’ body, though this term may be a bit misleading as the party was, for all practical purposes, restricted to the central tracts of the province. Additionally, during a phase of ‘reorganization’ in early 1931, the Sabha briefly styled itself as the ‘All India Workers and Peasants Party’ (*Sarab Hind Kirti Kisan Party*), apparently in an attempt to claim a truly national representation of Kirtis and Kisans disappointed at the readiness of the Congress to negotiate with the Government.<sup>55</sup> However, their ambitions of taking over the mantle of national leadership proved to be short lived, and in practice, barring a few exceptions in other provinces, the Sabha never amounted to anything more than the ‘Punjab’ Kirti Kisan Party. In this respect, the provincial body consisted of a ‘working committee’ that was composed of the leading figures in the Punjab that were affiliated to the Party. The executive committee in turn elected from within its ranks, office holders to the positions of General Secretary and Secretary, Treasurer or Financial Secretary and Propaganda Secretary. Additionally, distinctions were made between the ‘*kisan*’ and the ‘*kirti*’ section of the Party and office holders were appointed to these two portfolios.<sup>56</sup> In addition to party procedure, regular elections to these posts were dictated by a number of factors, which included the frequent arrests and restrictions of its members, the arrival of Ghadarites or the induction of new members, defections of certain activists to other organizations and last, but not the least, factional disputes over reasons of ego, money, and ideology.

These organizational structures were more or less replicated lower down the party hierarchy as well. Sympathizers and activists organized Kirti Kisan bodies in their respective *tehsils*, districts and regions. The founding of the Guru-ka-Bagh KKS (a

---

<sup>55</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 14<sup>th</sup> March, No. 11, pp 172

<sup>56</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 21<sup>st</sup> March, No. 12, pp 191

locality in Amritsar district), Ludhiana District KKS, and *Doaba* KKS are examples in this regard. In practice these local parties were initially formed through the individual initiatives of local activists and were then affiliated to the provincial body. In some cases, elections were also held to appoint members to offices similar to those in the main party as well to nominate local activists for membership in the provincial body. The Provincial body too, aside from outlining provisions for the formation of *tehsil* and district branches, regularly issued calls for the affiliation of other labour and peasant organizations whose objectives were in sympathy with those of the party. Thus a communiqué was issued to all Kirti Kisan Sabhas, *Mazdur* Sabhas and *Kisan* Sabhas in the Punjab, NWFP and Delhi, calling upon them to affiliate themselves to the Party.<sup>57</sup>

In practice though, as this communiqué implied, local branches of the Sabha, whether affiliated with the central body or not, exhibited a remarkable degree of operational autonomy. In some *tehsils*, small bodies, such as the 'Kirti Kisan League,' were formed in emulation of the provincial body. Some of these never did affiliate themselves with the central body for the sake of maintaining complete functional and ideological autonomy and for the more practical purpose of avoiding state persecution that was certain to be invited by virtue of their association with the main party. Moreover, local activists followed a political line that was loosely defined and not controlled by the main body. Thus, many did not eschew cooperation with constitutional and quasi constitutional bodies such as the Zamindar League or Zamindar Sabha nor with 'nationalist' or 'communitarian' ones, such as the local branches of the Congress or the Akali Dal. In turn, most of the other bodies exhibited a similar degree of operational autonomy, which

---

<sup>57</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/300, File P& J (S) 1691 (1931), Extract From: Weekly Report of the Director, IB, Home Dept., GoI, New Delhi, 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1931. No. 43

is why collective political activism at the local level, such as delivering a speech at another party's public meeting or conference or agitating collectively on a local issue, was part of the norm. Ideological orientations and personal relationships were thus prioritized ahead of organizational affiliations. For all practical purposes therefore, the KKP was far from being an organized and cohesive institution. Rather it exhibited a remarkable degree of political heterogeneity that was in many ways typical of much of the Punjabi political landscape.

### *Outreach*

Despite such a loose organizational structure, the KKS was unable to significantly replicate itself beyond the central tracts of the Punjab. The Party was a significant force in the rural politics of the *Doaba* and *Majha* regions, which included the important districts of Lahore, Amritsar, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur, Lyallpur, and Ludhiana among others.<sup>58</sup> This presence was in addition to the Party's activism in the cities of Lahore and Amritsar, where its main office was also located. Moreover, unlike other leftist parties, which were mostly quartered in urban centres, and in particular Lahore and Amritsar, the Sabha could claim to be the only leftist organization that had such a wide presence in the rural areas.

The question of organizational outreach however, was intimately linked with a number of crucial factors. Foremost amongst them was the link between emigration and the place of origin. Districts, rural or otherwise, which were deeply involved in radical politics, were also those which were at the forefront of migratory trends. Returning emigrants who had

---

<sup>58</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/300, File P&J(S) 1013 (1932), Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha, pp 3. Also see, PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 12<sup>th</sup> September, No. 36, pp 547

been sufficiently radicalized during their sojourns abroad, would on their arrival connect with other local or provincial activists and begin their political careers in their local *tehsils* and districts. In this way, the spread of the leftist message was, among other things, also along familial, kinship, caste or even religious lines. The geographical spread of radicalism in the Punjab was therefore very much tied with experiences in the international arena.

Secondly, it was by no means a coincidence that radical politics, to a great extent, found space to operate in districts which had previously experienced varied forms of political agitation. At one level, these districts provided veterans of political agitations that could lend their experience and energies for the advancement of radical politics. At another, the citizens of such districts were already attuned to nationalist or communitarian politics and were therefore more likely to be more receptive to 'subversive' propaganda. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in the overwhelming success that a small branch of the KKP achieved in its spread of communist propaganda. The location of this branch was in Guru-ka-Bagh, which also happened to be one of the flashpoints of the Akali agitation. In this instance, local veterans of the Akali agitation affiliated themselves with the KKS and preached socialism through the medium of localized agrarian grievances. A large number of political and party *diwans* were thus organized in this locality, each of which was attended by a sizeable audience of peasants that varied between 800 to 1200 individuals. Indeed, the very success of the Guru-ka-Bagh KKP can be gauged by the comparatively high number of arrests that took place here.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, a member of the Sabha was also

---

<sup>59</sup> Amritsar district – in which radical centres such as Guru Ka Bagh and Tarn Taran were located – alone accounted for one fourth of all Kirti arrests in 1931. PPSAI 1931, Departmental Notice, 15th August, No. 32, pp 515

appointed the manager of the local Gurdwara.<sup>60</sup> Previous experience with political agitation therefore was significant in determining whether the Left would find sympathizers at the local level.

Moreover, the geographical outreach of the Left was also contingent on a host of other factors. In the rural space, these depended on the structures of local power, and especially the power exercised by the rural elites. In Shahpur district for instance, and notwithstanding the brief agitation of horse breeders in Sargodha, there were very few instances of radical agrarian politics. The primary reason for this was the power wielded by the powerful Noon and Tiwana families, who were among the leading lights of the loyalist Unionist Party. Similarly, in the south-western districts of the Province, state power was exercised through the mediation of landed elites who frequently doubled as *pirs* and *sajda nashins*.<sup>61</sup> The strength of patron client relationships was therefore crucial in determining whether radical politics would find space in a particular district or not. This was further underscored by the State's practice of providing patronage to those elites who were successful in preventing their villages from being politicized. Indeed, the very appointment and dismissal of *zaildars* and *lambardars*, was dependent upon their performances in fulfilling the interests of the State, such as in the maintenance of law and order and the collection of land revenue, and in keeping out 'corrupting' influences, foremost amongst which were political activists. In a number of instances therefore, leftist *jathas*<sup>62</sup> were unceremoniously escorted from villages and deprived of any means of shelter or sustenance. Villages that failed to do so or those which lent a sympathetic

---

<sup>60</sup> PPSAI 1931, 13<sup>th</sup> June, Simla-E, No. 23, pp 371

<sup>61</sup> See David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam* and Malcolm Darling *The old light and the new in the Punjab Village*.

<sup>62</sup> Travelling bands or groups.

ear to radical politics were subsequently burdened through the imposition of punitive police posts, and the dismissal of their local élites from their official posts.

Lastly, leftist politics found breeding grounds much more readily in towns and cities as opposed to the rural sphere beyond the central tracts. There were a number of factors why this was so. For one, state authority was directly administered to a greater extent in cities as opposed to the stifling temporal and spiritual power exercised by rural intermediaries in some districts. Moreover, urban centres benefitted from a thriving print culture and were more in touch with intellectual and political trends, nationally as well as internationally. There were also a plethora of associations and *anjumans* which represented all shades of political and apolitical opinion in the Punjab. Additionally, there were a host of colleges and universities which gave birth to burgeoning student movements, significant sections of which were attracted by the ideals of ‘socialism’ and ‘communism.’ As a result, urban centres were more familiar with political struggles, the most prevalent of which were Congress led movements. Lastly, urban centres also had the advantage of having large groups of industrial and daily wage labourers’ as well significant numbers of unemployed individuals, all of whom provided a fertile ground for labour unions and leftist parties to operate in. For all these reasons therefore, urban centres, and particularly Lahore and Amritsar, afforded a greater political space for the Left to operate in.

### *Membership*

The question of outreach was also related to the composition of the Kirti Kisan Sabha’s membership, which drew upon the diverse socio-political trends prevailing in 20<sup>th</sup>

century Punjab. The varied backgrounds of Kirti activists is perhaps best illustrated by providing a brief biographical sketch of two members who are perhaps less well known, though no less significant, than their more famous Ghadarite counterparts.

The first of these individuals was Feroze-ud-Din Mansur, son of a tailor in Sheikhpura in central Punjab, though he later went on to settle in Amritsar City. His political career started with his migration to Afghanistan during the Hijrat movement in 1920. Soon disillusioned by the movement, he, like many, joined M. N Roy's school at Tashkent for 'training in Bolshevik propaganda.' According to British reports, he was later sent to Moscow for further training. While on his way to India *via* the Pamir-Chitral route – which was popular with Ghadarites as well – with some other 'Soviet emissaries,' he was arrested by the Frontier police. He was soon convicted and sentenced to a year's rigorous imprisonment in 1923. On his release in 1924, he continued his political work with communists in Bombay, Meerut and Lahore. In 1928 however, he went to Amritsar and joined Sohan Singh Josh on the staff of the Urdu *Kirti*.<sup>63</sup> During his affiliation with the *Kirti* he also became a member of the Amritsar branch of the Naujawan Sabha and soon rose to become an important member of its Provincial body. He was thereafter arrested a number of times for his activities. In 1931-32 when the Sabha developed differences with the Kirti Party, he split ranks with the former and became of the member of the Working Committee of the Provincial KKS.<sup>64</sup> He later went on to engineer a split even within the Kirti Party over party policy and set up a rival body called the League Against Imperialism (also called the Anti Imperialist League) in 1933.<sup>65</sup> This party along with the

---

<sup>63</sup> Ghadar Directory 1934, pp 74-5

<sup>64</sup> PPSAI 1933, Supplement No IV, Simla-E, 20<sup>th</sup> May, No. 19, pp 249-51

<sup>65</sup> IOR/V/27/262/5, India and Communism (Revised up to 1935), pp 275-6

Kirti Party itself was banned in 1934, after which F.D Mansur continued his work in various capacities.

The other individual related to this analysis is Darshan Singh of Pheruman in Amritsar District. He first came to notice in 1923 as an activist in the *Shriomani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (SGPC). He also acted as a *jathedar* of one of the *shahidi jathas* during the peak of Akali agitation. Arrested and sentenced to a nominal term in prison, he was nominated to the Sikh Central Board in 1926 and also became a member of the Shiromani Akali Dal. According to British intelligence, he first declared his approval of a communist regime in India in 1927 during a conference organized by the Kirti Party. Thereafter, he committed himself to spreading Kirti propaganda. He also visited the Federated Malay States in 1928 to ascertain the names of Indians who were responsible of the proscription of the *Kirti* and collect funds for the NJBS. During his political activities with the KKS and the NJBS, he was also elected as the General Secretary of the District Congress Committee, Amritsar in 1929. During the Civil Disobedience movement he was arrested and convicted for his participation in it. Whilst free from state persecution he devoted himself to agitation on agrarian issues. Moreover, during these years he also managed to become the General Secretary of the Central Sikh League (1930) and the provisional secretary of a nascent party called the Mazdoor Kisan Sabha (1932), formed by a faction of the NJBS and KKS.<sup>66</sup> After 1934, when all leftist parties were banned, he continued his political career through various organizations. By the mid 1940s he was working with the Akalis and the socialist party in establishing rival Kisan sabhas to the ones founded by his former comrades in the Kirti Party.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Ghadar Directory 1934, pp 62-3

<sup>67</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1942, Simla-E, 1<sup>st</sup> August, No. 31, pp 445

In a sense then, both men are fairly representative of the socio-political background of the KKS. F.D Mansur for instance was one of many returned emigrants who were radicalized during their stay abroad. These individuals, and particularly those from the Ghadar movement, were represented in the KKS. Conversely, D.S Pheruman typified a trajectory to leftist politics that passed through more localized forms of political experiences and radicalization. Indeed, a significant number of Kirti activists had at one point begun their political careers in the Akali movement. For these individuals, communism was not a doctrine to be rigidly adhered to, but rather an inspiration, a contemporary intellectual trend, that could be rhetorically employed in order to pursue their nationalist, communitarian, economic or local agendas. Perhaps this explains why many, including D.S Pheruman, did not see the slightest contradiction in simultaneously claiming affiliation with multiple political identities. In a sense then, anti-imperialist politics in this period offered a ‘free market’ for political identities in which new organizational affiliations could be made, the old discarded, and the existing being held simultaneously. For more committed communists like FD Mansur however, the shifting of organizational allegiances was only restricted to the left end of the political spectrum. For both kinds of activists, the shifting of political affiliations was as much about the personal as the ideological. Both these individuals then, represent the vast majority of the Kirti Sabha’s membership and to a great extent typify the political flux of the Punjabi landscape during the interwar years. Indeed, given this fluidity, it is nearly impossible to estimate the exact membership of the KKP. The most that can be said is that the more committed (again, that is an arbitrary judgement which means little, if anything) of the party’s members were in the hundreds.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> For various reasons, the composition of the Kirti group is covered in greater detail in Chapter 6.

## *Finances*

Financial affairs were perhaps the most contentious aspect of the Left's organization. As far as the British were concerned, the Left as a whole was tapping into an inexhaustible pool of financial resources from Moscow. For the KKP, this support was also generously supplemented by the Ghadar Party and from remittances from Punjabi communities abroad. If anything, the support from the latter was often more than the occasional sums the Party received from the Comintern.<sup>69</sup> This was in addition to acquiring funds from more dubious sources. Thus, the Guru-ka-Bagh branch of the KKP was reported to have 'secretly filched' local gurdwara funds and 'faked accounts in case of enquiry.'<sup>70</sup> The Party though, was always quick to dispel such accusations, especially when they were related to foreign funding. At the Meerut Conspiracy Case for instance, Sohan Singh Josh denied receiving any funding from outside sources. He claimed that the *Kirti* newspaper and the broader movement itself were sustained by subscriptions and donations from within India itself. According to him, the total amount of these contributions amounted to 16000 Rs.<sup>71</sup> Such denials were also issued in a number of public meetings and conferences and were, as such, hardly unexpected. For to have admitted receiving money from abroad, the Kirti Party would have confirmed their role as proxies of the Ghadar Party as well as the Soviet Union and merely invited further persecution. There was however an important qualification that was repeatedly made by the Kirti leaders. As far as they were concerned, they were well within their rights to receive material assistance, if need be, from the 'workers of the world' as 'internationally organized Capital' could

---

<sup>69</sup> See the first chapter for more details.

<sup>70</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 29<sup>th</sup> August, No. 34, pp 531

<sup>71</sup> MCCP 218 SS Josh, pp 302

only be overthrown by an ‘internationally organized Labour.’<sup>72</sup> It was hardly surprising therefore that the British failed to appreciate the subtlety of this argument and continued to suspect the Sabha for being a proxy of a nefarious alliance between the Ghadar Party and the Comintern.

Irrespective of the exact numbers involved, what was clear was that the Party and its flagship paper, the *Kirti*, enjoyed access to funds that were largely unavailable to other organizations. Thus, time and again the proprietors of the *Kirti* were able to pay punitive fines that were regularly imposed by the state in order to keep publishing the paper. Moreover, the Party was also able to pay salaries to some of its leadership and activists, which was a luxury that few organizations at the time could afford. This support, then, was crucial in allowing radical politics to survive, despite the odds against it. And yet, it could also be a double edged sword. For with relatively large sums of money involved and crude methods of accounting for them, accusations of embezzlement and financial misappropriation predictably followed. For their part, the security services fully exploited these divisions. In 1932 for instance, four leading members of the Party, including F.D Mansur, were accused of bribery and maladministration. The police in turn were quick to exploit this opportunity by seizing the account books of the party in a raid, and thereby making it impossible for these members to refute the allegation against them or to make new set of accounts to satisfy their party members. Reports of this infighting eventually reached North America with the result that monetary supplies were cut off for a brief period.<sup>73</sup> This was of course greeted with exultation by the provincial intelligence services who opined that such infighting rendered the Kirti Sabha and its splinter factions

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, pp 303

<sup>73</sup> PPSAI 1933, Supplement No IV, Simla-E, 20<sup>th</sup> May, No. 19, pp 249

‘incapable of doing really constructive work.’<sup>74</sup> Instances such as these were typical of the state of the Left in the early 1930s, in which accusations of financial embezzlements and maladministration were frequently the cause of internal strife and factional splits. Particularly contentious was the debate over who would gain access to and control Ghadar funds. For example, this was the central issue in discussions over mergers between the Kirti group and the provincial CPI affiliated groups.

### Mobilization

With a loose organizational structure, and prone as it was to internal rifts, the Sabha could not rely on a committed cadre base that could act in pursuance of well planned directives emanating from a centralized party structure. In terms of strategies related to political mobilization therefore, the Sabha relied on a loose network of relatively autonomous activists who devised their own ways and means of working, depending on their level of commitment and ability to adapt to local circumstances. There were other issues to contend with as well. The Sabha as an organization had to navigate between what it claimed to be its ideological moorings, which were founded on a vague notion of communism, and a cultural context in which this political tradition was still a relatively new phenomenon. The party also had to continually adapt and change its political tactics in response to an ever changing political landscape and consistently hostile government. In this regard, the Party relied on a two pronged strategy which involved the extensive use of publications and the medium of culture, with all the different aspects that entailed. This section will now examine each of these in turn.

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid pp 251.

### *Publications*

Publications were the cornerstone of the Kirti Party's political activism. They were used for a variety of purposes which ranged from disseminating Kirti and communist propaganda to announcing upcoming party conventions and public meetings. However, an insight into Santokh Singh's rationale for launching the Party's flagship journal, the *Kirti*, reveals one of the primary purposes of such publications. For him this paper was an attempt at preparing the ground for a revolutionary movement – the possibility for which did not exist in the prevailing political climate – in the hope that it might one day take root in India.<sup>75</sup> In pursuance of this objective the *Kirti* journals soon became the 'movement's most active missionaries to the peasants and working classes of the Punjab.'<sup>76</sup> The paper was also expanded to an Urdu edition in the hope of attracting a wider circle of readers.<sup>77</sup> The *Kirti* though, was not the only publication issued by the KKP. It soon gave way in 1931 to the weekly *Mazdur Kisan* which was published in both Gurumukhi and Urdu. This paper, in a shift from its predecessor's far more theoretical tone, was intended to make a more effective appeal to the rural masses.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, there were other vernacular papers such as the *Mehnat Kash* and the *Naujawan Kirti Kisan*, as well as the *Rising Youth*<sup>79</sup> and the *New Era*<sup>80</sup>, which were published in English. None of these papers though, had a particularly long life. They were frequently the target of proscriptions and often too short of funds to continue publishing. As far as the *Kirti* was concerned for example, every issue of the paper was proscribed and several

---

<sup>75</sup> PPSAI 1928, Lahore, 5<sup>th</sup> May, No. 18, pp 200

<sup>76</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/300, Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha, pp 1.

<sup>77</sup> PPSAI 1928, Supplement I, Lahore, 5<sup>th</sup> May, No. 18, pp 201

<sup>78</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 7<sup>th</sup> February, No. 6, pp 94

<sup>79</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/300, Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha, pp 5-6 and PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 18<sup>th</sup> April, No. 16, pp 256

<sup>80</sup> PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 30<sup>th</sup> May, No. 21, pp 338

prosecutions were launched against its ‘dummy’ editors – which were propped up to save the original proprietors from a lengthy prison sentence – and the Kirti Press from where it was printed.<sup>81</sup> In being the target of frequent proscriptions however, the KKP was hardly unique, for other parties in the Left – and in particular the NJBS – were also subjected in a similar vein to state persecution. Neither was its series of publications in a variety of languages atypical. In many ways, it epitomized the thriving print culture prevailing in the Punjab which produced hundreds of periodicals and newspapers representing every shade of political opinion. In addition to the standard journalistic outlets, these publications were issued by mainstream political organizations as well as by individuals who owned printing presses or the more primitive cyclostyle machines.

As far as the intended audience for its publications was concerned, the Kirti Party appealed to a wide variety of groups which regularly subscribed to its journals. Of the more important groups were ‘disaffected’ Sikh communities that were based overseas. The paper was routinely smuggled to such groups and they in turn expressed their appreciation by sending substantial remittances to the Party.<sup>82</sup> Other sources of subscriptions were schools and colleges where the Urdu *Kirti* was mostly distributed.<sup>83</sup> This practice did not fail to have an effect. For instance, the Akal College at Mastuana, in Jind state, which had a significant number of subscribers to the *Kirti* and other revolutionary propaganda, produced activists who were convicted for revolutionary activities, one of which was a famous train dacoity.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, other means were also employed for disseminating propaganda. For example, *Kirti* journals were frequently

---

<sup>81</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/300, Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha, pp 5.

<sup>82</sup> PPSAI 1928, Supplement I, Lahore, 5<sup>th</sup> May, No. 18, pp 200

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, pp 201

<sup>84</sup> PPSAI 1930, Lahore, 18<sup>th</sup> January, No. 3, pp 62-3

distributed free of cost at public meetings, especially where rural audiences were concerned.<sup>85</sup> This practice was also carried out by the sidelines of conferences held by mainstream political parties such as the Congress.<sup>86</sup>

### *'Culture'*

The distribution of publications and the richness of the Punjabi print culture raised an important question: how did news and propaganda reach its intended audience in a society that was still largely illiterate? Also relevant was the question of disseminating material that was all too frequently proscribed. For the Kirti party, both issues were of vital importance. Moreover, in their case, the first concern was all the more crucial since a large section of their intended audience were resident in rural tracts where illiteracy was more widespread. In this sense the method chosen by the *Kirti* Party, and emulated by other political organizations, entailed the appropriation of certain social, cultural and religious idioms through which their brand of radical politics could be effectively articulated. While for the most part these practices were deliberately planned, they were also reflexive; for politics in the Punjab, and especially in the rural areas, was closely tied to the context in which it operated.

One of the best illustrations of this lay in the use of *jathabandi*. While difficult to translate, this word is perhaps best understood for what it evokes: the power of organization. In this case, this organization stemmed from the formation of *jathas*, or bands, of (nearly always) men into quasi-military formations, each with its own head or *jathedar*. Each *jatha* was tied to a distinct locality and called upon in times of need. In

---

<sup>85</sup> PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 27<sup>th</sup> June, No. 25, pp 400

<sup>86</sup> PPSAI 1930, Lahore, 4<sup>th</sup> January, No.1, pp 12

pursuance of political objectives, this method was used and perfected during the Akali agitation. Bands of Akali *jathas* would frequently tour the countryside, spreading propaganda and mobilizing men, and converge on political flashpoints where they courted arrest. Frequently, this method was also adopted by the more violent strain of the Akali movement. In terms of spreading propaganda however, the utility of *jathabandi* far exceeded that which might be achieved through the print medium. It was for this reason that the power of *jathabandi* was repeatedly invoked and frequently emulated by the KKP.<sup>87</sup> In large measure though, this form of organization and mobilization came naturally to Kirti activists since a significant section of them were veterans of the Akali agitation. Kirti *jathabandi* then typically entailed a *jatha* touring selected villages where public meetings were convened in which communist doctrines were articulated through the medium of localized economic grievances.<sup>88</sup>

This form of politics though was typically fraught with difficulties. For the most part, these had to do with restrictions in place for any sort of agitational politics in rural areas. These had been placed by a colonial government that was naturally anxious to prevent the politicization of rural tracts that supplied the bulk of recruits to the British Indian Army. Indeed, even the rare involvement of retired military personnel in Kirti politics was viewed as a most unsettling development.<sup>89</sup> The anathema for rural politics was also closely related to how the British perceived themselves as protectors of a childlike Punjabi peasant who through his 'rustic' sensibilities was prone to being misled by seditious propaganda. It was for this reason that the only form of large gatherings tolerated in the rural arena was predominantly cultural or religious in nature. Meetings

---

<sup>87</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/300, Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha, pp 4

<sup>88</sup> Examples of such meetings can be found on PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, No. 20, pp 315

<sup>89</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 25<sup>th</sup> April, No. 17, pp 267.

which broke this convention were frequently banned, its speakers arrested or compelled to furnish security for good behaviour, and its host village burdened with punitive measures. It was hardly surprising therefore, that Kirti activists were often compelled to hold their public meetings under the guise of religious or cultural *diwans*.<sup>90</sup> For many, this practice also dovetailed neatly with their dual commitment to the cause of community and revolution. Similarly, religious and cultural fairs, such as *Puranmashi*, *Besakhi*, and many others which attracted large crowds, were targeted through the convening of public meetings and the dissemination of Kirti propaganda.<sup>91</sup>

The employment of contextual idioms for political purposes was also extended to the realm of popular culture. Perhaps the best example of that lay in the frequent use of poetry which even today is a commonly used medium for political activism in the Punjab. To that end, the proceedings of Sabha conferences typically commenced with the recitation of poems which touched upon a variety of issues which ranged from a lament on the conditions of workers and peasants to the condemnation of the British Government and its middlemen.<sup>92</sup> One Mula Singh Dhadi for instance recited a poem at a conference in 1931 to the effect that capitalists were sucking the blood of the poor and that the British government should leave the country, as it had oppressed the people and usurped their rights and had imprisoned all those who spoke the truth. He went on through his verses to say that the workers and peasants would force *sahukars* to do manual labour and would establish a Kirti Raj and replace the tyrannical union jack by the red flag. In doing so, he also accused the government of ‘plucking beautiful flowers’ like Bhagat

---

<sup>90</sup> PPSAI 1928, Simla-E, 21<sup>st</sup> July, No. 28, pp 311-2

<sup>91</sup> See for example, PPSAI 1932, Lahore, 19<sup>th</sup> November, No. 46, pp 659-60 and IOR/L/P&J/12/300, Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha, pp 5

<sup>92</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1934, Lahore, 10<sup>th</sup> March, No. 10, pp 121

Singh. In reciting these poems he was typical of other local poets who were affiliated with the *Kirti* movement. These poets also participated in poetical ‘contests’ that were regular features of Sabha conferences, in which ‘judges’ were appointed and prizes awarded to the most inspiring poets.<sup>93</sup>

Such methods however, were hardly the preserve of the Sabha. Indeed, the Sabha was merely part of a political tradition that utilized popular culture in the advancement of its political objectives. The reported gist of a poem recited by a certain Man Singh at a *diwan* held under the auspices of the Central Sikh League is typical in this regard:

The British earned their living by tyranny and injustice, and bathed in the blood of the religious men. Indians would one day single out and kill the executioners of their patriots. Traitors would rot in jail and patriots would be crowned. The whole world would be theirs and Europe and Japan would come under their sway. There would be no poor in the country and no capitalists.<sup>94</sup>

This poem though, was also remarkable in its blend of ‘revolutionary,’ ‘nationalist,’ ‘communitarian’ and ‘socialist’ doctrines. And herein lay the crucial point: the political culture of the Punjab in the 1920s and early 1930s drew from diverse intellectual strands that could be merged together to articulate political aspirations from varying backgrounds. In such a culture, ideological consistency was hardly something to aspire to, and it would indeed be futile to look for one while studying the political landscape of the Punjab; an error that is all too frequently made by historians. The point was precisely that politics could be made effective through the methods of praxis and acculturation as opposed to stifling itself through the pressures of ideological orthodoxy and purity.

Complementing the use of contextual idioms in politics were also interesting experiments in political mobilization that reflected, as it were, new cultures in the making. One of

---

<sup>93</sup> PPSAI 1932, Lahore, 19<sup>th</sup> November, No. 46, pp 659-60

<sup>94</sup> PPSAI 1927, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> October, No. 40, pp 446

these was pedagogical in nature. Thus a number of short lived ‘political schools’ were opened by the Left. Perhaps the most well known of these was a venture of the KKS in Lahore, though activists of the NNJS also played a prominent role in this. Called a ‘Workers Home,’ its rationale was explained in an announcement appearing in the *Milap*:

‘In order to make struggle against the reactionary powers which maintain unbearable and unjust constitution of society, and to help in bringing into existence a better system of administration, it is necessary to produce a party of trained *parcharaks* and *nazims*. For this purpose a few comrades met and decided that a center be opened in Lahore for giving education and training in socialism to the people in laboring classes in particular.’<sup>95</sup>

Work at this center started in the beginning of 1932 with fourteen students. All were given free board and lodging. The course was designed to last for four months and included ‘lectures on communism, the world’s history with special reference to revolutions and the development of trade unions, and the Russian Revolution...’ Of interest too are the texts that were issued to the students, which included the ABC of Communism, Russia *Panchayati Raj* (in Hindi), The Life of Rash Behari Bose (in Hindi), and the *Mazdur Kisan* paper.<sup>96</sup>

This experiment was therefore, in a sense, a microcosm of an attempt by the Left to incorporate new methods in their attempts at political mobilization. The fact that such experiments frequently proved short lived and futile owing to a variety of reasons – in this instance a crucial role was played by an irate landlord who forced the workers to vacate the house which had been rented as their ‘home’<sup>97</sup> – did not deter the more committed of the Kirti Sabha’s activists to venture into more unique forms of political activism that did not have a precedent in Punjabi political culture. A constant attempt was

---

<sup>95</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/300, Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha, pp 6

<sup>96</sup> PPSAI 1932, Lahore, 12<sup>th</sup> March, No. 11, pp 131

<sup>97</sup> Ibid

therefore made to use both the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ in the pursuance of the Sabha’s political objectives.

### A Brief Survey of Punjabi Factionalism

The KKP, though, did not survive long as an organization. Along with other leftist organizations in Punjab and elsewhere, it was banned in 1934. But the fluidity of its organization meant that the Kirti group continued its politics, or as much as was possible under the restrictions imposed by the state, under the umbrella of new bodies. Even its relatively short political career was marked by the frequent arrests of its members and leaders. S.S Josh for instance was soon arrested after the founding of the party and tried in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. The frequent arrests of its members and leadership also led to subtle shifts in the Party’s political outlook and strategies. With the removal of Josh for instance, the leadership of the Party passed into the hands of returned Ghadarites and former Akali activists whose ideological outlook was less tied to Marxist orthodoxy.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the Kirti group’s suspicion of ideological rigidity made it distinctive as a leftist movement. This antipathy also led its leadership to develop differences with S.S Josh who was compelled to create his own faction once he was released from prison. This intellectual divide, then, constituted one of the defining features of Punjabi leftist politics up until independence and beyond.<sup>99</sup>

But this dispute was merely one of the many factors that led to frequent inter and intra party disputes. As the section above alluded to, factionalism was endemic within the

---

<sup>98</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 12<sup>th</sup> September, No. 36, pp 547-8

<sup>99</sup> This division was eloquently explained by a former Kirti Kisan activist who described the difference between his group and the largely urban based Marxist ideologues in the following way: *sanu angrezi nahin si aaundi, ohnaa nu siyasat* (We did not know English and they did not know politics). This was narrated to Amarjit Chandan by the renowned activist, Bhagat Singh Bilga.

Punjabi Left. If anything, the prevalence of internal strife was perhaps the only consistent feature of leftist politics in the province.<sup>100</sup> In 1932 for example, it was reported that there were no less than four different factions in as small an organization as the NJBS.<sup>101</sup> Differences over personalities, ideologies, political strategies, and finances all played their part. That is not to suggest, however, that Punjabi leftists were not cognizant of the need to build a united provincial and national front. Thus, repeated attempts were made to foster unity and work in amity with each other. Yet, each and every one of these attempts eventually foundered. The following police report for example in 1933, viewed one of these attempts with appropriate skepticism:

A meeting of considerable importance was held during the week at Amritsar, when representatives of all the various communist parties and organizations were present, including the Kirti Kisans, Naujawan Bharat Sabha, and League against Imperialism, as well as terrorists, Congressites, and anti-untouchability enthusiasts. The object in holding the meeting was for a single party, in which all existing organizations would be merged and which would provide a common platform for agitators of every shade of thought. It remains to be seen whether this organization will meet any more success than similar unity attempts in the past, which have been quickly wrecked by personal jealousies and fractious controversies.<sup>102</sup>

Clearly then, these divisions, when also actively encouraged by the state, were too deep seated to overcome.

As a result, the Punjab continued to have a plethora of radical parties up until independence and beyond. The more noteworthy of these were the provincial Congress Socialist Party (CSP), the Punjab Kisan Committee (PKC), and the provincial

---

<sup>100</sup> Indeed, a significant proportion of party literature was devoted to criticizing other factions. For a particular gem, see the pamphlet by 'Comrade' Ram Kishen and 'Comrade' Tika Ram Sukhan in CA, *Punjab Congress may firqa-parasti kay khilaaf hamari jido-jehad aur is jido-jehad may mukhtalif partioun o afraad ka kirdar* (Our struggle against factionalism in the Punjab Congress and the role of different parties and individuals in this struggle), F. 595, Inv. 16, File 34, pp 172-9.

<sup>101</sup> PPSAI 1932, Simla-E, 16<sup>th</sup> July, No. 29, pp 382-3

<sup>102</sup> My emphasis. PPSAI 1933, Lahore, 28<sup>th</sup> October, No. 41, pp 495

Communist Party.<sup>103</sup> Each was formed in succession and was a response to shifting political alignments on the All India and provincial front. The provincial socialist party for example was formed soon after the founding of the All India Party in 1934. Its ranks were primarily composed of the defunct NJBS and other groups. Similarly the PKC was formed after the formation of the All India Kisan Committee (AIKC) in 1936. Comprised of various factions, the PKC was led by Kirti and CSP activists until the mid 1940s when it affiliated itself with the CPI. In terms of membership, this was by far the largest network in the Punjab. By the mid 1940s, the provincial Kisan Sabha claimed a membership of more than a hundred thousand, though again, its base was concentrated in central Punjab.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, CPI affiliated activists had joined the CSP in 1936 under the ‘popular front’ strategy suggested by the Comintern. The cooperation between the two lasted until 1940 when gradually developing tensions finally led to all communists being expelled from CSP organizations. On the provincial front, the CPI was represented by an ‘official group’ led by leftist stalwarts like SS Josh and FD Mansur, who were continually opposed to their erstwhile comrades in the Kirti party and the CSP. It was only in 1942, after the Kirti and ‘official’ group reluctantly came together, that a united ‘communist’ bloc was finally created. Even this was only able to survive till the eve of

---

<sup>103</sup> These organizations are covered in greater detail in the following chapters.

<sup>104</sup> See, for instance, PPSAI 1943, Lahore, 10<sup>th</sup> April, No. 15, pp 195. Also see Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab*, pp 112-3, in which he has usefully tabulated this information along with other statistics. That said, and as with the membership of the Kirti and other groups, it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish exact numbers. Often, members existed only on paper. This was because most organizations, and especially the PKC, hurriedly enrolled as many members as they could in order to meet the membership quotas set by their parent bodies. This was also true for all parties that claimed to be mass organizations such as the Congress and the Muslim League. Given this, it becomes appropriate to ask what exactly being a ‘member’ meant. This was further complicated by the fact that such organizations had a large turnover of activists. In this context, then, calculating exact numbers becomes a superfluous task. Indeed, the only claim that can be made with any certainty is of the rough numbers involved and the districts this membership was mostly from.

Partition. And this group was in addition to the provincial CSP that continued as a separate organization till Partition and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

At first glance, one could be forgiven for being mystified at the sheer number and variety of these organizations. Yet, these were only the most prominent in a political landscape that hosted tens of radical groups at any one point in time. Others like the *Desh Bhagat* Committee functioned as intermediary bodies in tussles between various factions. Given their sheer variety then, how do we understand such organizations and their ways of functioning? Insofar as the KKS was concerned, it never quite managed to build a cohesive party structure with a cadre based membership that would be subject to strict party discipline. By and large, that remained true for all organizations irrespective of whether they were radical or not. Rather, the KKS and its successive permutations, like other radical networks, remained a collective of relatively autonomous individuals who shared a particular genealogy of radicalism. That made the Sabha distinctly ‘Punjabi’ in relation to the wider All Indian Left. Moreover, issues of ideology, political preferences, finances, and personal circumstances were also variables which affected the composition of these collectives. Indeed, this state of affairs only calls into question whether these movements can even be understood as ‘political parties’ in the normative sense or not. There were of course moments, particularly in the 1940s, when most Punjabi radicals consciously subjected themselves to party discipline even to the detriment of their political standing. Yet, for the most part, individuals retained a remarkable degree of

autonomy in their political activism.<sup>105</sup> This only highlights the importance of focusing on both individuals and organizations in a study of the Left. On an additional note, examining what ‘organizations’ meant would also bring into question the extent to which other forces in the Punjabi political landscape could properly be considered as ‘political parties.’ Far from leading to debates about semantic preciseness, these issues only point towards a far broader question of whether the neat categorizations that historians reproduce from the archive can really be used to understand processes that were clearly far more complex and subtle than the manner in which they were recorded.

A close scrutiny of the Sabha then, alerts us to the possible pitfalls of an analysis that is premised on an easily navigable and categorized social and political landscape. The Sabha in effect demonstrates what categories such as the ‘Left’ or ‘Communism’ meant in relation to the Punjabi context. Far from being a foreign import that was from its very inception ill suited to its host society, the ‘Left’ was to a great extent, an organic force that appropriated cultural idioms in its understanding and articulation of a vague idea of ‘communism.’ More crucially however, an analysis of the Sabha and similar organizations shows the extent to which seemingly contradictory concepts were, in practice, quite navigable. As the previous chapter pointed out, the best example of this is the manner in which the Sabha treaded the ‘divide’ between the ‘International’ and the ‘National.’ Indeed, the very origins of the Party indicate the extent to which these concepts and arbitrary demarcations could be straddled. This ability extended to their ideas and politics as well. This flexibility, then, complicates the conceptual determinacy

---

<sup>105</sup> This was most starkly manifested in the politics of the venerated Ghadarite *Babas*. This is a term usually used for an elderly person to signify respect and veneration. The Babas were mostly veterans of the first Ghadar uprising. Lionized in their villages and districts, they played a crucial mediatory role in local and radical politics.

of these categories and indicates that in practice they were far more fluid and indeterminate. This argument then can also be reasonably extended to other seemingly contradictory impulses such as ‘traditional’ and ‘modern,’ ‘nationalist’ and ‘communitarian’ and so on.

Lastly, the Sabha also complicates an image of a static Punjabi political landscape. Instead it provides a fascinating insight into a dynamic and fluid society in which projected categories make little, if any, sense at all. The Punjab thus, hosted a socio-political landscape in which varying intellectual strands fed into a mode of politics that was unconcerned with norms of ideological rigidity or organizational loyalty. Thus, labels that are retrospectively projected into the past were at the time, continually contested and refashioned. This was a process that was as much a product of operational constraints as of autonomous choices. Indeed, it is precisely in this sense, that the Sabha, and other organizations like it, compel us to rethink our view of the provincial political landscape, and by extension, the assumptions that are unconsciously reproduced in Punjabi and South Asian historiography.

### **Contesting Political Space: The Colonial State and the Punjabi Left**

The last two chapters situated the Punjabi Left within the region and the wider global arena in an attempt to uncover the political contours of both. In addition to the insights it provides into these political spaces, the Punjabi Left also provides useful glimpses into the political actors it came into contact with. This is therefore, the first in a series of discussions aimed at charting the engagement of the Punjabi Left with the dominant political forces in the Punjab and the wider subcontinent. Accordingly, this chapter will explore the Left's continually hostile engagement with the most dominant and hegemonic political force in the subcontinent: the colonial state itself. From the very outset then, I treat the Colonial State, in contrast to its self proclaimed role as a neutral arbiter between conflicting interest groups amongst Indians, as an active political player which consistently employed its hegemonic capacity to demarcate a sphere of legitimate politics in which leftist politics was often criminalized and consistently delegitimized. The Left then, provides an excellent case study that can reveal some valuable insights about the character of the colonial state. Moreover, the nature of the engagement between the two also uncovers the contours of the provincial and All India political landscape in which the Left struggled to operate.

In doing so, this chapter will rely on a variety of official sources which reveal more about the nature of the state than they do about the subjects of their reporting. What emerges from these documents is a picture of a vertically and horizontally differentiated state that varies along levels of governance, from the perspective of the Empire to the level of a

district, and across institutional divides that range from the security services to the legislative chambers. This image is further complicated by the fact that the state itself was undergoing changes through the gradual devolution of power and periodic constitutional reforms. Additionally, and as the introductory section of this thesis pointed out, the power and reach of the state was unevenly spread across the subcontinent. This was particularly the case in the Punjab, where the experience of colonialism was arguably distinctive from the rest of South Asia. Even within the province, the state was unevenly spread between the rural and urban arena.

As a preliminary then, this picture contests the dominant portrayal of a state as a monolithic entity in which varying institutional and governmental impulses work in perfect harmony with each other. At one level, that may be stating the obvious. But in another sense, this monolithic portrayal runs as a subtle undercurrent in much of the works devoted to the Punjabi and South Asian Left.<sup>1</sup> However, a disaggregated portrayal does not imply that it is not possible to speak of the state as a generalized entity. Neither does it imply that power or the exercise of it was differentiated along similar lines. Rather, what emerges is a sense of a complex state which is constituted of varying structures, which despite often functioning in discord with each other, project in totality a hegemonic capacity that is uncontested by any other political force in the subcontinent. In

---

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, most view the Left through a standard chronological and biographical narrative that only hints at the contours of the state. One of the notable exceptions is Shalini Sharma's *Radical Politics in Colonial Punjab* in which, among other things, she usefully examines the ideological discourses that were employed by the State to delegitimize the Left. This is, of course, in addition to the many general works that have examined the nature of the colonial state. For the Punjab, see especially, David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam* and Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj*. Generally, see Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press 1997), and Sudipta Kaviraj, 'On the Construction of Colonial Power: Structure, Discourse and Hegemony,' in Engels, D. and Marks, S. (eds.), *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Asia and Africa* (London: British Academic Press, 1994). These are in addition to other works which are listed in the bibliography.

this reading, the ‘state’ can be understood as an aggregation of powers that are respectively exercised by its constituent parts. The understanding of a complex and multifaceted state then is an undercurrent that runs across much of this chapter.

The chapter itself is divided in three distinct sections. The first situates the mutual animosity between the Left and the State squarely within the broader realm of great power rivalry, though, as ever, there are other considerations as well. It also charts the evolving nature of this global rivalry and the consequences this had for the Left which, like communist movements elsewhere, was mostly perceived as a proxy for the Soviet Union. The next section will look at how the State responded to what it viewed as an almost existential threat to its sovereignty. It will closely examine the various means – legal, coercive, and administrative – through which the Left, both in the centre and in the Punjab, was persecuted. The last section will look at the range of methods employed by the Left to circumvent the restrictions that were progressively placed on its activism. In particular, I will be examining the extent to which the Punjabi Left was able to mould itself in order to function as a viable socio-political entity. In short, the emphasis on adaptability is a prominent theme that runs across much of this dissertation and is a departure from the traditionally understood ‘inflexibility’ – whether ideological or otherwise – of the Left.

### The ‘Bolshevik Threat’ to British India

For the British, the Indian Left was constantly perceived as a threat that was vastly disproportionate to the actual influence it wielded in the political arena. Indeed, the ‘threat’ of ‘communism’ was widely accepted as one of the greatest security challenges

facing the colonial state. Unlike any other political movement, Indian 'communism' posed an internal as well as an external threat to British rule. In short, the two were inextricably tied to each other. The external threat was posed by the Soviet Union, the self proclaimed patron of international communism. For the colonial state then, Soviet support for communist activities in India was a key method through which British India could be strategically 'encircled.' Thus, coordinated 'communist' activities within the subcontinent were widely understood to be a prelude to an imagined Soviet incursion into British India. The fear of 'encirclement' however was hardly unique to this period in history. Indeed, similar fears had been voiced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century about Tsarist Russia, and British incursions and interventions in Afghanistan were largely attempts at negating Russian influence there and pre-empting any efforts at 'encirclement.' This geo-political rivalry continued unabated, except that after the Bolshevik Revolution, British fears were amplified on account of the Soviet Union's repeated pronouncements against British imperialism and its active engagements with Indian radicals of various political persuasions.

The Soviet Union however was not the only protagonist in this great power rivalry. Germany too, especially during the world wars, was a cause of concern for British Indian intelligence and security apparatuses. During the First World War for instance, German agents were widely suspected to be supporting the Ghadar insurgency in the Punjab. While this relationship was not as substantial as the British believed, it was nevertheless true that the Ghadarites, starting from Santokh Singh, approached German agents and

counsels for financial and military support against the British in India.<sup>2</sup> This support later led to the leaders of the Ghadar Party being convicted in the San Francisco Trial in 1917 after the United States had declared war on Germany. The Germans were also suspected of fomenting agitation in the Tribal Agencies on the border with Afghanistan and the presence of their legates in Kabul was viewed with trepidation. Moreover, Berlin, during the First World War and for much of the interwar period, played host to a number of groups of Indian exiles who conducted their politics with the knowledge and support of successive German governments. During the First World War, this group of exiles was known as the Berlin India Committee and led by Virendranath Chattopadhyaya. The most famous of these engagements though was the support rendered by the Third Reich to Subhas Chandra Bose.<sup>3</sup> The Punjabi Left too, despite their avowed support for the Soviet Union, did not shy away from approaching the Axis legates in Kabul in the early 1940s.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, for a while they sought support from both Germany and the Soviet Union – even after the commencement of Operation Barbarossa – and continued a tradition in which Indian radicals, whether Leftist or not, continually sought the assistance of other powers for bolstering their activities against their arch nemesis of British Imperialism.

It was the Soviet Union however that remained the chief source of material, ideological, and inspirational support for Indian radicals. The British were of course painfully aware of that. Soon after the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin had declared his firm support for

---

<sup>2</sup> See for instance the official report by Isemonger and Slattery, and IOR/V/27/262/8, J.C Ker, Political Trouble in India, 1907-1917, (Calcutta: 1917). The latter also sets out in detail the German involvement with other Indian revolutionary networks.

<sup>3</sup> While there have been numerous works on 'Netaji' Subhas Bose, the more recent work by Sugata Bose provides a fascinating account of his life and political career, as well as situating his dalliances with fascism in context. See, Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011)

<sup>4</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/218 (Bose Conspiracy Case) 'Harmindar Singh Sodhi account of the Bose Conspiracy' pp 35-44

national liberation struggles throughout the world and he himself was actively engaged in discussions with Indian radicals like MN Roy, V Chattopadhaya, and Maulvi Barkatullah on how to further develop their struggle against British Imperialism. He even proposed his own 'thesis' in answer to M.N Roy's diagnosis of how to build the communist movement within India. Similarly, as explained in the second chapter, the Comintern too provided an active platform to Indian radicals and made arrangements for the ideological and military training of aspiring Indian communists. It was hardly a surprise then that the pronouncements and activities of the Comintern were closely watched by British authorities. The Comintern was widely suspected to be disbursing substantial financial support to the Communist Party and its affiliates in India while its directives were understood to be directly controlling the affairs and activities of the communist movement in India.<sup>5</sup>

Intriguingly though, the concerns relating to the communist 'threat' and the activities of the Comintern were not shared uniformly across the various levels of government and state institutions. At the highest level these concerns were frequently voiced from the India Office in London. This in turn was a reflection of the threats faced by British Imperial interests as a whole from the propagation of Communist Internationalism emanating from the Soviet Union. Indeed, successive British Governments were as much concerned about the spread of the communist 'menace' in Britain itself as they were about its infiltration in the subcontinent. Moreover, this concern was not just restricted to Britain's colonies and dependencies but it also extended to every country or region where 'Communism had established itself.' It mattered little that these regions were not in a

---

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, an anxious watch was kept on Comintern 'agents' from the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) who regularly visited India to support and advise the communist movement there.

position to directly harm British interests for they could still act as ‘relay’ or ‘transmission stations.’<sup>6</sup> As far as the British were concerned though, the foremost culprit behind the export of communism was the Comintern which was viewed as indistinguishable from the Soviet Government. Its offices were viewed as the means through which covert Soviet foreign policy was exercised and while this perception was to some extent true, it still ignored the mutual differences that periodically cropped up between the two. While this nuanced relationship was acknowledged to a very limited extent by British intelligence, the fundamental outlook remained that the Comintern was a ‘part and parcel of the Russian Communist Party and the Soviet Government.’<sup>7</sup> It would have been acceptable had the USSR adopted a non-interventionist policy, but after all, it was incapable of doing so as ‘passivity was incompatible with the theory on which it was founded.’<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough (and this may be quite obvious to historians of great power rivalries) similar concerns were also expressed on the Soviet side, as was clear from many pronouncements issued by the Comintern about the nature of Imperialism. Thus, both powers regularly expressed their fears of ‘encirclement’ by the other.<sup>9</sup> This was then a global rivalry with multiple fronts that ranged from both metropolises to regions around the globe.

It was British India, though, that occupied one of the most prominent positions in this theatre of global rivalry. Accordingly, there was constant pressure from the office of the Secretary of State for India to the incumbent Viceroy to ensure that British India was

---

<sup>6</sup> A.K. Mukhopadhyay (ed.), *India and Communism: Secret British Documents* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997; originally published, Simla: 1935) pp 314

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pp 307

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp 305

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pp 314

aggressively combating the spread of communism there. This was especially so in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution when there was a sense at the highest level that the communist threat was not being taken seriously enough by the British administration in India. Thus, concerns were repeatedly expressed by the India Office whether intelligence services within the subcontinent were being deprived of adequate resources and reminders were issued that the spectre of communism was a matter of ‘world wide interest to all Governments...’<sup>10</sup> It was even suggested that individuals should be prosecuted and convicted on the basis of *being* communists or ‘spreading communistic ideas’ (a logic which culminated in the Meerut Conspiracy Case) as the ‘profession of faith of communists involves the destruction of existing governments...’<sup>11</sup> Caution was also urged with respect to the repeal of repressive laws and further measures were also suggested such as enlarging the scope of existing laws, which included the infamous Regulation III of 1818.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the extent to which London was concerned about communist activities, which can at times be described as paranoia, was illustrated in the close interest that the Secretary of State himself took with regard to the shipping of communist propaganda material to India and the activities of assorted *individuals* at a time when a communist party had not even been established in India. In frequent correspondences, the Indian Government was queried about their intelligence on the activities of individuals such as MN Roy, Jotindra Mitra and Muhajir youths like Shaukat Usmani, among others. There was then, a palpable sense of anxiety in London at

---

<sup>10</sup> IOR/L/PJ/12/117, File 6533/1922, (DIB résumé ‘Bolshevik Danger in India’) Telegram from Sec of State to Viceroy, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1922.,pp 101

<sup>11</sup> IOR/L/PJ/12/117, (Bolshevik Danger in India), J & P (S) 6975/23 Letter from India Office to Sec of State (Home Dept.) to GoI, pp 86

<sup>12</sup> IOR/L/PJ/12/117, (Bolshevik Danger in India), J & P (S) 6975/23 Letter from India Office to Sec of State (Home Department) to GoI, 18<sup>th</sup> January 1923, pp 90-92

communist activities and concerns about the Indian Government in effectively dealing with this threat. This concern was all the more urgent given the interests of the British Empire at large.

For its part, the Government of India in its replies to London was keen to emphasize the steps being taken to counter the activities of ‘communists.’ The Central Government in turn leaned on provincial administrations to step up their efforts and improve their coordination with the centre. At the same time, the Government attempted to caution London for what it viewed as its overly zealous tone, by pointing out that there was nothing resembling a large scale communist movement in India. In contrast to the India Office, it felt that the existing laws and organizations were adequate for dealing with the communist threat while difficulties in procuring sufficient evidence to ensure conviction in courts were also pointed to.<sup>13</sup> It was also argued that under ordinary law, the mere state of ‘being’ a ‘communist’ was not considered an offence unless it was conclusively proven that the aim and object of an individual or organization was to overthrow British rule in India through violent means.<sup>14</sup> This perspective changed somewhat in the late 1920s as the Communist movement was gradually established in India. In this period, the Government stepped up its efforts to combat the ‘spread of communism’ through the introduction of special laws and implementation of repressive ordinances. An insight into this increased aggressiveness came from the Meerut Conspiracy Case in which a substantial part of the prosecution’s case was devoted to criminalizing communism in and of itself.

---

<sup>13</sup> IOR/L/PJ/12/117, (Bolshevik Danger in India), Telegram from Viceroy to Sec of State, dated 21<sup>st</sup> December 1922, pp 103-4

<sup>14</sup> IOR/L/PJ/12/117, (Bolshevik Danger in India), Telegram from Viceroy to Sec of State, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1923

Lower down the governmental scale, provincial governments, in response to the pressures from the Centre and London, stepped up their vigilance against 'communist' activities. Inevitably though, their concerns were far more immediate and dependent on the specific regional context which may or may not be directly related to the concerns of the Centre or London. In the Punjab for example, where the 'communist threat' was ostensibly acute, these concerns were related to the activities of Leftist radicals in rural areas that were crucial for the stability of the colonial state. In particular, calls for the non-payment of land revenue and other agricultural taxes were viewed with alarm by the government. As were threats to open violence, which had a greater resonance in a province with sharp communitarian differences and substantial numbers of highly trained and demobilized individuals. For district officers, these concerns were particularly acute; charged as they were with ensuring the maintenance of 'order' and 'stability' in their respective districts. In contrast, leftist activities in the urban arena, and particularly in labour circles, were viewed with lesser anxiety except when it related to strategic sectors such as the North Western Railways. All such concerns, though, were trumped by leftist activities in the most sensitive of arenas: military recruitment. Being the heartland for recruitment to the British Indian army and hence the 'Sword Arm of the Empire,' the Punjab administration was particularly keen to insulate demobilized and serving soldiers from leftist influence. For their part, the Punjabi Left was all too conscious of this fact and a considerable proportion of their activities were devoted to anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda. Therefore, a key function of the provincial and district administration was to ensure that communist propaganda was closely observed and actively countered. Often, key measures were employed by a responsive provincial

administration to placate agrarian grievances which formed the central plank of leftist propaganda. One of the best examples of this was the remission of land revenue during the Great Depression, which, as one police report gleefully reported, ‘took the wind out of the communists’ sails.’<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, this was another way in which the Unionists were useful for the Punjab administration. For one, they represented agriculturist interests and successfully defended them on certain occasions, even by the admission of many of their detractors within the Left. This was particularly true for the amendments in the Land Alienation Act that were passed by the Unionist Ministry in the late 1930s. Claiming to provide relief for the heavily indebted peasantry, these amendments were supported by prominent leftists affiliated with a faction within the Congress. What was extraordinary, however, was that despite the Unionist Party’s claim of working for the peasantry, the Leftist movement still found considerable traction in basing its politics on agrarian grievances. This was particularly true for the Kirti Kisan movement and its successor in the PKC. Both capitalized on agrarian grievances in the central tracts. In part, this was possible because the Unionists were mostly composed of landowning elites. Still, the Party had men like Chaudhari Chhotu Ram who championed and tirelessly worked for Jat interests.<sup>16</sup> And yet, the ranks of the Leftist movement were mostly composed of and supported by Sikh Jats from the central districts. Obviously, this was to be understood mostly in light of their prior association with radical politics.<sup>17</sup> But on another level, the fact remained that the Unionists were unable to offer the substantial change that the Kisans were looking

---

<sup>15</sup> Mukhopadhyay (ed.), pp 300

<sup>16</sup> See the account by Prem Chowdhry, *Punjab Politics: The role of Sir Chhotu Ram* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1984)

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 6 for detailed explanation.

for. This was particularly the case with the various forms of state exactions that posed a heavy burden on the middle peasantry. Aside from capitalizing on these general grievances, the Kisan movement also exploited certain issues that periodically impacted the Punjab peasantry. Usually, these were in the form of revenue, tenancy or canal water disputes in various parts of the Punjab. But during events of wider significance, such as the Great Depression for instance, the Kisan movement successfully agitated for a remission of land revenue in light of the rapid fall in agricultural prices. It was here that the Unionists proved useful in mitigating the radical potential of these movements. Thus, during the Great Depression, they made successful representations to the Governor which resulted in the substantial remissions in land revenue.<sup>18</sup>

All together, this only showed how the degree and nature of anxiety regarding the ‘communist threat’ was also dependent on the level and context of governance. The same also held true for institutions comprising the central and provincial administrations. Unexpectedly, the institutions most concerned with leftist politics were the various security and intelligence services. At the all India level, the fear or paranoia of communist encirclement was particularly acute. For instance, in a series of published works commissioned by the Intelligence Bureau, considerable space was devoted to ‘communist’ incursions in regions bordering British India.<sup>19</sup> In particular, a close eye was kept on communist advances in China, while Afghanistan and Persia were considered dangerous for providing ‘bases’ through which communists could infiltrate into British India. The concern for the latter was certainly relevant as the Ghadar Party had made

---

<sup>18</sup> Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj*, pp 91.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance the three works in the ‘Communism in India’ series produced by the IB, Home Department: Subodh Roy (ed.), *Communism in India 1919-24* (Calcutta:1971), IOR/V/27/262/3 *Communism in India 1924-1927*, Mukhopadhyay (ed.) or IOR/V/27/262/5 *India and Communism 1935*.

Kabul a base of operations from which to smuggle individuals and materials into India. Additionally, a wary gaze was also kept on Sinkiang, Tibet, Burma, French Indo China, Siam, the Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States, and the Dutch East Indies. Aside from assessing the threat of ‘encirclement,’ these regions were also useful for yielding insights into the *process* of communist infiltration. After all, as far as British intelligence was concerned, these developments provided instructive lessons for British India. Thus, while commenting on the disturbances in the British Concessions in Shanghai and Hankow, the Director of the Intelligence Bureau remarked that the power of the ‘infuriated rabble’ led astray by communist agitators could be not be underestimated.<sup>20</sup>

This unease at the events in regional countries unmasked a deeper concern within the British Indian security establishment. Indeed, what was striking in British reporting on leftist politics throughout the period, from its establishment to decolonization itself, was a fear of the *potential* for leftist inspired disturbances. Frequently, this level of anxiety bore little or no relation to the *actual state* of the leftist movement, which was effectively crippled owing to a whole host of reasons, not least of which were the shortcomings of the Left itself. Indeed, in the preface of the second *Ghadar Directory* issued in 1934, the Director of IB commented that the members of the Party were ‘every disloyal, but luckily almost equally stupid.’<sup>21</sup> In part, the focus on potentialities was a reflection of the perceptions held by the security establishment regarding Indian society itself. Thus, while comparing the political conditions of England and India, the Director of the IB remarked that in the former the ‘great weapon against Communism is the commonsense and political understanding of the bulk of the population...’ In contrast, India was still ‘trying

---

<sup>20</sup> IOR/V/27/262/5 India and Communism 1935 pp 22.

<sup>21</sup> Ghadar Directory 1934 pp iii.

to find her legs in the political world, and her political sense (had) not yet spread far downwards.’ Her people required guidance from the privileged few who had the education for appreciating ‘new creed(s) and shibboleths.’<sup>22</sup> This view was also underscored by recognition of the economic distress that labourers and kisans faced across India. The political capital that communist ‘agitators’ could make from these conditions could not therefore be easily discounted. Viewed another way, this analysis was also an outcome of the perceived fragility, and perhaps, illegitimacy, of British rule itself. The mass movements witnessed during the Non Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements fundamentally shook the authority of the British Raj. Consequently, the British security establishment was haunted by the spectre of such movements being led by revolutionaries bent upon the violent overthrow of the colonial state. More realistically, the mass mobilization within these nation wide movements afforded excellent opportunities for ‘trained propagandists’ bolstered by Russian support to create massive difficulties for British rule.<sup>23</sup> The mass movements led by Gandhi did not, in of themselves, threaten to uproot British rule. Rather, he was gratefully acknowledged for his ‘capricious willingness to compromise with the powers that be...’<sup>24</sup> Instead, the danger came from the ‘ease with which popular feeling’ could be whipped against the Government and the political gain that ‘communism’ could make as a result of that.

---

<sup>22</sup> Mukhopadhyay (ed.), pp 300. Curiously, this patronizing view of the ‘masses’ was also shared, often quite explicitly, by leaders from all shades of the political spectrum, and not least by many within the Left itself.

<sup>23</sup> IOR/V/27/262/5 India and Communism 1935 pp 20

<sup>24</sup> Mukhopadhyay (ed.), pp 6

These concerns though were also an expression of the frustration felt by individuals within the security establishment about the relative lack of seriousness shown by other institutions with regard to the communist threat. It was at this point that, on a general level, there were variations in the outlook between central and provincial institutions. Thus, the primary reason why secret intelligence assessments were published by the Home Department was to impress upon their recipients in the provincial and district administrations the seriousness of the communist threat. As a preliminary, and by their own admission, the object of these books was to ‘help those in responsible positions to understand the nature of the enemy, his objective and his methods.’ The implicit suggestion, then, was that the nature of these threats was inadequately understood by colonial administrators. This sense was underscored by the warning to successive administrators about the headway that ‘communism’ would make following constitutional reforms in India. Additionally, these works were also intended for officers within the security establishment who, distracted by multiple duties and frustrated by the constant demands made on them, could acquire a ‘true perspective’ on the communist threat.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, these warnings did not have the desired effect as frustration was repeatedly expressed at the relative inaction of other state institutions. In particular, there was an acute tension between the juridical and security wings of the state. It was felt by officials in the security establishment that the judicial process, with its requirement for relatively sound evidence and limitations by legal lacunae, was far too lax in convicting accused ‘communists.’ Similar concerns were also voiced regarding the relative laxity of

---

<sup>25</sup> Mukhopadhyay (ed.) pp 303. Also see NDC S-361 (Punjab Government Policy Regarding Communists) Letter from JTM Bennett, Deputy Inspector General, Police, CID Punjab, to commissioners, deputy commissioners, superintendent of police and others, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1934

existing laws and ordinances. Thus, as far as the IB was concerned, it was only official and institutional 'apathy...neglect, and a complacent attitude' that could make 'Communism a serious menace to India's peace and prosperity.'<sup>26</sup>

It would, however, be a mistake to understand these anxieties as being uniformly shared throughout the security and intelligence apparatuses. As with varying layers of governance, the perception of the communist threat varied across different levels of the security establishment. Thus, intelligence assessments issued by the Punjab Police betrayed very little anxiety (again in a relative sense) regarding the regional threats posed by communist advances. Nor were these reports obsessively focussed on the ubiquitous, if unseen, Russian hand. Rather, these assessments were more firmly situated in the socio-political context of the Punjab, in which leftist politics was understood more as a function of particular local conditions rather than the sole outcome of Comintern directives. Thus, local police reports often had a more realistic assessment of the state of the communist movement which was mostly viewed as a serious but not an imminent threat. In this, the police authorities were immeasurably assisted by the high degree of factionalism and infighting within the Punjabi Left and the steps taken by them and the district authorities in effectively dealing with 'subversive' activities. Again, a rather patronizing view of the 'masses' was held by the police authorities, though this variant was relatively more optimistic. The masses were often claimed to be too 'rustic' or 'simple minded' to fully comprehend the complex theories propounded by leftists, though the very same qualities could be exploited by well trained and capable propagandists. Nevertheless, like their patrons at the all India level, Punjabi security assessments were

---

<sup>26</sup> Mukhopadhyay (ed.), pp 297

mostly concerned with the *potential* that the leftist movement had for causing mass upheaval. Perhaps, one of the most important causes for concern in this department was the economic distress faced by Punjabi Kisans and other working classes. As was the rather more serious threat of disorder in rural, and especially military, districts. It was for this reason why almost a fifth of weekly Punjab Police Intelligence Abstracts were exclusively devoted to leftist activities within labour, nationalist or Kisan circles. This remained true even in the communal holocaust that was tearing Punjab apart in the summer of 1947. In this obsession however, the police authorities were at odds with the provincial administration. A key, if crude, metric for assessing this disparity is in the space devoted to leftist activities in the fortnightly Governors reports to the Viceroy. Indeed, they barely merit a mention compared to the concurrently issued intelligence assessments. This disparity again was a reflection of the varied way in which different institutions and levels within the state respectively viewed the Communist ‘threat.’

### The State Responds

And yet, despite their varying levels of seriousness, these concerns overlapped sufficiently to project a seemingly coordinated state response to the communist threat. It was in this intersection of institutional and governmental powers that the state, as an aggregated entity, projected a hegemonic dominance that irreversibly obstructed the development of a flourishing leftist movement in British India. As far as the colonial state was concerned, its chief concern was to delimit a sphere of what it deemed to be legitimate politics, especially as the seemingly inexorable process of constitutional reform and devolution of power continued apace. Inevitably, the majority of

organizations and individuals who could collectively be labelled as the 'Left' stood beyond the pale of this arbitrary demarcation, though there were of course circumstances in which these boundaries changed. Given the various capacities at its disposal, the colonial state demarcated this sphere through the liberal use of its legislative, coercive, administrative and judicial measures.

Given the repressive nature of the colonial state as a whole, it was perhaps unavoidable that the favoured tactics in the multi pronged assault on the Left were based on coercion. A key role was thus played by the security and intelligence apparatuses in both India and Britain. The primary function of these agencies was to maintain a ceaseless surveillance over suspected communists and their activities. Indeed, given the vast corpus of available police and intelligence reports, it is clear that this web of intelligence and surveillance ranged from the global to the local.<sup>27</sup> This vast operation was an outcome of a view which argued for ceaseless vigilance in all territories that played host to communist activities. Indeed, the very nature of a global rivalry necessitated a system of intelligence gathering that was global in scope. In this, the Empire was undoubtedly assisted not just by its all encompassing global presence but also by its cooperation with the security services of other countries, such as France<sup>28</sup> and the United States,<sup>29</sup> who were equally concerned about the expansion of the communist sphere. Accordingly, the movements of suspected individuals, pronouncements of organizations and individuals, correspondences, and propaganda publications, were all meticulously observed and

---

<sup>27</sup> For an excellent account into how the Indian realm was defended against great power 'intrigues' see, Richard J. Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire 1904-1924* (London: Frank Cass, 1995)

<sup>28</sup> See for instance the cooperation between the two on the question of Pondicherry. IOR/L&J/12/56, (Pondicherry: Bolshevik Activities)

<sup>29</sup> With the San Francisco Conspiracy Case being a prime example of such cooperation.

recorded by intelligence agencies. All this was accomplished owing to a vast network of consular offices, spies and intelligence agents who were deputed to track suspected individuals and organizations, including, undoubtedly, those in Moscow itself.<sup>30</sup>

This network was especially pervasive within British India itself, and particularly the Punjab, where the degree of infiltration within leftist organizations was remarkable in itself. Numerous examples of this can be gleaned from the reports of 'secret' leftist meetings that at times involved as few as a dozen individuals. Intriguingly, a key component of these intelligence operations was the often obsessive focus on individuals as opposed to organizations. This obsession ranged from the highest offices in London to the local police *thanas* at the *tehsil* and village level. In part, this method was almost necessitated by the way in which the Left was itself organized. Thus, it was quite common for leftist radicals, especially in the 1920s and 30s, to be members of multiple parties, not of all of whom would necessarily be associated with the Left. This tendency was not just restricted to the Left, but was rather typical of the provincial political landscape in which organizational affiliations were transitory and contingent on specific socio-political and even personal circumstances. Additionally, given the relentless persecution directed against them, radical and revolutionary organizations tended to have a rather limited life span. This was further complicated by the fact that most of such organizations tended to work underground as they could not afford to have a visible and public party structure that would be an easy target for the police authorities to clamp down on. From the perspective of the colonial security services, there were other reasons as well. On a practical note, it was easier to persecute individuals rather than illusory

---

<sup>30</sup> This is obvious given the detailed way in which Indian radicals were reported on in Moscow.

organizations that could remerge in a different form after being proscribed. At another level, in the British imagination, Indian radicals acquired a larger than life image, especially as each prominent personality was viewed as a representative of the forces of international communism. The threat posed by certain individuals therefore was not as much a function of their capabilities but more a consequence of the power of their patrons in Moscow.

A key element in this panoptical web was the close surveillance of British Indian borders. While this was in part directed towards preventing the infiltration of Indian revolutionaries and Comintern agents into British India, this control was more important for policing the entry of proscribed materials such as arms and ammunition, letters and most importantly, 'subversive literature.'<sup>31</sup> This was perhaps the most daunting task faced by the colonial security and intelligence apparatus. For it was far easier to curb the activities of certain individuals or organizations than it was to check the spread of ideas. It was in this realm, then, that the colonial state perceived itself to be most vulnerable. This perpetual anxiety is perhaps best reflected in the worried reporting on Indian newspapers and other publications. Constantly trawled for any traces of 'subversive' or 'communist' ideas, these publications were considered both a means for the spread of seditious notions as well as barometers of public perception. Indeed, for a society with very low levels of functional literacy, the concern for the printed word was quite remarkable. This in turn was a reflection of its profound power to inspire and mobilize, which was a fact recognized by all political actors. Thus, a strict watch was kept on all

---

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed account of proscription and censorship, see the excellent work of N. Gerald Barrier, *Banned : Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India, 1907-1947* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974)

mediums through which ‘seditious’ ideas were transmitted to wider society. Of greater concern was the import into India of ‘seditious publications’ – ranging from newspapers to pamphlets and books – which were understood to be the primary drivers behind shifting attitudes and opinions in favour of ‘communism.’ Since precious little could be done about the source of these publications, some of which were in Britain itself, the colonial state exercised a careful vigilance over the means and ports of entry through which such materials could make their way into India. As one of the earliest measures adopted in this regard, special officers were appointed to consult and coordinate with provincial CID’s, as well as Post Office and Customs Authorities.<sup>32</sup>

These intelligence operations were supplemented through legislative mechanisms and the issuance of ordinances specifically designed to counter the communist ‘threat.’ With respect to the import and spread of seditious materials for instance, the Sea Customs Act was specifically expanded to include any publication emanating from either the Communist International or any of its affiliates. Moreover, Provincial Governments had recourse to special provisions under the Code of Criminal Procedure to proscribe any publication remotely considered to be ‘seditious.’<sup>33</sup> Other legal provisions were liberally interpreted to prosecute suspected communists, though obtaining convictions was an entirely different matter. Thus the punishable offence of the ‘promotion of feelings of enmity or hatred between different classes of His Majesty’s subjects’ under the Indian Penal Code was creatively interpreted to include the advocacy of workers and peasants

---

<sup>32</sup> IOR/L/PJ/12/117 (Bolshevik Danger in India), Telegram from Viceroy to Sec of State, 23<sup>rd</sup> February, pp 94. See Chapter 1 for more details into the kinds of materials that were banned.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

rights in opposition to capitalists and landlords.<sup>34</sup> Also used extensively in this regard were the various provisions designed to punish the act of sedition, defined as either an attempt to ‘excite disaffection towards his Majesty or the Government’ or a ‘conspiracy to deprive the King Emperor of the sovereignty of British India.’ Additionally, the colonial state was also quick in strengthening existing laws and in creating special laws of which the most famous were the Public Safety and the Trade Disputes Bill. Indeed, both these Bills were etched in the public imagination after Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw a bomb in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1929 as a protest against their passage. The Central Government thus was quite proactive, though not as efficient as the security establishment would have liked it to be, in strengthening the legal mechanism through which leftist activities could be effectively countered.

At the regional and local level, certain provinces were vested with additional powers with which to curb leftist and nationalist activities. Punjab for instance, in addition to Bengal, Bombay and the North West Frontier Province, was granted additional powers to arrest and temporarily detain individuals who had acted or were intending to act in a manner that was vaguely defined as being ‘prejudicial to the public safety or peace.’ More generally applied was the power to prescribe the residence and movements of such individuals, who would be liable to imprisonment if they broke these terms of these restrictions.<sup>35</sup> In the Punjab especially, these powers were extensively used to incarcerate Punjabi Leftists either in jail or in their home villages. This practice started from the first influxes of returning Ghadarites, which led to the incarceration of thousands of

---

<sup>34</sup> Mukhopadhyay (ed.)

<sup>35</sup> Mukhopadhyay (ed.) pp 289

individuals in their home villages.<sup>36</sup> As far as the Punjab administration was concerned, this was especially convenient as it freed the authorities from having to procure evidence sound enough to obtain convictions in courts. Additionally, local Acts also vested the authorities with other powers such as the control of posts and telegraphs, including the transmission of money orders and the prerogative to restrict access to certain places.<sup>37</sup> They also allowed police authorities to openly attend and report on public meetings, which was a particularly emotive issue for radical leftists and nationalists alike. Indeed, rarely was a public meeting inaugurated without a fierce denunciation of the police reporters present in the audience. These acts then, vested the local police and district authorities with extraordinary powers with which to restrain the movements of any individuals even remotely suspected of fomenting disorder.

This was further supplemented by both incentivizing and coercive administrative measures that were designed to ensure that the rural arena remained immune to activities against the state. The first check in the Punjab against these activities was the strong patron client relationships in the form of local powerbrokers and intermediaries. Additionally, preserving the rural peace was also the responsibility of *tehsil* and village officials like *zaildars* who were appointed by the local administration. This system was further bolstered by local district officials and police *thanas*. A system of incentives was also put in place by a Punjab administration cognizant of the necessity of 'showing the promptest recognition and, in suitable cases, of liberally rewarding those who furnish active assistance to the police and magistracy in their efforts to cope with crime.' Thus,

---

<sup>36</sup> See for instance, RPAP 1916, No. 977-8, Lieutenant-Colonel H.T Dennys, Inspector-General of Police, Punjab to the Additional Secretary to Government, Punjab, Simla, 29<sup>th</sup> June, 1917, pp 24

<sup>37</sup> Mukhopadhyay (ed.), pp 289-90

remissions of revenue, grants of land, monetary rewards and public commendations were methods usually employed to encourage local cooperation. Conversely, any 'dereliction of duty' by village officials was severely dealt with in the form of their summary dismissals and the appointment of others considered more trustworthy and suited to the task. At times, these measures could also amount to collective punishment as entire villages could be saddled with the upkeep of punitive police posts for failing to assist the local authorities or for aiding and abetting 'criminal' activities.<sup>38</sup> Naturally, this method was widely deplored and was the object of numerous protestations led by leftists themselves. It was hardly surprising, then, that political activism in the rural arena was a difficult undertaking for leftist radicals. Despite this however, this system of control was hardly watertight and there were many instances when state authority was actively subverted and challenged, as the Akali and Kisan movements successfully demonstrated in the 1920s and 1930s.

The fourth primary method employed by the state was the use of judicial measures, though this was by far the most inefficient of all the measures employed. A slew of 'Conspiracy Cases' was launched – in Lahore, Peshawar and Kanpur among others – to prosecute leftist radicals on sedition charges. The most famous of these cases was the Meerut Conspiracy Case which began its hearings in mid 1929. Involving more than thirty communist leaders, as well as a few British activists, from across India, this case lasted for four and a half years and represented the state's most far reaching attempt to judicially tackle the growing threat of 'communism.' The case culminated in the convictions of most of the accused who were sentenced with varying severity depending

---

<sup>38</sup> RPAP 1914, Proceedings of...the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab in the Home (Police) Department, No. 3243 S, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1915, pp 1-2

on the seriousness of their ‘crime.’ In general the court found the accused guilty of, amongst other charges, a conspiracy to ‘overthrow the sovereignty of the King in British India, with a view to the establishment of a socialist State under the dictatorship of the Communist International.’<sup>39</sup>

While Meerut and other Conspiracy Cases before it succeeded in impeding the growth of the leftist movement in India to a certain degree, they also spectacularly backfired on the state itself. More particularly, Meerut, by the admission of both the security agencies and communists themselves, ‘helped in popularizing the ideas of communism, of agrarian revolution, (and) of complete independence.’<sup>40</sup> As an unintended consequence, the accused were provided with a golden opportunity to publicly air their defence, which mostly consisted of very detailed descriptions of radical and revolutionary ideas. In short, it was public relations disaster for the colonial state. This experience led many to decry the shortcomings of the judicial system and to explore other and more coercive means through which to eliminate the communist threat. Direct coercion then, remained the ultimate resort of controlling leftist activities.

The most important step in this regard was the outright ban of the CPI. The Party had been reorganized and founded anew with a centralized apparatus in 1933 following the release of most Meerut prisoners after a protracted appeals process. The Party was then formerly affiliated to the Communist International in 1934 after developing a concrete manifesto. Dismayed at the renewal of the leftist movement, the Central Government in the same year under the Criminal Law Amendment Act declared the CPI, its committees, sub-committees, and branches, unlawful associations on the ‘ground that they constituted

---

<sup>39</sup> Mukhopadhyay (ed.), pp 134

<sup>40</sup> Documents of the Communist Movement in India, (1917-1928) Vol. 1, pp xlvii

a danger to the public peace.’ The primary reason for this action was that Meerut had not ‘caused more than a temporary setback to Communist plans in India.’ Indeed, if anything, the Communist Party had received a fillip from the case proceedings and was reorganizing on a more ambitious scale. As ever, in the paranoia surrounding communism, ‘it was...not so much the immediate activities of the Communists as their ultimate object<sup>41</sup> which led the Communist Party of India being declared unlawful.’ But in the last analysis:

‘the ban was imposed because experiences had conclusively shown that the ordinary law was inadequate to control Communist activity and because proscription was considered more warranted by circumstances than special legislation and calculated to succeed without resort to frequent and protracted legal proceedings.’<sup>42</sup>

In short then, this action was a spectacular admission of defeat by a Government that attempted to counter ‘communism’ through other relatively indirect methods. It also conclusively showed that the more hawkish elements within the Government, especially those from the security and intelligence services, had won the argument for a more severe crackdown on communist activities. Nevertheless, these voices were unable to outlaw, much as they would liked to, ‘communist’ ideas and beliefs in of themselves. Neither were they able to criminalize ‘communists’ in of themselves. This much was admitted by the Government itself, especially as the ban on the CPI effectively forced radical politics underground. Thus, while ‘communist’ activities may have been delivered a crippling

---

<sup>41</sup> Defined as: ‘...overthrowing the existing order of society and bringing about India’s independence by means of violent revolution, seeking to secure this object by mass revolutionary action, strikes, demonstrations etc., culminating in general strikes and armed insurrections.’

<sup>42</sup> Subodh Roy (ed), *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents, 1935-1945* (Calcutta: Ganasahitya Prakash, 1976), pp 89-91

blow, the pursuit of the 'communist threat' still continued unabated. In the battlefield of ideas then, the colonial state was compelled to back down.

In Punjab, the provincial Government was only too eager to implement the provisions of the Criminal Law Amendment Act on 'communist' organizations. Again, this leeway was liberally interpreted and five organizations were banned, most of whom had no direct links with the CPI (if anything, there were serious rifts between a few and the Party) but were rather merely classified as 'communist.' Namely, these organizations were the Anti-Imperialist League, Punjab Provincial NJBS, Punjab KKP, Amritsar District Kisan Sabha and the Punjab Kisan League. Along with the provincial wings of these parties, their committees, sub-committees, and branches were also declared unlawful. Conversely, trade unions and other labour organizations were spared for the time being as they were not considered a credible threat. But, if anything, the sheer multitude of these organizations revealed the dispersed and complex nature of the radical Left in the Punjab. A few, such as the Anti Imperialist League (AIL), led by Sohan Singh Josh and M.A Majid had rifts with the Punjab KKP (of whom the former was a founding member) while the NJBS, after a period of prolonged tension with the KKP, was now allied with it. As far as the Amritsar District Kisan Sahba and the Punjab Kisan League were concerned; both were affiliated with the KKP and the AIL respectively, but maintained a seemingly autonomous existence in an eventually futile attempt to avoid government persecution.<sup>43</sup> Despite the fractured nature of the Punjabi Left though, the provincial Government still considered them a threat that was sufficiently serious to warrant proscription. Its action also came at a fortuitous moment, and was perhaps intentionally

---

<sup>43</sup> Subodh Roy (ed), *Communism in India : Unpublished Documents, 1925-1934* (Calcutta : Ganasahitya Prakash, 1972), pp 238-44

timed, as there were negotiations afoot between the rival factions amongst the Punjabi Left for the formation of yet another ‘united front.’<sup>44</sup> Inevitably, these attempts at unity were scuppered with the announcement of the proscriptions. Overnight, all the proscribed organizations, with the exception of the NJBS, announced their dissolution in order to evade arrest.<sup>45</sup> The Punjab Government thus succeeded, if only for a very limited time, in hindering the activities of the Punjabi Left.

### The State-Left Engagement

The step taken in 1934 was but one of many episodes in the prolonged engagement between the Left and the Colonial State. The State adopted a variety of means with which to confront the spread of radical politics and even succeeded to a significant extent. Indeed, this litany of relentless persecution is viewed as one of the main reasons why the leftist movement in India eventually ‘failed.’ And yet, leftist politics in India, as indeed the Punjab, displayed a remarkable tenacity in surviving despite the vast odds and the sheer asymmetry of power stacked against it. If anything, the Left continually adapted to and moulded itself to changing circumstances. The tussle between attempted dominance and responsive adaptability continued to define the engagement between the Left and the Colonial State. This section, then, will chart this engagement as it played out in the Punjab and will focus on a few episodes which highlighted the Left’s capacity in moulding itself in order to remain a viable socio-political force.

One of the clearest insights into this engagement comes from the response of the Punjabi Left to the provincial government’s act in 1934. While these proscriptions effectively

---

<sup>44</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1934, Simla-E, 8<sup>th</sup> September, No. 35, pp 372

<sup>45</sup> PPSAI 1934, Simla-E, 15<sup>th</sup> September, No. 36, pp 379

ended the activities of a number of radical organizations, they could not prevent leftists from reengaging with radical politics. In part, this was a familiar story. As with any act of proscription, new forms and mediums immediately cropped up through which a similar kind of politics could be conducted. The 1934 ban then, led to the establishment of new organizations which may have been semantically and rhetorically different, but were, to all intents and purposes, a substantive continuation from the politics of the old. As at the All India level, one of the first steps taken in this regard was the formation of a Provincial Congress Socialist Party (CSP), which could conduct its politics under the ostensible control of the Congress. This new organization appealed both to those dissatisfied with the promises of mainstream nationalism as well as those looking for a refuge from outright state persecution. For the more radically inclined though, any association with the Congress was anathema. Thus, leftist radicals such as Sohan Singh Josh and Feroze-Din Mansur, who were previously associated with the AIL, temporarily set up rival organizations like the 'Workers League.'<sup>46</sup> Moreover, in line with past practices, issue specific associations were also established, which again reflected the incredible adaptability of the Left. Thus, during discussions on the Relief of Indebtedness Bill at the provincial level, a Punjab Kisan Qarza Committee was formed with the immediate objective of working within agricultural workers and opposing rival Zamindar Leagues set up by the Left's Unionist and Akali opponents. This association, and others like it, enabled the political survival of a section of the Punjabi Left while also allowing it to

---

<sup>46</sup> PPSAI 1934, Lahore, 17<sup>th</sup> November, No. 44, pp 487-8

focus on specific issues with frequent references to more substantive matters concerning alternative socio-political objectives.<sup>47</sup>

Notwithstanding this political manoeuvring, which the provincial authorities were all too aware of, Punjabi radicals could not hope to continue in a similar vein as before. At the very least, rhetorical and semantic changes had to be made. Thus, in a meeting of the newly formed 'Workers League,' stress was laid on keeping the publicly declared aims and objectives of the league 'moderate.'<sup>48</sup> For the most part this required using the more acceptable label of 'socialism.' Conversely, references to the more problematic terms of 'communism' and 'revolution' were eschewed. And yet, within Leftist circles, the long term aims and objectives remained virtually unchanged. For example, the publicly declared objectives of the CSP contained the more politically acceptable ideas of 'social justice,' organizing society on the basis of 'constructive socialism' as well as the ambiguous classic: seeking to 'modify human behaviour in order to produce a better type of citizen.' And yet, in a widely circulated letter to political workers, it was emphasized that the foremost goal of the provincial CSP remained the attainment of 'complete freedom with the object of establishing an independent and democratic government of peasants and workers in India.'<sup>49</sup> Despite this assurance however, there were still a few dissenting voices who preferred the label 'communist' over 'socialist.'<sup>50</sup> Both the State and elements within the Left then had a penchant for semantic politics. But in practical terms, there was no substantial change as far as everyday politics was concerned. The provincial authorities and the State at large had succeeded in preventing leftist radicals

---

<sup>47</sup> PPSAI 1935, Lahore, 9<sup>th</sup> March, No. 10, pp 93-4

<sup>48</sup> PPSAI 1934, Lahore, 1<sup>st</sup> December, No. 46, pp 509-10

<sup>49</sup> PPSAI 1934, Lahore, 10<sup>th</sup> November, No. 43, pp 476-7

<sup>50</sup> Speech of SS Josh, PPSAI 1934, Lahore, 29<sup>th</sup> December, No. 50, pp 549

from openly proclaiming their objectives of 'Communism,' 'Revolution' and 'Internationalism' but in reality these labels were rhetorical ploys that had little bearing on practical politics. Despite the obsessive beliefs of the security and intelligence services, the Left was never close to achieving the communist utopia it yearned for. Rather, everyday politics was mostly concerned, both before and after the proscription, with immediate social and political issues, albeit with references to a more substantive politics thrown in. The provincial authorities were clearly cognizant of this but were unable take further steps as the Punjabi Left had taken care to seek refuge in more politically acceptable *terms*. The *form* of politics thus remained, for the most part, unchanged.

And yet, even the form of politics was not beyond the tactics of adaptability. An important instance in this regard was the decision of prominent leftist leaders to contest the 1937 elections. Conducted according to the terms of the Government of India Act of 1935 and under a relatively broadened franchise, the elections demonstrated the extent to which the Left as a whole had managed to emerge as a significant political force in the Punjab. Typical to the Punjabi mode of politics, these elections were fought, for the most part, on the strength of patron-client networks in which 'party organization was not always effective and was ordinarily unable to direct and control the course of voting to any appreciable extent.' Unexpectedly then, the Unionists emerged as the most dominant political party with 90 out of a house of 175 seats. And yet, two Unionist candidates were defeated by 'socialist' candidates in the Lahore and Sheikhpura districts. In all, seven leftist candidates of varying political inclinations were elected to the Legislature on various platforms which included prominent leaders such as Sohan Singh Josh, Mian

Iftikharuddin, Master Kabul Singh and Harjap Singh. Other leftist candidates such as Mange Ram Vats were defeated.<sup>51</sup> Overall then, and despite the divisions between them, the results represented a small victory for the Punjabi Left as a whole. There was however a heavy price that had to be paid. Unable to stand on their respective platforms, Punjabi leftists had to rely on other organizations like the Congress, and the separate, exclusively Sikh, electorate, in order to get elected. This was important both for attaining political legitimacy and benefitting from the superior organizational capacity of their patron parties. More crucially though, through their decision to contest electoral politics, the Left implicitly accepted the structures of the political arena that had been crafted by the state and which had previously been, and still were, the object of their vociferous criticism. But if politics were ever to be relevant and viable, key concessions would have to be made; even if that entailed contesting the elections on platforms different from what leftists would have preferred. And yet, the left leaning proclivities of these individuals were hardly a secret for both their parent bodies and the provincial authorities. Indeed, in subsequent police reports, the ‘socialist’ candidates kept being referred distinctly in relation to these bodies as a whole. The continuing concern about the leftist threat then, showed that the Left, through its adaptation, had remained a significant force in Punjabi politics.

These suspicions and mutual antagonisms remained barely concealed even during one of the most famous episodes in this engagement. Following the invasion of the Soviet Union, the CPI undertook a radical u-turn in its policy by the end of 1941. A war that had hitherto been labelled as an ‘Imperialist War,’ was now classified as a ‘People’s War.’

---

<sup>51</sup> PPSAI 1937, Lahore, 20<sup>th</sup> February, No. 8, pp 122-3

The attack on the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany had pushed the Communist Party into a corner, forcing it to choose between its Internationalist ideals and its commitment to the liberation struggle in India. In rhetorical and theoretical terms at least, the two objectives were intimately linked to each other. In part, it was argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global advance of fascism would only spell the end of various liberation struggles across the world.<sup>52</sup> But in terms of practical politics, this balancing act was a very difficult undertaking. For in committing itself to the war against fascism, the CPI was compelled to support the British war effort as well. More crucially, the Party also alienated itself from the nationalist mainstream which had decided to boycott and oppose the war effort unless certain key conditions were met. Inevitably then, the political costs associated with this dramatic shift in policy were quite severe, as the Left was to discover after the termination of the war.

As far as the British were concerned however, this shift was broadly welcomed, though not without the obligatory note of caution. On a general level, the necessity for ‘accepting help from anyone genuinely anxious to support the war, be he Communist, Socialist, or anyone else,’ was broadly recognized.<sup>53</sup> But the support proffered by the Communists for the war effort was still treated with a great degree of caution. In the first instance, it was understood by many within the Home Department that most individuals within the CPI paid only ‘lip service to the tenets for Communism as a mode of life.’ Instead, they were far more enamoured ‘by the mechanics of revolution in general and the technique of the Russian revolution in particular...’ They were thus, ‘terrorists first and communists

---

<sup>52</sup> See for instance Party Letter No. 55 ‘Our New Party Line – British Comrades Correct Us!’ in *Communism in India 1935-45* pp 269-78

<sup>53</sup> Extract from ‘Note dated 8/12/41 from Deputy Director IB to Director, IB...’ *Communism in India 1935-45*, pp 239

second.’<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, there was no doubt that a significant number of ‘genuine’ communists were sincere in their support to the British war effort. Indeed, to ascertain this commitment, the Intelligence services even went so far as to arrange direct interviews with Puran Chand Joshi, the first and only General Secretary of pre-partition CPI.<sup>55</sup> Strategic interventions were also made through the placement of ‘converted’ leftists in detention centres in the hope that they would be able to push the ‘Peoples War’ line to other incarcerated activists.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the urgency of the moment – especially given the succession of Allied defeats in Malaya, Burma and South West Pacific, which led to a wave of ‘defeatism’ in the country<sup>57</sup> – meant that Communist assistance would have to be accepted despite the clear risks involved in doing so. In the beginning then, a policy of select releases of communist/socialist detainees was adopted by dividing the ‘sheep from the goats.’<sup>58</sup> Every case of potential release was examined and dealt with separately in order to ensure that the ‘rebel’ could be converted into a ‘useful citizen.’ If anything, this sort of an individual was deemed to be far less of a danger than the average Congressman who had ‘the heart of a defeatist or a Quisling...’<sup>59</sup> Far more significantly, the ban on the CPI was itself removed in July 1942 in order to allow the Party to throw its full organizational weight behind the war effort.<sup>60</sup> Thus, despite the recognition that the CPI and its affiliates were implacably opposed to the British Empire, a calculated

---

<sup>54</sup> ‘Policy towards the Communist Party of India’ *Communism in India 1935-45*, pp 343

<sup>55</sup> ‘Notes on Interview with Mr. P.C. Joshi’ 12-5-1942 *Communism in India 1935-45*, pp 375-9

<sup>56</sup> An excellent example of which was the placement of Acchar Singh Chinna at the Deoli detention camp. See for instance ‘Extract from Note dated 8/12/41 from Deputy Director IB to Director, IB...’ *Communism in India 1935-45*, pp 236-9

<sup>57</sup> NDC S-361, (Punjab Government Policy Regarding Communists) Letter from F.C Bourne to All Deputy Commissioners in the Punjab, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1943, pp 1

<sup>58</sup> A biblical reference to the Gospel of Matthew 25:31.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Policy towards the Communist Party of India’ *Communism in India 1935-45*, pp 351

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, pp 348

decision was taken in order to utilize any possible means of support; a clear indication, if any were needed, of British anxieties during the height of the Second World War. For its part, the CPI performed its job remarkably well, as the cheering tone of the appropriately named *Peoples War* and *Qaumi Jang*<sup>61</sup> indicated.

This shift in policy, however, was less well received in the Provinces, and particularly in the Punjab, where the leftists were politically delicately positioned. In pursuance of the decision taken at the central level, the Punjab Government had, as a first step, released a number of leading Punjabi leftists in May 1942. These included renowned personalities like Acchar Singh Chhina, Teja Singh Sutantar, Iqbal Singh Hundal, Sohan Singh Josh and Feroze-ud-Din Mansur.<sup>62</sup> As far as the provincial authorities were concerned though, these releases did not have the desired effect. The utility of the pro-war propaganda by Communist-Kisan activists had rapidly deteriorated on account of their 'natural anti-British bias,' until it became, for the most part, quite objectionable. Moreover, the released leftists were concentrating their energies on the reorganization of the provincial party in preparation for the post war period. At the same time, such individuals were also perceived to be 'genuinely anxious' to see the defeat of the Axis powers. Accordingly, they refused to participate in Congress activities and actively condemned attempts at sabotage, strikes and any other activity that might interfere with the war effort.<sup>63</sup> On balance therefore, the influence of Punjabi leftists was considered to be marginally beneficial. This view however was not shared further down the line as the repeated protestations made by Deputy Commissioners clearly indicated. The Deputy

---

<sup>61</sup> Also meaning 'Peoples War.' This was the Urdu version of *Peoples War*.

<sup>62</sup> 'Reports from the IB regarding the political situation and communism in India 1941-42' 7/5/1942, *Communism in India 1935-45*, pp 338

<sup>63</sup> NDC S-361 (Punjab Government Policy Regarding Communists) 'Letter from F.C Bourne, pp 1

Commissioner for Lahore for instance, found the release of these individuals and the Punjab Government's policy 'quite incomprehensible.' If anything, he argued, leniency towards an opponent would be interpreted as a sign of weakness and would only add to the worries of district officers charged with the maintenance of law and order.<sup>64</sup> The activities of the Punjabi Left then, had divided the provincial administration, as they previously did on other occasions as well.

But this could hardly have been otherwise. As was feared by the security services at both the All India and the provincial level, many individuals saw governmental 'leniency' as a good opportunity for continuing and consolidating their politics which had suffered enormously on account of proscriptions and incarcerations. In part then, the usual remonstrations against Imperialist injustices and the advocacy for independence as well as labour and Kisan rights continued unabated. Moreover, the Punjabi Left was also anxious not to alienate the Congress. After all, the Congress, despite being persecuted by the State, was still the primary successor to the Imperial Government in India. Thus, Communist-Kisan activists frequently demanded the release of Congressmen and openly expressed their sympathy for the Congress cause. Their release was considered all the more important for the formation of a 'National Unity Front' with the Muslim League which would ostensibly bring about Hindu-Muslim Unity and the end of British Imperialism in India.<sup>65</sup> Another crucial reason behind the continuance of such activities was to ensure that the Left did not get politically isolated in the Punjab. Its pro-war stance

---

<sup>64</sup> NDC S-361, (Punjab Government Policy Regarding Communists), Letter from Cuthbert King, Commissioner, Lahore Division, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1943, pp 1-2

<sup>65</sup> NDC S-361, (Punjab Government Policy Regarding Communists), Report on the Situation in the Punjab for the first half of April 1943, pp 1-2. This episode is covered extensively in the chapter on the Muslim League.

had come at a great political cost, with their provincial rivals portraying their change in policy as a conclusive proof that the Left's loyalties lay with the Soviet Union rather than with the liberation struggle. These were then almost futile attempts at shoring the badly damaged political credibility of the Punjabi Left.

More crucially, the reluctance to conform to governmental expectations was also an outcome of the radical tendencies within the broader Punjabi Left, which had been reorganized, following the first releases in 1942, under the united platform of the CPI. The exception was the provincial CSP which refused to affiliate itself with the CPI line. While attempts at leftist unity had been a permanent feature of radical politics, concrete progress was made between the rival Kirti and Communist factions in the early 1940s.<sup>66</sup> These attempts finally achieved fruition with the formation of the first united Provincial Committee in 1942. Still, the agreement to follow the Party line was not accepted wholeheartedly by many activists, and especially amongst the rank and file of the provincial party. Indeed, many were promised by their leadership that:

'...by joining the war effort, Communists would be able to penetrate the Army and key industries in large numbers, and thereby strengthen their position for an ultimate struggle against British Imperialism.'<sup>67</sup>

At the very least then, this drastic shift in policy was greeted with bemusement by many in the Left. After having dedicated the better part of their political lives to an uncompromising stance against the British Empire, such individuals could hardly have been expected to suddenly support their arch nemesis despite their commitment to the ideals of Internationalism. Such individuals then, argued that they could make no

---

<sup>66</sup> NDC, S-425, (Fortnightly Reports on Situation in Punjab by the Chief Secretary, Punjab Government, 1941) Report on the Situation in the Punjab for the first half of August 1941, pp 3

<sup>67</sup> PPSAI 1942, Supplement, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, No. 18, pp 233

headway with the ‘masses’ unless they diluted ‘their war Gospel with attacks on the British Government.’<sup>68</sup> This was particularly the case with the Kirti movement which had a substantial presence in rural tracts within the central districts.

The Kirti movement had in fact been at the front of anti-war activities even before the advent of the Second World War. Indeed, like its Ghadarite patrons, much of Kirti activities were focussed on discouraging military recruitment as well as fomenting dissensions within the British India Army. By the late 1930s, the Kirti Party had managed to establish ‘contacts’ with serving Sikh soldiers in the local cantonments. Copies of the *Kirti* and other revolutionary literature were also smuggled into regimental lines. While small in scale, these efforts did have an impact. Thus, ‘large scale desertions’ from the Sikh Central India Horse stationed in Egypt, followed by cases of ‘mutinous behaviour,’ were held to be the direct result of the ‘insidious influences and pernicious preachings’ of the Kirti group.<sup>69</sup> They were also an outcome of effective anti-militarist propaganda within districts that were the centres of Kirti and Kisan agitations. Moreover, in making use of the pressing requirement for military recruits a number of ‘subversive elements’ had also succeeded in joining the British Indian Army. Being the heartland of military recruitment, such cases were viewed with grave concern by the Punjab authorities. As a result, hundreds of leftist radicals were incarcerated under the Defence of India Rules on the charge of spreading ‘disaffection’ and ‘sedition.’ In another sense though, these cases also highlighted the tensions that cropped up *between* provincial governments following

---

<sup>68</sup> Lionel Carter (ed). ‘Document No. 110, Glancy to Linlithgow, June 10<sup>th</sup> 1942’ *Punjab Politics, 1940-43: Strains of War (Governors Fortnightly Reports and other Key Documents)* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005) pp 310

<sup>69</sup> ‘A Note Outlining Kirti agitation in the Punjab and the Kirti Lehri Group Meerut in relation to the Communist Movement in India, 1940,’ *Communism in India 1935-45*, pp 229-30

the elections of 1937. For the activities of the Kirtis had been made possible in large part to a more amenable Congress Government in the United Provinces which promised more political freedoms compared to the Punjab Government. Thus, despite repeated protestations from the Punjab, no action was taken against the openly functioning Kirti office in Meerut.<sup>70</sup> This brief episode, then, only showed how change within the state profoundly affected the functioning of radical politics.

Given this history, it was thus difficult, if not outright impossible, for radical Punjabi leftists to unconditionally support the British war effort once the Peoples War line had been formally adopted by the All India Party. For their part, the provincial authorities were all too cognizant of this reality, as was evidenced by their refusal to release all Punjabi radicals. They correctly assessed that for such individuals, a commitment to 'Proletarian Internationalism' came second to their animosity towards British rule. An excellent example of this sentiment lay in the successful approaches made by the Kirtis in the beginning of the Second World War to *both* the Axis and Soviet legates in Afghanistan for financial and material assistance.<sup>71</sup> Thus, much like their Ghadarite patrons, the irreconcilable foe of the Kirtis remained the British Government in India. These activities only lessened once the Kirtis were compelled to, at the very least, rhetorically support the Peoples War line. Nevertheless, sporadic efforts were still made by fringe radicals to continue the policy of anti-militarist propaganda in the Punjab.<sup>72</sup> Despite the compromised position in which the Punjabi Left found itself then, it still

---

<sup>70</sup> Carter, 'Document No. 47 Craik to Linlithgow, dated August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1942,' pp 175-7 *Punjab Politics, 1940-43: Strains of War*

<sup>71</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/218 (Bose Conspiracy Case) Harmindar Singh Sodhi account pp 35-44

<sup>72</sup> See for instance the reports of PPSAI 1942, Supplement, Lahore, 20<sup>th</sup> August, No. 35, pp 529; PPSAI 1944, Supplement, Lahore, 8<sup>th</sup> April, No. 15, pp 208; PPSAI 1944, Simla-E, 8<sup>th</sup> July, No. 28, pp 381-2

managed to create some space for its activities. This compromise however, came at a very heavy political cost as after the war it was effectively shunned by a revengeful Congress and CSP. More crucially, any space that had previously existed for political manoeuvre was effectively reduced to naught by the end of the war. The successors to the post-colonial dispensation had no interest in granting the Left a platform, or even an arena, in which it could conduct its politics.

## **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, the engagement between the Colonial State and the Left provides some useful insights into their respective contours. With regard to the 'State,' what emerges from the documents is a picture of a variegated and aggregated entity that can be vertically and horizontally differentiated along levels of governance and range of institutions respectively. Nevertheless, the concerns of these disaggregated entities overlapped to a sufficient extent to project a seemingly monolithic and synonymous response to a 'communist threat' that was always perceived as being significant enough to pose a serious challenge to British rule in the subcontinent. It is this intersection of varying influences and powers that can actually be understood as the generalized entity of the 'colonial state.' It was this entity that demarcated an arbitrary political arena which determined the kind of politics that would be considered as 'legitimate.' This sphere ensured that much of the Left would mostly be beyond the pale of what could be considered as a mode of politics that the British could effectively deal with. Much of this analysis however, seems to belabour a fairly obvious point. The crucial question then, concerns the extent to which this hegemonic sphere was a function of the varying

institutional and governmental impulses within the colonial state. A close analysis reveals that this sphere was constantly subject to expansion and contraction depending on which impulse within the state was winning the argument. That in turn was contingent on the specific period and its prevailing regional and international socio-political conditions. Crucially, this sphere could also be subject to expansion and contraction by the politics of the Left itself. Indeed, an excellent example of this is furnished by the adoption of the 'Peoples War' line which enabled the Left to continue its politics in an, albeit, limited fashion. It is also in this process that the much romanticized 'agency' of marginal actors can be adequately situated.

That is not to suggest however, that the power exercised by the state can in anyway be underestimated. Rather, what it points to is an understanding that power and hegemony cannot merely be understood in terms of the various *means* that the Colonial State had at its disposal in countering the Left. Instead, the State's power lay in its ability to craft a political sphere in which a certain *kind* and *mode* of politics would effectively be delegitimized. With respect to the latter, the state was particularly keen on cracking down on any form of politics that employed the tactics or the threat of mass violence. Thus, frequent references were made to the fact that the 'Communist threat' deserved to be taken seriously, precisely because it threatened a mass and violent revolution intended to overthrow a state established 'by law.' 'Communism,' in other words, could not be understood other than through this prism. It mattered little that most leftists eschewed violent tactics and the attempts to instigate a mass revolution were confined to rhetoric alone. What mattered was the *association* between the two. In this however, the leftists were hardly alone. Also targeted on this basis were fringe revolutionary groups, assorted

‘terrorist’ cells, ‘communalists’<sup>73</sup> and radical nationalists whose activities did involve frequent acts of violence and sabotage. What made the Left distinctive however was the dovetailing of its rhetorical threat of violence with the *kind* of politics it chose to espouse. The key element of this politics was the invocation of ‘class’ as an organizing principle. But as far as the British were concerned, class remained, at best, an ‘alien’ and even ‘unnatural’ form of association for a populace which had long been imagined as a conglomeration of different castes, religions, and ethnicities. Indeed, the political structures created by the British were mostly built along these divisions in society. Additionally, there was a fundamental distinction between those who wished to *inherit* the State versus those who wished to *dismantle* and *restructure* it. Negotiations could be conducted with the former in the hope of retaining some British interests but there was clearly no prospect of dealing with the latter. This was especially so when those wishing to dismantle the state were considered to be proxies of a rival global power. Indeed, the very power of this rival intellectual and political force can be understood in the terms that were employed to describe it. Mostly, these were biological metaphors, such as the terms of ‘virus,’ and ‘disease;’ all of which conveyed the speed with which ‘communist’ ideals were percolating across the globe as well as their potential potency. The key for the colonial state then, lay in demarcating a sphere in which this *kind* and *mode* of politics would effectively be rendered impotent.

And this is precisely where the power of the State lay. For the British Indian State by and large succeeded in channelling what it considered to be illegitimate into the very structures and spheres of acceptable and legitimate politics. The Left then, in order to

---

<sup>73</sup> That said, such individuals were certainly treated with greater degree of tolerance than leftists.

remain politically relevant and viable, was compelled to mould its politics in conformity with the contours of this sphere. When it failed to do so, it paid the ultimate political price of being rendered completely impotent. When it did, it had to do so on the basis of compromises that may have challenged the ideological principles of its politics but not the *form* in which it was conducted. The fact that the Left was compelled to engage on such terms showed that the asymmetry of power lay in the State's ability to craft a political arena in which political players would have to conduct their politics on terms acceptable to the ruling dispensation. Nevertheless, this process also clearly showed that the Left was able to adapt its politics to changing circumstances in order to ensure its political longevity. Moreover, despite the various circumstances that impeded its development, the Left was still able to engage with the colonial state on terms that were vastly disproportionate to its actual political power. In doing so, it also succeeded in popularizing its ideals amongst sections that were not directly associated with the Left. It is in this sense, then, that the engagement of this movement with the Colonial State reveals much more about these two political forces that would otherwise be obvious.

### **Competing Visions of the Nation: The Congress and the Punjabi Left**

This section will chart the prolonged and often torturous engagements between the Congress and the Leftist movement within Punjabi politics. This is a continuation of the previous chapter which initiated a series of discussions aimed at exploring the Left's broader engagement with the dominant political forces in the Punjab and the subcontinent. The first dominant and hegemonic political force examined in this regard was the colonial state itself. In one sense then, this section is also linked to the previous discussion since it examines a political force that gradually came to be seen and (often reluctantly) accepted as an inheritor of the colonial state. Like the Raj it was trying to displace, the Congress's relationship with the Left too was fraught with severe difficulties, which were further complicated by oscillating periods of cooperation and opposition. When situated within the realm of provincial politics, this engagement also has the potential of providing some useful insights into the contours of the Punjabi political landscape. This is particularly true insofar as the themes of party organization and patterns of political and organizational affiliation are concerned. Additionally, this analysis is also important for highlighting an eternal – and often existential – dilemma confronting the Leftist movement as a whole across the subcontinent: how to work with an organization leading the national liberation struggle whilst at the same time opposing it and claiming a distinct space for the Leftist vision of politics?

Admittedly though, this question may seem irrelevant insofar as colonial Punjab is concerned. For one of the most intriguing aspects of the Congress movement in the

Punjab was its political marginality relative to other regions, and in particular the neighbouring United Provinces, where it was the most dominant amongst all political players. For the most part, the Congress movement in the Punjab was disorganized, mostly restricted to the urban arena – in a province where the bases of power were situated in the rural areas – and weighed down by perpetual infighting and factionalism. Moreover, provincial politics was consistently dominated by the Unionist Party, a loyalist coalition of rural power brokers who formed the base on which the colonial state was constructed in the Punjab. If access to the corridors of power is any guide, the Unionist party dominated the Legislative Councils during the 1920s and early 1930s and formed a ministry in the Punjab following their overwhelming victory in the 1937 provincial elections. In contrast, the Congress only managed to enter provincial government in a short lived arrangement with the Unionists following the elections in 1945-6. And yet, despite its relative weakness, the Congress was still the most prominent oppositional force in the Punjab, if only owing to its association with its All India counterpart. It is largely in the context of this association then, that the Punjabi Left too was confronted by the dilemma shared by its ideological counterparts across the subcontinent.

But this naturally leads to another more fundamental question. To what extent could the ‘Congress’ and the ‘Left’ be distinguished from each other as far as the Punjab was concerned? This matter is rendered all the more complicated by the nature of the colonial sources one has to mostly rely on. For during certain periods, colonial intelligence itself often found it difficult to analytically distinguish the two. Thus similar, and often exact, sets of political activities and activists were interchangeably classified under the categories ‘communist’ – and its related labels of ‘socialist’ and ‘revolutionary’ – or

‘Congress.’ At other times, it was far easier to distinguish between the two political strands, though even then, there were certain trends of political actions and ideological affiliations that resolutely refused to fall into neat categorizations. Clearly, political affiliations and activities were transitory, conditional and notoriously difficult to classify, even for a colonial bureaucracy accustomed to arbitrary categorizations. The purpose of this analysis, then, is not to reproduce the arbitrary classifications of political affiliations and actions that the colonial state sketched in its reporting. Rather, it is perhaps more useful to dismantle the broad categories of both the ‘Left’ and the ‘Congress’ and to question what both meant in political practice. In so doing, a more insightful analysis of both these political strands can be undertaken, which is at the same time sensitive to the interplay between local, provincial and All India politics and yet, alert to the issues and periods of collaboration and hostility between the two forces. In short, this is as much an exercise of enhancing our understanding of ‘local’ politics as it is an attempt of moving beyond the traps laid out in colonial sources, which many historians of the Left have unwittingly fallen into.

In recognition of this complexity, this chapter will initiate its discussion by a brief analysis of the Congress, both as an organization and a movement. In doing so, I will closely examine the provincial Congress movement as well as its multiple local variations. I will also highlight the unfamiliar position that the Congress found itself in, with its status as a relatively marginal actor in provincial politics. After disaggregating the Congress as a political movement, I will then analyse its multiple levels and periods of engagement with the ‘Left.’ An important part of this narrative will be a discussion on the Congress Socialist Party, which has curiously been omitted from standard histories

focussing on the Punjabi Left. Instead, the focus of this literature has more often been on the ‘traditional’ or ‘true’ Left, which distinguished itself with its complete break with the Congress in the 1940s. In discussing this, I will be pursuing a roughly chronological narrative which will highlight the oscillating relationship between the ‘Left’ and the ‘Congress.’ Overall, I hope to highlight the practice and perhaps, the limits to political radicalism in the world of Punjabi politics.

### Disaggregating the Congress

As the most prominent political movement in British and post colonial India, the Indian National Congress has been the subject of numerous works. The most significant work on this movement was pioneered in the 1970s, particularly by the ‘Cambridge School,’ which subjected the Congress to an intense scrutiny. The emphasis in much of this literature was on the region or locality that worked to disaggregate both the Raj and the Congress. These works dissected the Congress as an organization and a movement, highlighted its numerous internal contradictions and emphasized the specificity of its politics in various localities and regions.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in light of this analysis, it becomes legitimate to ask whether the ‘Congress’ can be understood in light of the normative parameters one normally employs to for a unified and cohesive political organization.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of the more useful examples in this vast body of literature include, John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson & Anil Seal (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870 to 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), and D.A Low (ed.), *Congress and the Raj : Facets of the Indian struggle, 1917-47, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn* (New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For works that focus on (but not exclusively) the post-colonial state and deal with similar themes, see Myron Weiner, *Party Building in a New Nation: The Indian National Congress* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), Paul Brass, *Caste, Faction, and Party in Indian politics* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1984-1985), and Paul Brass & Francis Robinson (eds.), *The Indian National Congress and Indian society, 1885-1985* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1987)

This is particularly the case insofar as the Punjab was concerned, where the Congress was a relatively insignificant political force. Moreover, it is perhaps owing to its marginality that the Punjab Congress has rarely been subject to a close scrutiny. The lack of literature becomes even more glaring when compared to the plethora of studies on the Congress movement in the Bengal, United Provinces or Bombay.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of organizational structure, the Congress was the first political organization, which, after the passing of a new constitution in Nagpur in 1920, combined a permanent central executive with a coherent party structure that reached down to the local level. This permanent body was called the Congress Working Committee, which was partnered by an All India Congress Committee that convened several times a year. Further down and based on linguistic demarcations, the eleven British Indian provinces were divided into twenty Congress 'provinces.' Heading each 'province' was a Provincial Congress Committee (PCC). On the face of it, these committees had the power to shape policy and supervise all subordinate activity. Lastly, lower down the party hierarchy came the District Congress Committees (DCCs) and below them, the *thana*, *taluka*, and City Congress Committees.<sup>3</sup> In many respects, this structure was the mirror image of how the Raj was itself constructed. As Anil Seal argued, this particular structure was designed to match the administrative and representative composition of the Raj, with the possibility of one day inheriting its functions.<sup>4</sup> But this particular organizational structure was certainly not limited to the Congress. Rather, a whole host of significant and marginal

---

<sup>2</sup> Excellent examples of these are, Gyanendra Panday, *The ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926-34: a Study in Imperfect Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), and Gordon Johnson, *Provincial politics and Indian nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress, 1880 to 1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973)

<sup>3</sup> B. R. Tomlinson, *The Indian National Congress and the Raj, 1929-1942: the Penultimate Phase*, (London : Macmillan, 1976) pp 32

<sup>4</sup> Anil Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India,' *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 7, No. 3 (1973), pp. 326

political organizations, not least amongst the Left itself, functioned along similar lines. That is not to suggest however, that all these organizations harboured ambitions to inherit the Raj's power. Rather, this particular arrangement was almost necessary if political associations and organizations were to deal with the Raj and their political counterparts at various levels. Moreover, the very presence of this structure was not in of itself sufficient for the functioning of a centralized and coherent political organization.<sup>5</sup> Rather, as the experience of the Congress shows, political activity, depending on the wider political situation and the specificities of a particular region or locality, was subject to frequent shifts in both intensity and influence.

This was particularly the case as far as the Congress movement in the Punjab was concerned. The Congress was first formed in the Punjab soon after the formation of its parent organization in the 1880s.<sup>6</sup> From this early period of Punjabi 'nationalist' politics till the Minto Morley reforms, the provincial Congress movement was dominated by the Arya Samaj. The Samaj itself was primarily composed of urban Hindu commercial castes such as the Khatri, Aroras and Banias. By the turn of the century, it was the predominance of these groups and their particular interests that first fully drew the Samaj into the orbit of Congress politics. The issue which led to this shift was the Punjab Alienation of Land Bill which proposed to restrict the transfer of land from agriculturist to commercial castes. Constituting a direct assault on their economic interests, the Aryas joined the platform of the Congress in increasing numbers to voice their grievances. Their involvement led the Congress down a more radical route, and in line with their radical

---

<sup>5</sup> Tomlinson, pp 33

<sup>6</sup> Gerald A. Heeger, 'The Growth of the Congress Movement in Punjab, 1920-1940,' *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 32, No. 1 (Nov., 1972), Pp 40.

counterparts elsewhere, these individuals adopted a more active role in the *swadeshi* and boycott movements.<sup>7</sup> The most famous Arya Samajist and the driving force behind this radical line was of course Lala Lajpat Rai, who remained at the forefront of provincial politics until his death in 1928. Indeed, Rai also played a prominent part in the 1907 agitation against an ill-conceived and poorly timed Colonization Bill which proposed to substantially extend government interference in the canal colonies.<sup>8</sup> Following the suppression of this movement, the Congress reverted back to relative inactivity and to the control of 'moderate' politicians until it again received a fillip during the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout this, and even while the influence of the Arya Samaj steadily declined, the presence of urban based professional and commercial classes remained significant in the provincial Congress organization. Indeed, it was the commercial and professional groups that became the strongest supporters of provincial and nationalist political activity. Given the increasing communal cleavages in Punjabi politics and the religiously skewed composition of the commercial groups, most Punjabi Congressites belonged to the Hindu community. This in turn reinforced the perception that the Congress merely represented the interests of the Hindu *bania* in the Punjab. The *bania* accusation especially was levelled against the Congress owing to its perceived and, at times, actual support for the urban commercial classes at the expense of the overwhelmingly rural based population. This was particularly illustrated during the passage of successive Land Alienation Bills in which the interests of Hindu, Sikh and predominantly Muslim agriculturists coincided

---

<sup>7</sup> Norman G. Barrier, 'The Arya Samaj and Congress Politics in the Punjab, 1894-1908' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (May, 1967), pp 364-73.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance, N. G. Barrier, 'The Punjab Disturbances of 1907'

<sup>9</sup> Barrier, 'Arya Samaj and Congress Politics,' pp 376

against the largely caricatured figure of the Hindu moneylender. For the Congress, any attempts at treading a fine balance between the interests of competing groups proved to be in vain. This was despite the fact that for the most part, the most vocal organizations arguing in favour of Hindu commercial interests, often against the Congress itself, were various Hindu communitarian parties. Indeed, the latter found itself in a familiar bind over other issues as well, of which the Communal Award was the most prominent. In the context of the Punjab, with its three prominent religious communities, the Award was a particularly sensitive issue. Following its announcement, the AICC, in its fear of alienating Muslims, had officially declared that it would neither accept nor reject the award. This incredible position had the effect of alienating many Hindu and Sikh leaders, who were adamantly opposed to the Award, as well as some Muslim members who became increasingly disenchanted once the Congress repudiated its initial stance in 1936.<sup>10</sup> Thus, as elsewhere, the claim to represent the 'nation' came at the cost of alienating significant groups in society. As a result, the Congress remained restricted, for the most part, to certain classes and groups within the Punjabi political landscape. Thus, in 1935 for instance, the provincial party had a rural membership of only 47%, a figure which was not only the lowest recorded amongst all provinces,<sup>11</sup> but was also a reflection of the Congress's failure to penetrate the overwhelming rurally based population.

Even this membership was not evenly spread across the province. Though it was present in all districts, the Congress, for the most part, was a significant force in the central and

---

<sup>10</sup> Heeger, pp 42-43

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp 43

particularly eastern districts of Rohtak, Hissar and Karnal.<sup>12</sup> The South Western and Western districts were largely the political preserve of prominent landlords and/or *pirs* who in their role as the Raj's chief power brokers maintained tightly knit patron-client networks. It was primarily these individuals who dominated Punjabi colonial politics in the twentieth century and constituted the ruling Unionist Party. Though it may be tempting to attribute the spread of the Congress in Eastern Punjab to the presence of a large non-Muslim, and primarily, Hindu population, the fact remained that communal affiliations were often superseded by sectional interests. Thus, the canal colonies, with their mix of religious communities, were, with some prominent exceptions, the preserve of loyalist politicians. Even in the eastern districts, the Congress could not entirely project their influence within the agriculturist classes – at least until the mid 1940s – who were instead represented by the prominent Jat and Unionist leader, Chaudari Chhotu Ram. Thus, the picture that emerges of the provincial Congress movement is primarily of an organization that was concentrated in certain districts and one that was overrepresented by certain urban, sectional and communal interest groups.

Even with this limited presence, or perhaps because of it, the Punjabi Congress movement was continually beset by factionalism. The Punjab however was hardly unique in this, as other provinces also witnessed bitter factional strife within the local Congress parties.<sup>13</sup> Neither was this phenomenon restricted to the Congress as virtually every political organization in the Punjab, including the Left itself, was plagued with incessant internal strife. At the provincial level, the Congress was continually divided, especially

---

<sup>12</sup> See for instance, Prem Chowdhry, 'Social Support Base and Electoral Politics: The Congress in Colonial Southeast Punjab,' *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1991), pp. 811-831

<sup>13</sup> See for instance B.R Tomlinson, pp 65-112

after the early 1920s, between two dominant factions. The differences between the two were often based on political approaches and issues of representation, but also regularly boiled down to a clash between personalities. Thus, in the 1920s the Punjab Congress was divided between the factions of Lala Lajpat Rai and Dr. Satyapal. Following Rai's death, another faction led by Gopichand Bhargava emerged. In contrast to both, Satyapal was more committed to soliciting support from Muslim groups and assorted radicals, often from the Leftist end of the political spectrum. In due course, and especially after the 1937 elections, the Punjab Congress was in the peculiar position of having dual lines of authority, with the provincial organization being dominated by Satyapal's group and the Congress Assembly Party firmly in the control of Bhargava's faction. Again, in addition to personal clashes, this situation was an outcome of irreconcilable approaches to politics and representation. Thus, reluctant to adopt a position that would both be perceived as anti-Muslim and anti-peasant, Satyapal's faction refused to outrightly reject a spate of agricultural reform bills that were introduced by the Unionist Ministry. These bills were primarily aimed at further restricting urban, and mostly Hindu, economic influences in the rural areas to provide relief to the poverty stricken peasantry. Bhargava on the other hand, representing the economic interests of his constituents, was more vocal in opposing these bills. By 1940, when Bhargava was able to gain dominance over Satyapal, the Congress Assembly Party led the opposition to the Relief of Indebtedness Bill which was aimed at severely curtailing the money lending practices of certain Hindu and Sikh groups. Indeed, this action proved so divisive, that it led to several Congress Muslims severing their connections with the Party, with some liking it to the Hindu Mahasabha.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Heeger pp 49-50. Moreover, details of Party factionalism are present in virtually all weekly intelligence

Internal strife though was not only restricted to the provincial level. Control over leadership and position within the party structure also extended down to the level of *taluka* and city committees. Consistent with the provincial level, these squabbles were also an outcome of personality clashes as well of differences over political orientations and approaches. The Lahore and Amritsar Congress Committees for instance, were constantly plagued with internal strife throughout this period. At the lowest level, this political competition was often over local influence and issues that had little if any bearing on provincial or national politics. For the provincial authorities however, these dissensions were a relief as they occupied the energies of individuals who would otherwise be unwelcome irritants. Indeed, as one police report remarked, the Congress would be little heard of in the Punjab, 'were it not for the hypnotic influence which the All India Congress organization wields.'<sup>15</sup> These problems however were recognized by Congress leaders, both at the provincial and national level, who frequently announced various schemes for restoring 'unity and discipline.'<sup>16</sup> For leaders at the All India level though, Punjabi politics proved to be a constant cause for concern. Thus Congress leaders, from Gandhi and Nehru to Abul Kalam Azad attempted in vain, in their various tours of the Punjab, to reconcile warring factions and to restore a modicum of discipline and organization within the provincial Congress. An irritated Nehru in particular, often denounced the 'selfish struggle for power of the leaders' and the 'complete lack of organization' which characterized the Punjab Congress.<sup>17</sup>

---

abstracts in the PPSAI files. Again, reasons ranging from the ideological to the communal and personal lay behind these divisions. In particular, see the years between 1931-9.

<sup>15</sup> PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 27<sup>th</sup> June, No. 25, p 397

<sup>16</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, No. 20, pp 311

<sup>17</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 3<sup>rd</sup> October, No. 39, pp 579

This endemic factionalism existed despite the fact that any hopes for holding political office and wielding administrative powers were until, the mid 1940s, illusory at best. The political landscape was firmly dominated by the Unionist Party in which the Congress and other marginal political actors could only hope to get a tentative hold. While the provincial Congress was severely debilitated by factionalism, it could not hope to compete with a dominant party that functioned through deeply embedded patron-client relationships and claimed to represent the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population. This was despite the fact that the Unionist Party too was frequently beset by localized factional struggles; though it did benefit from having leaders like Fazal-e-Hussain and Sikandar Hayat Khan, whose leadership was widely accepted within the Party. The disparity between the two political forces was adequately demonstrated in the 1937 elections. Notwithstanding the fact that this comparison may not be entirely fair, especially taking into account the very limited franchise, the fact still remained that the provincial Congress could only manage to win roughly 10% of the seats in the Punjab Legislative Assembly. Again, in comparison to other provinces, this was the lowest share of seats won by any provincial Congress party.<sup>18</sup> In a number of constituencies, it was even defeated by explicitly Hindu communitarian parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha.<sup>19</sup> In the 1946 elections of course, both the Congress and the Unionists experienced a complete reversal of fortunes. The Congress was by now the second largest party in the Provincial Legislature after the Muslim League, while the Unionists could only manage a

---

<sup>18</sup> B.R Tomlinson, pp 71. Also see, Lionel Carter (ed.), 'Document No. 6. 'Emerson to Linlithgow' February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1937' *Punjab politics, 1936-1939: The start of Provincial Autonomy* pp 76-78

<sup>19</sup> Prem Chowdary, pp 821 and 822.

paltry 15 seats in an Assembly of more than 170 members.<sup>20</sup> But rather than being owed to any inroads that the Congress may have made in the province, these results more accurately reflected the position of the Congress as an inheritor of state power. In a post-colonial setup, there would be little, if any, space for 'loyalist' elements like the Unionist Party.

And yet, the Congress remained for much of its marginal existence in the Punjab, one of the most prominent platforms for conducting politics. For the most part, the Congress functioned as a relatively inclusive political platform for groups with varying agendas who entered into transitory alliances on the basis of their opposition to British Imperialism and/or the Unionist Party. This position was, without doubt, underscored by the provincial party's affiliation with the All India Congress movement. Indeed, it was at this juncture that the 'national,' 'provincial' and 'local' met. Despite being marginal political actors in the province, the Punjab Congress's rank and file could nevertheless conduct their politics based on their affiliation with the most prominent All India movement. Thus, despite being electorally insignificant, Congress leaders in the provincial hierarchy could still command a great deal of prestige in local politics. Given this prominence, political activists with varying organizational and ideological affiliations could conduct their politics from the Congress's platform. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, it was quite usual for political activists to belong to the Congress as well as other organizations. In part, this was possible owing to the Congress's claim of representing the entirety of the Indian 'Nation.' But more to the point, this was also an attractive option

---

<sup>20</sup> Lionel Carter (ed.), 'Document No. 61. 'Note by Glancy,' March 7<sup>th</sup> 1946' *Punjab politics, 1 January 1944-3 March 1947: Last years of the Ministries: Governors' Fortnightly Reports and Other Key Documents* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), pp 178.

for sectional interests who felt that their grievances and aspirations could only be addressed by dominating the provincial congress movement. This was certainly the case insofar as the interests of commercial and urban-based groups were concerned, though even this was subject to frequent disputes and mutual acrimony. And unsurprisingly, the same logic applied to radical politicians of various shades, including those from the 'Left.'

### The Left-Congress Engagement

As elsewhere in the subcontinent, the Left had an extremely varied engagement with the Congress movement in the Punjab. There are, however, some difficulties that inevitably crop up when examining this relationship. The first relates to the concept of the 'Left' itself. As the preceding chapters have made clear, it is very difficult to outline what the 'Left' actually was. Clearly, there were a number of organizations and ideological positions within the broad spectrum of the 'Left' within the Punjab, as elsewhere in the subcontinent. And each of these had a varied level of engagement with the local, provincial and national Congress movement. Matters are of course further compounded in discussing the 'Congress' itself. To the extent that the Congress can be understood as a generalized entity at all, its nature of engagement with the Punjabi 'Left' was also contingent on specific periods as well as the prevailing political situation. Thus, from the mid 1920s to the early 1930s, it was quite difficult to analytically separate the two. In the 1940s however, the dividing lines between the two were quite well established, though even then, much depended on which organization within the Left one was referring to. To further complicate the issue, the nature of engagement between the two indistinct

political forces also depended on the level and issues on which politics was being conducted. Thus, even for periods when it was possible to distinguish between the Congress and one section of the Left, it was still quite usual to find issues on which the two cooperated at the local level, which again was quite at odds with the prevailing tensions at the provincial and national level. Lastly, there were a whole host of other aspects, ranging from the personal to the ideological, which determined the nature of engagement between the two. Given these complications then, it is hardly possible to present a comprehensive account of these sets of engagements. Rather, this section will attempt to provide a flavour of these interactions in order to elicit some broader conclusions about the contours of and, perhaps, the limits of radicalism in the Punjabi political landscape.

Perhaps the first thing to note is that the involvement of the Congress with political radicalism predated the onset of the Bolshevik revolution. The Congress had at various periods, not just in the Punjab but across the subcontinent, acted as a platform for 'extremist' and 'radical' political activists. Its worth pointing out though, that these labels were quite specific to particular periods. Hence, an 'extremist' politician in 1905 or 1907 might be considered 'moderate' in 1931 or 1942. Indeed, the meaning of these labels kept shifting according to shifting political situations that the Raj found itself confronting. 'Radicalism' then – and the Leftist variety was no different – was to be understood in relation to other political and ideological inclinations. Thus, from the turn of the century to the Minto Morley Reforms, the Punjab Congress frequently acted as a platform for the expression of 'radical' politics. The same held true for the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements. Thus, by the time that leftist politics had an impact on the Punjab, the

Congress already had a well established tradition of providing a space to ‘radical’ politicians. In most cases, these individuals merely made the transition from arch ‘nationalists’ to committed ‘leftists.’ What remained constant was their antipathy to British Imperialism. Thus, for radically inclined Punjabi Congressmen, like Dr. Satyapal, or Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew, Bolshevist ideals were merely an added inspiration to their mode of politics. It is firstly in the realm of ideas then, that the interaction between the ‘Congress,’ or more accurately, the individuals associated with the ‘Congress, and the ‘Left’ began. As the previous chapters have argued, the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution, its success, and its accompanying ideals, interpreted in a myriad of ways, had a profound impact on the political and intellectual landscape of the Punjab, as indeed it did across the wider subcontinent. Indeed, references to these ideals, at least on a rhetorical level, were so ubiquitous in the 1920s and early 1930s, even amongst parochial and communitarian ends of the political spectrum, that it is quite impossible, if not pointless, to outline the exact contours of the ‘Left.’

This difficulty was most starkly illustrated in the realm of actual politics. There were, to begin with, a number of instances, where political radicals were involved in the formation of other organizations which may not be affiliated with their own bodies. The best illustration of this lay in the founding of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha by Dr. Satyapal in 1926.<sup>21</sup> While it may be true that Satyapal may not have intended the Sabha to become a ‘terrorist’ or a ‘revolutionary’ outfit, the fact nevertheless remained that the Sabha from the very outset attracted individuals who pursued radical means for the redress of their political grievances. Additionally, it was quite usual in this period, even at the level of

---

<sup>21</sup> PPSAI 1926, Simla-E, 12<sup>th</sup> June, No. 23, pp 260

'high' politics, for radical activists to use each others platforms for articulating their politics. Thus, Congressmen like Satyapal and Kitchlew regularly attended and spoke at students conferences, labour meetings and Kirti Kisan conferences, while prominent 'communists' such as Sohan Singh Josh, Ram Chandra and others were a regular fixture at political conferences organized by sympathetic Congressmen.<sup>22</sup> Even Jawarharlal Nehru in his multiple visits to the Punjab regularly chaired and spoke at conferences organized by political radicals.<sup>23</sup> In this period of course, Nehru was the most admired Congressman for his outspoken support for socialism, even if he regularly declared it subordinate to the broader nationalist cause.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it was also possible in this period to have multiple organizational affiliations at the same time. An individual like the prominent radical M.A Majid for instance. was for a long period affiliated with the Congress, the NJBS, and the KKP. His journey to political radicalism began in the *Hijrat* movement which eventually led him to Moscow and later, back to British India. Clearly, then, there were significant possibilities in this period for lateral movement in a political space where ideological and political boundaries were not clearly demarcated.

That is not to suggest however that minor political differences did not exist. Issues relating to the legitimacy of violence and the ambivalent role played by the Congress in the national liberation struggle were often subject to vigorous debate. Important too was the idea of *swaraj* which was interpreted and envisioned in a variety of ways. Thus, staunch congressmen such as Satyapal and Kitchlew often shied away from preaching open revolution. Kitchlew for instance, declared at a public meeting that he approved of

---

<sup>22</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1928, Lahore, 21<sup>st</sup> April, No. 16, pp 172-6; Simla, 26<sup>th</sup> May, No. 20, pp 213; Simla, 23<sup>rd</sup> June, No. 24, pp 261

<sup>23</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1928, Lahore, 21<sup>st</sup> April, No. 16, pp 173

<sup>24</sup> PPSAI 1929, Lahore, 9<sup>th</sup> February, No. 6, Pp 64

Bolshevism if it meant social reform.<sup>25</sup> While also critical of Congress policy, these individuals were also quick to plead in its favour and counsel patience to those frustrated by the party's inability to adopt a radical agenda for independence. Despite their moderating influence though, they actively retained and further developed their linkages with their more radical counterparts. These political positions were also reciprocated by avowed revolutionaries like Josh. Thus, while consistently arguing for a revolutionary *swaraj* that did not substitute a 'black oligarchy,' for a 'white oligarchy,'<sup>26</sup> he was nevertheless careful of not subjecting the Congress to excessive criticism. For instance, he denied at a public meeting that the NJBS was opposed to the Congress. Instead, he was reported to have said that 'the young men of India were opposed to the spirit of compromise which was prevalent in the Congress and that they were anxious to capture the Congress and to conduct its affairs themselves.' Similarly MA Majid also added that the Sabha was not opposed to the principle of the Congress but was merely opposed to its leaders.<sup>27</sup> The statements of both Majid and Josh encapsulated the political strategy that was adopted by the vast majority of leftist radicals in the late 1920s. In the heady atmosphere of this period, the Congress, despite its vacillating and reluctant postures, still offered a considerable potential for the realization of their political aspirations. If anything, as Josh's statement indicated, there was always the hope that the Congress could be 'captured' by like minded individuals. By itself, this was indicative of the possibilities latent in a yet amorphous Congress that could be pulled in nearly any political direction.

---

<sup>25</sup> PPSAI 1929, Lahore, 16<sup>th</sup> February, No. 7, pp 74

<sup>26</sup> PPSAI 1928, Simla-E, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, No. 21, pp 231

<sup>27</sup> PPSAI 1928, Simla-E, 26<sup>th</sup> May, No. 20, pp 216

And yet, these prospects could not mask the substantial differences that existed between most leftist radicals and the prevailing political attitude of the Congress high command. For the more orthodox, the Congress, despite its potential, represented the forces of 'bourgeois nationalism.' That did not however make its attraction any less. If anything, it reinforced the perception that the Congress had to be 'taken over' by the more radically inclined. Nevertheless, the ire of virtually all radicals, from leftist organizations as well as the provincial Congress movement, was reserved for Gandhi and his political vision. The premature end to the Non-Cooperation Movement had dispelled the hopes that many radicals had come to invest in Gandhi. The unfulfilled potential of both this movement and a host of smaller ones such as the Bardoli agitation, only reinforced the perception that Gandhi, and the Congress in general, was not interested in ameliorating the plight of the working masses. Neither were they, at least until 1929-30, unequivocally calling for complete independence from British rule, which was a cry that had rallied political radicals of all persuasions since the Ghadar movement. Also up for vociferous criticism was the Gandhian brand of non-violence. While many among the Punjabi Left, with the exception of a significant number of activists from the NJBS and the HSRA, disagreed with the tactics of terrorism – if only because it was self defeating and ultimately futile – they nevertheless maintained that a violent mass revolution could be a necessity for achieving an independent republic for the working classes. Gandhi's call for non-violence on the other hand, was mostly viewed as a ruse for maintaining the unacceptable status quo. That said, like all politics, this rhetoric was also largely dependent on the audience receiving it. Thus, in virtually the same period when Josh denied that the NJBS were opposed to the Congress, he also gave a presidential address that far was more forceful in

its critique of the party's politics. The difference between the two was that the former was a speech delivered to a diverse public meeting in the Punjab, while the latter was an address to the Workers and Peasants Conference in Calcutta.<sup>28</sup> This was politics as its practical best. Working and, in some cases, allying with the Congress was both an opportunity and a necessity if leftist politics was ever to be a practical endeavour.

But this positioning was also contingent on the period and the prevailing political situation. For the disenchantment, that many within the Left felt towards the Congress, substantially increased by the early 1930s. While there were many occasions when the split between these two strands intensified, a glimpse in a brief period in 1931 provides an adequate illustration of this trend. To begin with, Gandhi's perceived refusal to plead for Bhagat Singh's life in his talks with Lord Irwin in 1931 greatly incensed many radicals as well as the wider public. Also important was the ongoing Meerut Conspiracy Case and its wider implications, which as some historians have argued, was an attempt by the state to draw a distinction between a 'legitimate' form of nationalist politics and the unacceptable 'threat' posed by the communist movement. Thus, even while *satyagrahis* were being released after the Gandhi Irwin Pact, prominent leftist radicals were still being summarily detained and arrested.<sup>29</sup> This settlement between the Congress and the Government in particular, was condemned by many as a 'sell-out.'<sup>30</sup> Under severe pressure from vociferous criticism and often in sympathy with it, Provincial Congress leaders could do little except hope to ride out the furore. Indeed, as one police report remarked, many local political leaders were 'only supporting Gandhi and the terms of the

---

<sup>28</sup> See, 'Presidential Address of Sohan Singh Josh' *Documents of the Communist Movement in India – Vol I (1917-1928)* pp 343-4

<sup>29</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 31<sup>st</sup> January, No. 5, Pp 70

<sup>30</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 7<sup>th</sup> March, No. 10, pp 149

settlement because they want(ed) to hold onto their leadership position.<sup>31</sup> Some local Congressmen even left the party while previously allied organizations like the NJBS were compelled to reassess their relationship with the party. But even here, there were wide ranging disagreements on how far this shift in relations should go and even this was dependent on the vagaries of local politics. Thus, the Multan branch of the NJBS decided to ‘organize propaganda against the Congress’ in Multan, prohibited ‘cries of *Mahatma Gandhi ki jai*,’ and disallowed their members to join the Congress until they were ‘in such a large majority that they could only implement their own creed.’ Still, the door was left open to the Amritsar branch of the party to see if they could come to terms with their local Congress.<sup>32</sup> Also increasing the rhetorical temperature was the KKP – by now in the hands of uncompromising radicals – which even dismissed the boycott of foreign cloth as a tactic to benefit a handful of local capitalists.<sup>33</sup> In a predictable response to this criticism, Congressmen at the local level felt compelled to bolster their radical credentials by – among other tactics – conducting propaganda in rural tracts that the Congress and Gandhi were the only hope for redressing agrarian grievances.

By 1934, the emerging tensions between the two broad political forces and the attendant contradictions within the Punjabi Left had fully come to the fore. That year marked a monumental shift in Leftist politics across the subcontinent. At the All India level, the All India Congress Committee (AICC) met for the first time since the resumption of the Civil Disobedience Movement in early 1932. In a session held at Patna, the civil disobedience

---

<sup>31</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 21<sup>st</sup> March, No.12, pp 187

<sup>32</sup> PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 4<sup>th</sup> July, No. 26, pp 422

<sup>33</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 4<sup>th</sup> April, No. 14, pp 227 – Intriguingly, this address was delivered at a parallel session of the KKP during the Congress Session in Karachi. Also see the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter where a flyer arguing along similar lines is quoted in detail.

campaign was called off, with an exception being made for Gandhi himself. Secondly, the decision of the allied Swarajya Party to contest the elections to the Central Legislative Assembly was endorsed. In a parallel move with the conference, the first All India Socialist Conference was convened which decided to establish an All India Congress Socialist Party. This decision was the culmination of the prevailing discontent that many within the Congress, and beyond it, had long expressed with the party's political tactics and agendas. The Patna convention only highlighted the break between the Party's 'moderate' and 'radical' elements. The calling off of civil disobedience, the campaign's perceived failure, and the decision to adopt a constitutional route in a shift from earlier resolutions, only reinforced the feeling of betrayal that many within the Left felt.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, and almost simultaneously, the Communist Party of India and its affiliates had been declared as illegal organizations. In the Punjab, a total of six organizations were proscribed by the provincial government, irrespective of whether they were affiliated with the CPI or not. For the Punjabi Left, the ban on 'communist' activity raised a whole host of questions regarding the future of their political relevance and the efficacy of their activism. The choice now facing many leftist radicals was whether to continue their work through the CSP or to create new organizations that would either work underground or adopt innocuous fronts that would ostensibly make them less suspicious to the authorities. The latter option ran the risk of repeated proscriptions and continued persecution.

For many, including rank and file Congressmen and Leftists, the answer to these multiple dilemmas lay in the formation of a provincial CSP. For others, this option was very

---

<sup>34</sup> John P. Haithcox, 'Left Wing Unity and the Indian Nationalist Movement: M. N. Roy and the Congress Socialist Party,' *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 3, No. 1 (1969), pp. 18-19

difficult to accept. Indeed, the very first declarations of political intent expressed by the Punjab CSP neatly encapsulate this tension. The Party issued a manifesto for public consumption that itself was relatively innocuous when compared to the rhetoric employed by ardent radicals. But in an accompanying letter to all political workers across the Province, the aims and objects of the Party were reaffirmed in a language and form that were, according to a police report, 'nothing else but communism.'<sup>35</sup> The intent was clearly to reaffirm the revolutionary aims of the new party, in an eventually futile attempt to gather all like mind political workers across the province in its fold. Even then, there were many disagreements within the ranks of the newly formed CSP. Thus it was argued by some that the 'real workers' of the Punjab would have difficulty joining any body under the umbrella of the Congress. At stake too was the decision to enrol members even if they were not officially members of the Congress.<sup>36</sup> This uneasiness was also reflected in a short lived decision to drop the word 'Congress' from the party nomenclature so that it would simply be known as the Punjab Socialist Party.<sup>37</sup> Still, even this manoeuvring was impossible for many to accept. Even a remote affiliation with the Congress, after a series of betrayals, missed opportunities, unfulfilled promises and unrealized potentialities, was too bitter a pill to swallow. Thus, some Punjabi leftists formed other organizations from recently proscribed ones, of which the most prominent was the short lived Workers League. Indeed, one of the express purposes of this new party was to oppose the newly formed CSP. Moreover, it also decided that no members would be

---

<sup>35</sup> For an in depth discussion on this episode, see the chapter on the state.

<sup>36</sup> PPSAI 1935, Lahore 5<sup>th</sup> January, No. 1, p 3-4

<sup>37</sup> PPSAI 1935, Lahore, 20<sup>th</sup> April, No. 16, pp 163-4

admitted unless it was known that they held anti-imperialist, anti-communal, and crucially, anti-Congress views.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, these existential dilemmas were also very much a product of their time. By 1936, most of the reluctant and oppositional elements within the Punjabi Left had been placated, cajoled and eventually won over. The state itself played an instrumental role in this shift. For there was a growing realization amongst the most ardent of Punjabi Leftists, that as long as the Government continued to declare every 'anti-imperialist' organization as illegal, they would not be able to do much as separate entities. In a throwback to the late 1920s then, a decision was made to enter and 'capture' the Congress in a bid to achieve their socio-political objectives.<sup>39</sup> The obvious front for doing so was the Congress Socialist Party. Similar considerations were plaguing those who already constituted the Socialist Party without being directly affiliated with the Congress or the All India CSP. These individuals too decided to revert to the original nomenclature of the Punjab CSP in the recognition that their existence as a political entity was almost entirely dependent on them securing a close alliance with the Congress.<sup>40</sup>

There were of course other considerations at play as well. By this time, the CPI had also come around to the policy of working through the CSP. To their affiliates in the Punjab, this strategy seemed reasonable given the prevailing political conditions.<sup>41</sup> Most crucially, however, the upcoming elections to the Provincial Legislative Assembly forced many to reassess their political strategy. The best that could be hoped for under this scenario was to enter the councils and make the new constitution unworkable. Failure to

---

<sup>38</sup> PPSAI 1934, Lahore, 1<sup>st</sup> December, No. 46, p 510

<sup>39</sup> PPSAI 1936, Lahore, 18<sup>th</sup> April, No. 16, pp 180

<sup>40</sup> PPSAI 1936, Lahore, 25<sup>th</sup> April, No. 17, pp 190-91

<sup>41</sup> PPSAI 1936, Simla-E, 30<sup>th</sup> May, No. 21, pp 248

do so would not only have meant relegation to the political wilderness, but would have also enabled British Imperialism to settle with ‘collaborationist’ and ‘capitalist’ elements.<sup>42</sup> Naturally, these decisions were not easy to agree upon. Recalcitrant political workers had to be given assurances that the entry into and affiliation with the Congress was only ‘temporary’ and merely an ‘experiment.’ Other workers were also concerned about their public reputation after joining a party that many had fought against in previous years.<sup>43</sup> There was also the question of the endemic factionalism that plagued the Punjabi Left. Thus for a time, there were two parallel Punjab CSPs, each of which, in an uncanny similarity to the engagements between the provincial and national Congress Party, approached the All India CSP in a bid for ‘official’ recognition.<sup>44</sup>

This arrangement worked well for the Congress movement as well. The gathering of assorted leftists within its fold could only increase its remote electoral prospects, especially in areas where the provincial Congress movement had failed to make any substantial inroads. This in itself was part of an established tradition of the Congress relying on the Left in earlier periods when the two greatly overlapped with each other. As far as local Congress workers were concerned, these joint manoeuvres were especially crucial for repairing the badly damaged credibility of the Congress in rural areas. In the run up to the elections, the Congress movement, from the lowest to the highest levels of leadership, relied on these networks and modes of political activism. Thus, Jawaharlal Nehru, in his frequent campaign visits to the Punjab regularly attended political and Kisan conferences that were organized by leftists. His rhetoric also placated the anxieties

---

<sup>42</sup> PPSAI 1936, Simla-E, 9<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> May, 1936, No. 19, pp 214

<sup>43</sup> PPSAI 1936, Simla-E, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, No. 20, pp 228-30

<sup>44</sup> PPSAI 1936, Simla-E, 29<sup>th</sup> August, No. 34, pp 431; Simla-E, 5<sup>th</sup> September, No. 35, pp 441; and Simla-E, 12<sup>th</sup> September, No. 36, pp 453

that many may have had regarding their association with the Congress. His speeches frequently paid homage to the successes of the Soviet Union and the spread of revolutionary ideals throughout the world, while his tours and rhetorical flourishes were regularly greeted with the cries of '*Inquilab Zindabad.*' 'Socialism' and calls for the formation of a 'socialist government' were now the labels that had wide currency.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, while labels and alliances may have temporarily changed, they didn't necessarily signify a shift in the substantive element of politics. For politics, as ever, was an often confusing mix of temporary alliances and strategic shifts. If anything, it was this particular *form* of politics that constituted what was perhaps the only constant in the provincial political landscape.

The 1937 elections heralded in a new phase of engagement between the Congress movement and the broader Punjabi Left. Firstly, the elections marked the entry of several 'socialist/communist' candidates to the Punjab Legislative Assembly. As such, these successes gave a fair indication of how far the Punjabi Left had come in its short life span, despite its perpetual status as an internally divided, persecuted and marginalized political grouping. Even in the elections, these individuals were compelled to either stand as candidates in the Sikh constituencies or as Congress nominees. More crucially though, these elections also opened up greater avenues through which radical politics could be conducted. Perhaps the best illustration of this comes from the Kirti movement. Thus, after the Congress had formed a ministry in the neighbouring United Provinces, the Kirti leadership decided to move its centre of operations and the publication of its flagship journal, *Kirti*, to Meerut district. In doing so, they were encouraged by the ostensibly

---

<sup>45</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1936, Simla-E, 1<sup>st</sup> August, No. 30, pp 382; Simla-E, 8<sup>th</sup> August, No. 31, pp 400

‘benevolent’ attitude of the Congress administration and its declared policy of the freedom of press, speech, and association. Interestingly, a similar logic was also adopted by the proprietors of the Communist publication, the *National Front*, who temporarily shifted to Allahabad owing to the hostile relations with the Bombay Ministry which itself was under Congress control!<sup>46</sup> For the Kirti leadership, this phase in their political careers was an unprecedented era of relative autonomy and freedom from persecution. A new publication by the name of the *Kirti Lehar* was published and by the middle of 1938, the Meerut centre had become a ‘regular posting house for Communists, Kirti agitators, terrorists, and revolutionary extremists of all kinds, who found in it a central and safe base for their operations.’<sup>47</sup> Inevitably, for the central intelligence services and the wider Punjab administration, these activities were a source of constant frustration and anxiety. The Punjab Government in particular highlighted the past record of the Kirtis to their UP counterparts, but these calls went typically unheeded. Indeed, for a while, the *Kirti Lehar* was in the strange position where it was proscribed in the Punjab but published openly in the UP. The Kirti leadership, however, was only able to benefit from this arrangement for a limited period, as with the outbreak of the Second World War and the resignation of the Congress Ministry, the Kirti office was closed owing to a fear of persecution and arrests under the Defence of India regulations. As an intelligence report remarked in a telling reference to the perceived performance of the Congress Ministry, these activists feared the ‘*stricter* enforcement of law and order against subversive activities.’<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> ‘A Note Outlining Kirti agitation in the Punjab’ *Communism in India 1935-1945* pp 227

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, pp 229

<sup>48</sup> My emphasis. Ibid, 227-231.

As before, however, the alliance between the Congress and the Left could not stand the test of time. In the initial period following the outbreak of the Second World War, political activists in both movements were persecuted owing to their opposition to the Imperial war effort. For many within the Congress, this opposition was based on the Imperial Government's failure to consult the Congress before declaring war on Germany and its refusal to commit to a final constitutional settlement of India after the War.<sup>49</sup> While these were important considerations for many within the Left, what was more crucial for the more orthodox was the 'Imperialist' nature of the war. Accordingly, Punjabi Leftists, in pursuit of ideology, but mostly driven by their enmity towards British Imperialism, worked to oppose the war effort. Given the centrality of Punjab to the war effort, these activities were not tolerated by the State, and many Leftists along with their Congress counterparts were summarily arrested under the Defence of India regulations. This was happening whilst other events of profound importance had already taken place. The most important of these was the decision of the All India CSP in 1940 to forcibly expel its CPI membership. The break between the two had long been in the offing. Ever since 1936, the CPI and its affiliates had worked through the CSP, a policy which had worked spectacularly well for the former. Under the imminent threat of losing control of their own party, the CSP was compelled to break with its CPI affiliated members.<sup>50</sup> With this split, the previously flexible distinctions between 'Communists' and 'Socialists' were indelibly demarcated. In line with the rest of the subcontinent, this break also occurred in the Punjab.

---

<sup>49</sup> See for instance Tomlinson, pp 142-6

<sup>50</sup> See Haithcox, pp 33-36

Nevertheless, the complete break in relations between the Congress and the non-CSP affiliated Left came with the rapidly changing events on the European front. With the invasion of the Soviet Union and the adoption of the Peoples War line, the CPI and its affiliates went against their previous position of opposing the war effort. Instead, the war effort was now to be supported. Moreover, this almost unqualified support also meant that the CPI and its Punjabi affiliates were forced to criticize the Quit India movement and related agitations that hindered the war effort. As an unintended, if inevitable, consequence, this decision did not go down well with the Congress movement. Not only did the reversal of a longstanding policy mark an egregious betrayal, but it also confirmed in the eyes of many Congress workers that the ‘Communists’ were merely a fifth column of the Soviet Union. In other words, their loyalties lay beyond India. With this, the CPI affiliated Left had lost the argument even before it could begin to defend itself from the politically fatal charge of disloyalty. In a period where the labels of ‘nationalism,’ ‘patriotism’ and ‘loyalty’ were solely appropriated by the Indian National Congress – with deviant ideas being labelled either as ‘treacherous’ or ‘communal’ – this could hardly have been otherwise.

Matters were furthered complicated by the endorsement of the ‘Muslim right to Self Determination’ by the CPI in 1942. Theoretically, the CPI had endorsed the right of all minorities or ‘nations’ to self determination. In practice though, this principled stance only came to be construed as an unqualified support for the Pakistan demand. This was especially the case in the Punjab, where this issue was particularly sensitive and divisive. Indeed, a few Leftist factions fully recognized the self defeating implications of this political positioning, but constrained by their affiliation with the Communist Party, they

were left with little, if any option, but to half heartedly follow Bombay's dictates. In the poisoned atmosphere of the early and mid 1940s, there was little use in pointing out that the support of the Pakistan demand was viewed as a means to achieve 'National Unity' between the Congress and the Muslim League. But for the Congress Party as a whole, the support for the Pakistan demand was completely unacceptable. This was particularly the case for the provincial Congress movement, which at this time was dominated by the less progressive faction of Gopi Chand Bhargava and represented the narrow sectional interests of certain non-Muslim groups. Moreover, owing to the growing polarization in the Punjab, Muslim Congressmen, included many leftists, had started defecting to the League.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, during the war years, it mattered little what the Congress position was, especially since most of its workers and leaders were either detained or driven underground by the State.

With the end of the war and the release of Congress and CSP workers, these tensions and hostilities erupted to the fore. As far as the Communist affiliated Left was concerned, its members would still try to work with and through the Congress in their increasingly desperate attempts to forge 'National Unity.' But it was Nehru, who neatly summed up the now irreconcilable differences between the Congress and the Communists as a clash between nationalist and internationalist ideals.<sup>52</sup> More than anything else, this was an indication of how profoundly the political landscape had changed over the years. After all, only fifteen or so years before, the same Jawaharlal Nehru saw no contradiction between the impulses of nationalism and internationalism. Fearing expulsion, the CPI pre-empted any moves by the Congress by calling on all its members to resign from the

---

<sup>51</sup> This process has been covered in greater detail in the chapter on the Muslim League.

<sup>52</sup> PPSAI 1945, Simla-E, 31<sup>st</sup> August, No. 33, pp 301

Congress and its affiliated Committees. Yet, even this step did not imply the Communists unqualified opposition to the Congress. Rather, it was still to be supported as a party working for national independence. And in the upcoming elections in the Punjab, the Congress was to be supported against ‘reactionaries’ such as the Unionists, the Akalis (albeit ambivalently), and the Hindu Mahasabha. But the Congress, in a manner befitting a party poised to take over the reigns of power, had no interest in soliciting the support of – and especially by now – an extremely marginalized political grouping. Thus, the Congress decided to directly contest the Muslim League in the provincial elections, with the desperate entreaties of the Communists for a united front against the Unionists going completely unheeded. Shunned by the Congress and handicapped by their support to the League, the provincial Communist movement reluctantly decided to support the latter at any cost, and against any rivals, even if it meant opposing Congress candidates. But even this decision was not taken without the last ditch manoeuvres to negotiate their way out a hopeless position. Thus, it was decided to support Congress nominees against Akali and Unionist Candidates except in Muslim constituencies where the League was to be supported against all others.<sup>53</sup>

As ever, it was at the local level that politics got a bit murkier. For the most part, the Communists had been decimated in the 1946 elections. Their result was in no small measure owed to a successful and intensely vitriolic campaign carried out by Congress and CSP workers. Thus, the Communists were regularly characterized as traitors and fifth columnists. Participating with great relish in this campaign, of course, were the Congress Socialists. As far as they were concerned, this was an excellent opportunity for them to

---

<sup>53</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1945, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> October, No. 38, pp 347. These electoral strategies are also covered in the next two chapters.

reclaim their lost prominence within the Leftist camp and completely delegitimize their Communist opponents. To this end, the CSP vastly increased the scope of its political activities through enrolling new members, infiltrating Communist dominated labour unions, and organizing agitations and province wide tours.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, for many Communist workers, the logic of political survival drove them to the Congress and CSP camps. And yet, despite the mutual hostilities, there were still some localities and issues which offered the possibility of cooperation between Communist and Congress workers. Thus, in a prolonged agitation against the remodelling of canal outlets in Amritsar District, local workers from the Congress, Akali Dal and Muslim League participated in *morchas* under the leadership of local Communist affiliated political activists.<sup>55</sup> Clearly, then, at the local level, cooperation or hostility between political workers was largely a function of contextual specificities that may be independent of political currents prevailing at the province or at the centre. Even so, in the broader perspective, the political situation had worsened to the extent that there was very little, if any, space left, where the two mutually hostile political forces could meet, and this state of affairs carried through and after Partition in the post colonial Indian State.

## **Conclusion**

Given this complex and varying narrative, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to make any generalizations about the tortured sets engagements between the wider Left and the Congress. Clearly, much depends on which sections within the Left and the Congress are being referred to. This is particularly the case with the 'Left,' which was comprised of a

---

<sup>54</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1946, Simla-E, 3<sup>rd</sup> August, No. 30, Pp 380-81.

<sup>55</sup> This episode is covered in greater detail in the following chapter.

vast array of organizations and ideological variations. Nevertheless, an outline of these multiple sets of engagements does serve a broader purpose. For one, they provide a useful insight into the contours of provincial politics. Additionally, they also contribute to the historiography of the Congress and its varying nature at the provincial and local level. Perhaps most importantly, through a more nuanced appreciation of Leftist dilemmas and politics, this analysis also highlights the constraints and progression of a political process that was defined by the State and the interlocutors it chose to deal with.

As various studies have adequately shown, politics in the Indian subcontinent varied immensely across provinces and regions. In large part, this variation was a consequence of the contextual specificities of each region, which in turn were dependent on a whole host of issues. Similarly, this diversity also existed at the local level in each province or region. In one sense then, the divergences between the national, provincial and local levels provide a fascinating glimpse into how multiple political arenas were constructed by the Raj. And yet, despite their differentiation, all these hierarchical levels of politics were linked together by the Raj and its interlocutors. The interplay of disconnects and linkages then, highlight the numerous potentialities of politics in the colonial state, which could at the same time be isolated from wider or specific concerns and yet be linked together in profound ways. In this dialectic between autonomy and interdependence, much depended on the issues at stake as well as the prevailing political situation, which in turn dictated which of the two impulses would be dominant. This was particularly the case with the Punjab where an incredible array of political associations and organizations functioned. Most of these organizations had linkages from the local to the national level, each of which functioned according to their own political logic. These linkages also

existed at the horizontal level between different bodies. Thus, depending on the issue at hand and the wider political atmosphere, there could be a significant degree of overlap between various political impulses which was manifested through, shifting loyalties, transitory alliances, and a reassessment of strategic calculations. It is for this reason that for certain periods, hierarchical levels, and issues; political categories and demarcations prove to be elusive, if at all useful.

This process is best illustrated through an analysis of the Congress at the local and provincial level. The Congress in the Punjab, as elsewhere, defies the normative understanding of a cohesive and disciplined political organization. Instead, in the context of provincial politics, it can best be understood as a platform, or as a multiple set of platforms if one takes into account the variations between the local, provincial and national. Thus, the Congress movement and structure demonstrated an incredible flexibility during the 1920s and 1930s for incorporating a diverse array of political influences and sectional interests, each of whom vied for control over the provincial party. That in itself was indicative of the possibilities latent in a marginalized Punjabi Congress movement which drew its strength and prominence from the more powerful and prominent All India Party. But perhaps the most suggestive illustration of what the Congress really meant in the Punjab is recorded in a police report from 1936. The report concerns a public visit by Nehru and deserves to be quoted in full:

‘Some fifty to sixty thousands thronged the route of Pandit Jawahar Lal's procession at Gujranwala on the 30th May. Ceiling fans and loud speakers were installed in the streets and standards with 'Long Live the Soviet Government,' 'Long Live Revolution' and other Communist and Congress slogans were displayed. The procession was organized as follows:

1. Roshan Lal Yas, a Socialist, leading with a red flag.
2. A band.
3. A party of 36 *Khaksars* led by Sufi Abdul Aziz.

4. 25 men of the National League, Gujranwala, led by Mir Muhammad Bakhsh, pleader.
5. About 100 women.
6. 150 men from the *Bal Mahabir Dal*.
7. 100 *Ahrars* led by Abdul Wahid.
8. A sword stick party.
9. 150 men of the Gujranwala Labour Party carrying standards with Communist slogans.
10. 150 *Akalis*.<sup>56</sup>

In short, there could have been no better description of the nationalist bandwagon than this inadvertent police report. For encapsulated in this report is a glimpse into what the Congress meant in certain periods of political and ideological flexibility. Varying organizations and associations, from the communitarian (some would even say fascist in the case of the *Khaksars*) to the radical left, attempted to project their influences onto the Congress. And yet, this multiplicity was itself contingent on specific periods and political conditions; for in due course, the nationalist camp could only accommodate a limited set of groups among whom the radical Left could not independently exist.

This was the central dilemma that the Punjabi Left, as a whole, faced in its prolonged engagement with the Congress. How various leftist groups chose to deal with these questions and engagements is an important narrative in its own right. But more crucially, an analysis of this politics reveals some profound insights into the progression of the Punjabi, and Indian, political space. As the example of the Left indicates, this process was very much a story about the gradual *restriction* of political space in the years leading to independence. In the 1920s, and certain periods in the 1930s, there was a flexibility within the Congress and a space within the wider political landscape for lateral movement. By the 1940s however, both these spaces had significantly shrunk, leaving

---

<sup>56</sup> PPSAI 1936, Simla-E, 6<sup>th</sup> June, No. 22, pp 268

little, if any, room for manoeuvre for marginal political groupings like the radical Left. After all, this was a period when political and ideological boundaries solidified and became far more difficult to transcend. This marked shift is itself indicative of the power that the Raj and its interlocutors wielded in shaping a landscape that converged to a point where it was impossible for all political groupings to coexist in harmony. And it is this broad narrative that defines and perhaps explains the limits to radicalism in the Punjabi political landscape.

### **Dealing with Communitarianism I: The Akalis and the Punjabi Left**

Building on the theme of examining the Left's engagement with provincial political forces, this chapter will initiate a discussion on communitarian politics in the Punjab. In the Punjabi context, of course, and more so than elsewhere in the subcontinent, 'religion' and religiously demarcated communities were a permanent fixture of the provincial political landscape. Each religious community, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh among others, had a plethora of communitarian parties that thrived in a socio-political space that was largely constructed on (mutually reinforcing) actual and imagined religious divides. Despite the fact that the Punjab was dominated for more than two decades by the cross communal Unionist Party, communitarian politics remained a strong underlying current beneath the surface of mainstream politics. In the context of this study, the prominence of communitarian politics and its increasing influence raises the obvious question of how the Left engaged with communitarian organizations. Given the sheer diversity of these political trends however, it would be pertinent to limit this analysis to two communitarian forces, both of whom played a decisive role in Punjabi politics. Given the makeup of the Punjabi Left and the constituencies they mostly operated in, the focus of this chapter will be on exploring the Left's engagement with the first of these political forces: 'Sikh' communitarianism.

This category, however, raises a few definitional problems that should be attended to at the very outset of this discussion. The first relates to the broad classification of 'Sikh politics.' In part this is a trap laid out by the colonial sources themselves. For instance,

colonial security services in the 1920s, regularly grouped all forms of political mobilizations involving 'Sikhs' under the broad label of 'Sikh politics.' That naturally ignored the thornier question of how 'Sikhs' were to be defined. Later, starting from the 1930s, a distinction was made in police reporting between 'Sikh,' 'Communist,' and 'Socialist' politics. Inevitably, and as with other arbitrary categorizations, these broad categories frequently overlapped and merged with each other. They also, at certain periods, grew distant from each other in a way that seemed to justify the use of such distinctions in the first place. And yet, in periods of political flux and fluidity, these categories were notoriously difficult to separate from each other. Frequently, the very same individuals, organizations and events were reported in both 'Sikh' and 'Communist' politics. Clearly this fluidity was difficult to categorize even for a bureaucracy accustomed to viewing the social and political landscape in neat and divisible categories. In turn, this difficulty pointed to the rather obvious fact that the world of 'Sikh' politics encompassed the entirety of political and ideological orientations percolating at any given period. To further complicate matters, ostensibly incompatible political allegiances often comfortably co-existed with each other. Thus, for certain periods, it becomes quite difficult to distinguish between 'communitarian' and 'leftist' politics. That said, neither is this arbitrary distinction desirable, though it does become relevant in later periods. And yet, even when it does, there is still a fair amount of overlap to contend with. In short then, the history of the Punjabi Left is also a history of 'Sikh' politics in general.

This conclusion is especially amplified in a significant section of the historiography available on the subject. This emphasis, however, is not without its problems. Given the disproportionately large membership of 'Sikhs' within the Punjabi Leftist movement

some works have sought to portray leftist politics within the Punjab as an almost exclusively Sikh phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, undeniably good reasons to arrive at this conclusion. For one, ‘Sikhs’ were at the forefront of the Ghadar movement, the KKP, the PKC and other organizations. On another note, there are numerous examples where Sikh religious symbolism was actively employed to motivate activists as well as the people they appealed to. In explaining the disproportionately large ‘Sikh’ representation, a subtle connection is often made between ‘Sikh’ ideals/characteristics and ‘communist’ or ‘socialist’ politics. It is almost as if both were innately suited to each other. In part, these connections often echo colonial stereotypes. Thus, the concepts of virility, aggressiveness, martyrdom, egalitarianism and social justice – which are ostensibly embodied by the archetypal Sikh Jat – are often invoked to explain the almost inevitable inclination of this figure towards radical and progressive politics. Indeed, these linkages were often made by leftists themselves. While appealing, such explanations obviously do not stand up to serious scrutiny. Leaving aside the fact that ‘Sikhs’ were also fully implicated in the project of Empire, these simplistic narratives mask the ease with which ideas – whether social, political, religious or cultural – can be selectively interpreted, appropriated, and moulded to suit a particular socio-political project. In this reading then, the strongly suggestive link between the ‘Sikh Jat’ community and leftist radicalism can be explained in different terms. In its place, a framework that privileges the politics of

---

<sup>1</sup> Gurharpal Singh for instance estimates that 85% of Ghadar Party members were Sikhs. The KKP also had a similar proportion of Sikhs within its ranks. Yet, with the leftist movement as a whole, he calculates the total number of ‘Sikhs’ to be approximately 50%, which he considers to be a conservative estimate. See, *Communism in Punjab* pp 59. For reasons that I hope are obvious, I have avoided making a similar calculation. After all, how are religious affiliations to be measured? Did all radicals think of themselves in terms of religious affiliation? Moreover, is the ‘Left’ only confined to a few discrete organizations or does it have a broader definition? This is in addition to the far more complicated issue that religious and political affiliations were often transitory. All these variables render a calculation extremely difficult, if not impossible. They also make this exercise somewhat futile.

certain localities and their proximity to political trends can be more usefully applied to understand the predominance of a particular group in leftist radicalism.

In part, this argument will be an underlying thread in this chapter. Put another way, this will be an attempt to avoid the pitfalls contained in the sources and move beyond their amplifications in much of historiography. In this chapter then, I will first briefly outline the history of 'Sikh politics' or 'Sikh communitarian politics' with a special focus on the Akali movement. It should be pointed out though, that both terms can be used interchangeably only up to a certain point, after which 'Sikh communitarianism' (or communalism according to some) becomes a distinct subset within 'Sikh politics.' The emphasis on the Akali movement is justified given the strong links that initially existed between it and the leftist movement. In a historical trajectory similar to other chapters, I will also highlight how the engagement between the two shifted in the 1930s and 1940s. Also important to this analysis is a discussion on the changing regional and international political conditions that precipitated this shift. Again, in a theme central to this work, this analysis will highlight the potentialities as well as the limitations of a political space in which these mutually coexisting political strands gradually became more rigid and distinct from each other.

### The Emergence of Akali Radicalism

As with other religious groups, Sikh communitarian politics also emerged as a significant force by the turn of the twentieth century. This form of politics though was presaged and

coupled by a rising tide of revivalist and reformist movements such as the *Nirankari*,<sup>2</sup> *Namdhari*<sup>3</sup>, and Singh Sabha movements. The latter especially was in many ways symbolic of its era. Formed after the suppression of the *Namdharis*, the Singh Sabha operated in a socio-political context which, from the late nineteenth century onwards, encouraged the emergence of competing reformist and revivalist movements such as the *Arya Samaj*, *Tanzim* and *Tableegh* movements.<sup>4</sup> On the political front, there were a number of organizations that also doubled as social and religious organizations and explicitly worked to advance the interests of the Sikh community. For the first two decades of the twentieth century, the most prominent amongst these was the Chief Khalsa Diwan. Founded in 1902-3 and derided by many of its opponents as an elitist and 'loyalist' body for much of its political lifespan, the Diwan conducted its politics through constitutionalist means like other mainstream political organizations of its time. Largely discredited following its support to the Government in the wake of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Diwan was superseded on the political front by a new and relatively more assertive organization called the Central Sikh League. Founded in 1919, the Central Sikh League proclaimed as its founding objective the attainment of *Swaraj* by constitutionalist

---

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the earliest of its kind, the Nirankari movement was a reformist campaign started by Baba Dayal, a contemporary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who preached against the deviations (as he saw he it) and Hindu influences that had crept into the Sikh religion. Thus, he preached against idolatry, worship of graves and other inanimate objects, deviant superstitions and rituals and exhorted his followers to worship one *Nirankar* (God).

<sup>3</sup> Better known as the *Kuka* movement, this was a reformist and radical (and violent) movement that, much like the Nirankaris, preached the worship of one God. Led by the famous Baba Ram Singh, the Kuka movement also worked against social evils such as the caste system and soon gained tremendous popularity. The fanaticism of some of its followers, though, led to a clash with the Punjab Government, which brutally crushed the Kukas in the 1870s. For details into both see, Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*, (Delhi : Macmillan, 1978) pp 6-7

<sup>4</sup> For a greater sense of this context, see especially the work of Kenneth W. Jones such as 'Ham Hindu Nahin: Arya Sikh Relations 1877-1905,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (May, 1973), pp 457-475 and 'Communalism in the Punjab: The Arya Samaj Contribution,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Nov., 1968), pp 39-54

means and remained a significant force in Sikh communitarian politics up until independence.<sup>5</sup>

The watershed moment in Sikh politics came with the onset of the Akali<sup>6</sup> movement which from 1920-25, posed the most sustained and serious challenge to the authority of the provincial government since the annexation of Punjab in 1849. While the movement was itself centred on the crucial issue of gurdwara<sup>7</sup> reform, it soon adopted a radical political position against the Raj and its loyalists. In part, the issue of gurdwara reform was a direct consequence of the evolving debates on Sikh identity and religion that had been raised by reformist and revivalist Sikh movements during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In these debates, the issue of gurdwara management, supervision and function was a pressing concern. For the most part, gurdwaras were controlled by *mahants*<sup>8</sup>, of a particular sectarian affiliation, who enjoyed unchecked and absolute power which in due course led to accusations of corruption and a variety of vices. In some cases, *mahants* were also blamed for introducing certain 'Hindu' practices and rituals. Consequently, Sikh reformers issued demands for gurdwaras to be administered on terms acceptable to the wider Sikh community. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to wrest control of the gurdwaras through litigation and petitioning, groups of radical reformers took matters in their own hands by forcibly ousting *mahants* from

---

<sup>5</sup> See for instance, Kailash C. Gulati, *The Akalis, Past and Present*, (New Delhi: Ashajanak Publications, 1974), pp 18-22.

<sup>6</sup> A word that, accordingly to commonly accepted interpretations, signifies one who is eternal and immortal. See, Mohinder Singh pp 7.

<sup>7</sup> A Sikh temple. Termed by many commentators as part of the 'Sikh Trinity' which comprises the Guru, *Granth Sahib* (the scripture of Sikhs) and the Gurdwara. A Gurdwara is held to be an essential part of Sikh social and religious life. See for instance, Gulati, pp 23.

<sup>8</sup> Managers/caretakers of gurdwaras.

certain gurdwaras.<sup>9</sup> These tactics set the stage for a series of confrontations with the authorities who were perceived to be in favour of the status quo.

More significantly though, the campaign for Gurdwara reform gave birth to two organizations, which profoundly shaped Sikh communitarian politics in the ensuing decades. In various periods, both were often indistinguishable from each other. The first of these, the *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak* Committee (SGPC), was formed in 1920 with the explicit purpose of bringing all Sikh religious spaces, including their vast estates and significant income, under *Panthic* control and management.<sup>10</sup> Given its all-encompassing remit and wide ranging powers, which were given legal sanction by the Government in order to placate Sikh opinion, the SGPC over the years was often the site of frequent political jousts between various organizations, including those within the Punjabi Left. After all, control of the Committee also provided the victorious faction an excellent opportunity to influence the course of Sikh communitarian politics. The second organization, the *Shiromani Akali Dal*, otherwise also known as the Akali Party, was founded by the SGPC shortly after its own creation in 1920. Though the SA Dal was closely tied with the SGPC in its formative phase as well at various other periods, it also exercised a degree of autonomy and assertiveness over key political issues. Initially though, the Dal was founded as an umbrella organization with the purpose of unifying and coordinating the activities of the numerous Akali *jathas* that had randomly emerged throughout the province in order to forcibly retake gurdwaras from corrupt *mahants*.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Tai Yong Tan, 'Assuaging the Sikhs: Government Responses to the Akali Movement, 1920-1925,' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July, 1995) Pp 660-663

<sup>10</sup> Mohinder Singh, pp 18

<sup>11</sup> These *jathas* or bands of Sikh volunteers called themselves Akalis after a legendary sixteenth century group of warrior ascetics. Akali *jathas* varied in number from a few dozen to hundreds of members, and, initially, usually functioned within a certain locality or district from which volunteers were drawn. Each

While an exhaustive account of the Akali movement is not the aim of this chapter, it would be pertinent to highlight some of the prominent features of this agitation. Firstly, the Akali movement soon after its inception moved beyond its central agenda of gurdwara reform to incorporate a radical form of anti-colonial politics. In part, this development was driven by the perception of a hostile Government that protected the *mahants* while persecuting Akalis who, as they viewed it, were only reclaiming and reasserting their inalienable rights. Indeed, this perception existed despite the various conciliatory measures introduced by an anxious Punjab Government. Naturally, these were aimed at preventing the spread of discontent in tracts that were absolutely vital for military recruitment.<sup>12</sup> More importantly however, the Akali agitation also took root in a region that was being profoundly affected by the ongoing Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements. Simultaneously feeding into and being fed by these movements, the Akali agitation dovetailed its demands for socio-religious reform with an anti-colonial political position that ranged from the relatively moderate to the overtly radical. Despite a number of deadly incidents, the movement was for the most part, non-violent, with thousands of its volunteers peacefully courting arrest and withstanding state persecution.

It was, however, the more militant and radical component of this movement that seriously challenged the authority of the state. This threat was posed by a few highly organized, if numerically small, groups that emerged from the Akali movement. The *Akal Fauj* (Army) for instance, which was created under the supervision of the SGPC, functioned, unlike other Akali *jathas*, on military lines and enjoyed the backing of the more ‘extreme’

---

*jatha* was headed by a *jathedar* who would be in charge of all activities within his vicinity. Tai Yong Tan pp 665. Also see, Mohinder Singh, pp 93.

<sup>12</sup> See Tai Yong Tan for an excellent exposition of the approach adopted by the Punjab Government.

elements in the broader movement. In a region with a high proportion of well-trained serving and demobilized soldiers, these developments coupled with reports that the Fauj was armed with a variety of weapons, caused considerable anxiety within the ranks of the Punjab Government.<sup>13</sup> Of far greater concern though, was the emergence of ‘terrorist’ groups of which the most prominent was the *Babbar*<sup>14</sup> Akali *jatha*. This *jatha* was formed in 1922 by Akali radicals disenchanted with the tactics of non-violence. As a form of direct action they were in favour of assassinating Government officials and local notables known to be loyal to the state.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, like the wider Akali and Non-Cooperation movements, this group also tapped into diasporic revolutionary networks for personnel as well as funding. Its ranks were filled by returning emigrants under the influence of the Ghadar Party as well as former soldiers radicalized by the Akali movement.<sup>16</sup> Seeking to foment revolution, the Babbar Akali gang committed a series of ‘brutal outrages,’ mostly in the Doaba region, spread revolutionary propaganda and assassinated a number of Government loyalists. The gang was however soon eliminated by the state, with most of its members either killed or arrested.<sup>17</sup> Despite the condemnation of the SGPC regarding its tactics, the Babbar Akali gang served as an important addition to the wider Akali movement and pushed it towards a more radical political position. The consequence, as a police report noted with dismay, was that in the districts most affected by the Akali movement, there was a ‘noticeable weakening of the

---

<sup>13</sup> Mohinder Singh, pp 96

<sup>14</sup> The word signifies a (majestic) lion.

<sup>15</sup> RPAP 1922, Proceedings of the Governor of the Punjab in Council in the Home (Police) Department, No. 3040-S, 28<sup>th</sup> August 1923, pp 17

<sup>16</sup> RPAP 1921, No. 283-S, From: L.L Tomkins, Inspector-General of Police, Punjab to the Home Secretary to Government, Punjab, Simla, 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1921, pp 19. Also see Mohinder Singh, 114-5.

<sup>17</sup> RPAP 1923, No. 340-S, From: L.L Tomkins, Inspector-General of Police, Punjab to the Home Secretary to Government, Punjab, Simla, 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1924, pp 20-21

loyalty of the Sikh peasantry,' as well as – much to the concern of the authorities – a 'certain number of retired soldiers.'<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis on particular districts and involved groups was of course important for the colonial state. Indeed there were good reasons to be concerned in addition to the fact that 'Sikhs,' and especially Jat Sikhs, – as a monolithic entity in the colonial imagination – were one of the cornerstones for imperial stability in the Punjab and beyond. For one, the very same districts and groups were involved in the ill-fated Ghadar rebellion from 1914-1918. As an intelligence report from 1916 indicated, 'the head-quarters of the (Ghadar) conspiracy was established in the Manjha, Malwa, and Doaba tracts' though 'recruits were drawn to the ranks of the terrorists from districts as far afield as Rawalpindi, Jhelum and from other Provinces.'<sup>19</sup> There was of course a good reason why these districts were at the centre of the attempted rebellion, for they had a significantly higher incidence of migratory patterns. Thus, a large proportion of immigrants to North America who subsequently got involved in the Ghadar uprising also came from these districts. Most were also Jat Sikhs. At the time of the rebellion, most migrants, for obvious reasons, chose to return to their home districts for political activism. Admittedly though, unlike the Akali agitation, the Ghadar 'rebellion' attracted far more opposition than active sympathy and support. Consequently, and aside from wanton acts of violence and theft, these districts remained by and large firmly under state control.

By the time the Akali movement reached its peak however, these districts were firmly involved in the wider campaign of protest, and in some cases, open rebellion. Naturally,

---

<sup>18</sup> RPAP 1924. No. 212-S, From: G.A Cocks, Inspector-General of Police, Punjab to the Home Secretary to Government, Punjab, Simla, 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1925, pp 12

<sup>19</sup> RPAP, 1915, Proceedings of His Honor the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab in the Home (Police) Department, No. 291 – Police-2, 15<sup>th</sup> September 1916, pp 2

this was mostly owing to the fact that the central districts had a higher percentage of the Sikh population and contained a large number of holy shrines and temples. Specifically, according to data tabulated in 1922, districts such as Lyallpur, Amritsar, Jullundur, Lahore, Sheikhpura, Hoshiarpur and others, provided the bulk of Akali recruits. Moreover, eastern districts such as Ludhiana, and northwestern districts such as Rawalpindi and Jhelum, also provided a sizeable number of recruits. In terms of the groups involved, the bulk of Akali recruits came from the Sikh peasantry while Sikh Jats constituted almost two thirds of those who enlisted as volunteers.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the Ghadar rebellion, returned migrants – most of whom were Sikh Jats anyway – constituted a significantly smaller proportion of Akali recruits. Furthermore, there were also certain localities that earned an iconic status for the resistance they offered against the colonial state. Thus, in addition to other sites, the localities of Tarn Taran and Guru-ka-Bagh for example, emerged as epicentres of protest and rebellion. Incidentally, many of these areas were also important sites of the Ghadar ‘rebellion.’<sup>21</sup> What emerges from this analysis, therefore, is a pattern in which certain localities and groups become involved – for a variety of reasons – in political mobilization which was directed against the state. Indeed, these very localities and groups later attained prominence in the broader leftist movement in the Punjab. Anti-colonial radicalism then was not simply a function of religious and caste particularities. Rather it was firmly embedded in local experiences of radicalism which were an outcome of specific ideological, material and motivational impulses.

---

<sup>20</sup> Mohinder Singh pp 97-101. See especially the table on pp 100-101. This table however does not contain information on Sikh states, Southwestern and Southeastern Punjab.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance RPAP 1915. ‘No. 977-3, From: Lieutenant-Colonel H.T Dennys, Inspector-General of Police, Punjab to the Additional Secretary to Government, Punjab, Simla, 30th June, 1916,’ pp 6-7

### Sikh Communitarian Politics and the Punjabi Left

The Akali movement then, coupled with the legacy of past agitations, constituted a distinct and prominent trajectory towards leftist politics. In addition to the Ghadar Party – which was in any case also linked with Akali, and specifically, Babbar Akali activities – and other networks, most Punjabi leftists emerged from the Akali movement. As the third chapter alluded to, the political career of Sohan Singh Josh illustrates this particular trajectory very well. In this regard, it is worth quoting in detail from a report filed on Josh as part of the comprehensive Ghadar Directory.

‘Sohan Singh Josh, son of Lal Singh, Jat of Chetanpura, P.S Ajnala, District Amritsar. Has studied up to the Matriculation standard. Took a prominent part in the Akali movement and was given the sobriquet of 'Josh' (fiery) on account of his violent speeches at Akali Diwans. In 1921 he helped to foment anti Government agitation among the Sikhs over the question of the possession of the keys of the Golden Temple, Amritsar and in 1922 identified himself prominently with the agitation arising out of the Guru-ka-Bagh *morcha*. Was the secretary of the Akali Dal. Became a member of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. Was arrested in October 1923 in the Akali leaders Case. While still under trial he was elected a member of the Shiromani Akali Dal. Was released in September 1926 when the case against the Akali leaders was dropped. Developed communistic ideas and on Santokh Singh's (of village Dodher, district Amritsar) death took up on the management of the 'Kirti' paper with Bhag Singh Canadian....’<sup>22</sup>

While the report goes on in minute detail, this excerpt is sufficient for noting a few salient points. For one, and aside from neatly encapsulating a particular trajectory to leftist politics, this extract also provides a fairly typical sketch of individuals involved in the Akali movement, though admittedly, not many could claim to be educated to the matriculation level. Following the end of the Akali movement and his release from prison, the extract then informs us that Josh ‘developed communistic ideas.’ This again is fairly typical of other radicals. For a great number of such individuals who were

---

<sup>22</sup> IOR/V/27/262/6, The Ghadr directory 1934, pp 270-71

ideologically indeterminate and yet devoutly anti-imperialist and sympathetic to the ideals of the Russian Revolution, 'Communism' provided a means through which they could continue their politics even after the end of the Akali movement. While for some, 'communism' was merely an inspiring polemic that could provide an impetus to their communitarian and/or anti-colonial political agenda, for others it was a comprehensive project of socio-economic and political change. Thus, far from being an 'import' or a rigid set of beliefs, 'communism' was distinctly compatible with a range of interpretations and socio-political visions that emerged in a localized context of anti-colonial struggle. Again, Josh is somewhat a rarity in this regard, for he was ideologically more committed to orthodox Marxism and in the 1930s regularly eschewed the politically more correct label of 'socialism.' Following the end of the Akali movement, he founded and led the KKP until he was convicted in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. After his release he was affiliated with a number of political groupings, including the Punjab Communist Party and remained a renowned activist even after independence. In short, his engagement with the Gurdwara reform movement in general and the Akali Party in particular is also the story of the broader engagement between Sikh communitarianism and the Punjabi Left.

Nevertheless, the invocations of faith and community were also quite prominent in the manifold articulations of 'communism.' For one, religious symbolism was actively used for political mobilization. Thus, ideas relating to martyrdom, egalitarianism, and social justice were consciously used for political mobilization. The use of religious rhetoric was not merely a recognition of the fact that it was necessary to engage with local cultural and religious idioms in order for politics to be effective. Rather, for many, there was no

contradiction between the religious tenets they believed in and the ideals proclaimed by ‘communism.’ Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise for individuals who received their political training in a communitarian movement and were acculturated to a specific mode and language of politics. Nor can this method be understood as an exception to the norm, especially as far as the 1920s and early 1930s are concerned. After all, there were precedents to such exercises of appropriation and translation. The political activism of Maulvi Barkatullah for instance, furnishes an excellent example of how ‘communism’ could comfortably coexist with religious idioms and beliefs. Thus, in famous pamphlet penned for ‘Muslim brothers’ in Central Asia (ostensibly written at the behest of Lenin), Barkatullah urged Muslims to respond to the ‘divine cry’ and to embrace the Soviet cause and its ‘noble principles’ wholeheartedly.<sup>23</sup> In the global zeitgeist then, where ‘communism’ had acquired an iconic status in which it was an inspiration more than a concrete set of philosophical and political beliefs, it was quite usual for ‘communism’ or ‘bolshevism’ to be invoked in a variety of settings for a variety of intents and purposes. Thus, leaders of the Akali movement regularly referred to the Russian revolution and its ideals even while addressing explicitly communitarian concerns. A famous activist, Mota Singh, made this connection explicit at an Akali conference. ‘Communism,’ he was reported to have said, ‘was nothing new...as it had been started by Guru Nanak Dev. The principles of the Sikh religion were the protection of the poor and the destruction of tyrants and this was nothing but communism.’<sup>24</sup> In other instances, religious and cultural fairs such as *Baisakhi* and *Puranmashi* also became sites for leftist political activism.<sup>25</sup> In

---

<sup>23</sup>SS Josh, *My meetings with Bhagat Singh* pp 40.

<sup>24</sup> PPSAI 1929, Simla-E, 29<sup>th</sup> June, No. 26, pp 334

<sup>25</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1932, Lahore, 19<sup>th</sup> November, No. 46, pp 651.

part these methods were standard in a political culture where such fairs were declared sites of activism by virtually all social and political organizations. At another level, this also signified the extent to which 'communism' had become embedded in local spaces.

But this was also function of a specific period, in which political affiliations and ideological orientations were in state of relative flux. As has been pointed out in the previous chapters, the decade following the mid-1920s was striking for the flexibility of a political space which offered numerous possibilities for diverse political strands to collaborate and overlap with each other. This flexibility was all the more apparent in the engagement between the Punjabi Left and Sikh communitarianism. Thus as far as some organizations are concerned, it is almost futile to draw a distinction between them during this period. This was certainly the case insofar as the Akali and the Kirti Kisan movements were concerned. Moreover, the Kirti Kisan movement and other leftist organizations, such as the NJBS for instance, also collaborated with other Sikh communitarian parties, such as the Central Sikh League for example. And so, while there were certainly opposing and irreconcilable ends in Leftist and Sikh communitarian politics, there were far greater overlaps and points of convergence. Indeed, the difficulty in distinguishing between the two is also reflected in colonial reporting, as similar events and similar personalities were reported on interchangeably under the heading of 'Sikh affairs' or 'Communism/Revolutionary.'

These linkages were embodied in the figures of activists as well as expressed at the level of ideas. Insofar as personalities were concerned, this period was remarkable for affording activists of all nearly all hues and colours to retain multiple party memberships and to move from one to another political organization with relative ease. Again, this was

especially true for the Akali and the Kirti Kisan movements. For instance, a colourful character called Kishen Singh ‘Bomb,’ described as a ‘luminary of the Kirti Kisan Sabha,’ was also appointed a *jathedar* of the Akali Dal at Guru-ka-Bagh.<sup>26</sup> Far from being an exception then, dual (or even more) party affiliations were by far the norm amongst the rank and file of these and other movements. Naturally, this also meant that certain political platforms and spaces were jointly held and used by – if, at times, only in appearance – separate political parties. KKP meetings for instance were frequently held in SA Dal offices while ostensibly neutral spaces like gurdwaras were also utilized for mutual party consultations.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, workers from other parties were also allowed to speak at *diwans*, conferences or public meetings organized by a particular organization. Kirti workers, for example, were a regular fixture at *diwans* organized by the Akalis or the Central Sikh League, with this arrangement also working the other way around.<sup>28</sup> This pattern also extended to participating in each other’s agitations. In the short lived Daska *morcha* for instance, which concerned a communal dispute between ‘Sikhs’ and ‘Hindus’ over the occupation of a gurdwara, Kirti activists not only participated but also introduced their socio-economic demands in protest meetings organized by the SA Dal.<sup>29</sup> This cooperation was particularly evident in the agitation against Sikh princely states. Following the All India States Peoples Conference in 1927, the *Punjab Riyasti Praja Mandal*<sup>30</sup> was founded the following year by Akali activists. Widely derided for their

---

<sup>26</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 12<sup>th</sup> December, No. 48, pp 689

<sup>27</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1932, Simla-E, 17<sup>th</sup> September, No. 38, pp 529 and PPSAI 1931, Simla, 6<sup>th</sup> June, No. 22, pp 356.

<sup>28</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1932, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> January, No. 1, pp 7

<sup>29</sup> PPSAI 1931, Simla, 5<sup>th</sup> September, No. 35, pp 540. Also see, PPSAI 1931, Simla, 29<sup>th</sup> August, No. 34, pp 531.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Punjab States Peoples Party/Society

widespread oppression and maladministration, these states<sup>31</sup> were frequently the target of radical and nationalist opinion. As the first expression of this discontent, the Mandal was formed by activists from the Akali movement with a variety of objectives seeking wide ranging reforms within princely states. This movement also involved Kirti activists and was later led by their successors in the PKC. Their intervention was important in agrarian disputes in a number of states such as Patiala, Malerkotla, Nabha, and Kalsia.<sup>32</sup> That said, political activism in princely states was a far more onerous task as compared to British administered territories.<sup>33</sup> Yet, this was another instance where Akali inspired agitations involved activists affiliated with the 'Left.'

This mode of politics, however, would not have been possible without a convergence of socio-political outlook and demands. There were of course important ideological differences, but these mostly existed at the level of rhetoric. For the most part then, these forms of politics and their short term socio-political aspirations were virtually identical. In part, this was a function of the fact that these movements appealed to similar constituencies. Thus, both the KKP and SA Dal naturally drew their support base from and appealed to the same central Punjabi, and primarily, Jat Sikh constituency. It was hardly surprising, then, that aside from the widely accepted demands for *swaraj* – which inevitably came with a multiplicity of interpretations – both parties had similar agendas insofar as agrarian issues and the economic welfare of *zamindars* were concerned. In this

---

<sup>31</sup> All together, there were 34 princely states in the Punjab.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed account on the movement in princely states, see Ramesh Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement in East Punjab States* (Patiala: Department of Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University, 1972). Also see, S. Gajrani, *Peasants and Princes: Agrarian Unrest in the East Punjab States, 1920-48* (Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1987). It should be added though, that very little work has been done on peasant movements in princely states in British India. Relatively more work has been done on their successors in the Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU). See for example, Mohinder Singh, *Peasant Movement in PEPSU, Punjab* (New Delhi: National Book Organization, 1991) and the second half of Gurharpal Singh's work.

<sup>33</sup> See for instance CA, 'Kisan Unrest in the Punjab States' F. 495, Inv. 16, File 43, pp 49-58

regard, standard demands relating to the lowering of land revenue, abolishment of *thikri pehra*, lowering of water rates, and other issues of local significance, were frequently raised by both as well as other political parties. The differences of course lay in what those immediate and contextually specific demands were eventually linked to. Kirti activists for instance, regularly bridged the local and the national/global by linking agrarian reform with the broader struggle against the imperialist and capitalist world order. While such invocations were also common in Akali meetings, emphasis was instead placed on communitarian issues. And for activists who belonged to multiple organizations, political rhetoric could always be tailored according to specific issues and the audience being addressed.

It is important to emphasize however, that these examples of collaboration were also contingent on the levels and sites of politics. As ever, at the local level, there was a far greater degree of cooperation and convergence between activists of various political parties. It was at this level too that there were more frequent incidences of multiple organizational affiliations. This trend was particularly amplified in localities, such as Guru-ka-Bagh or Tarn Taran, which had a history of political activism and shared struggles. At the higher regional and organizational level, political distinctions were more apparent. Prominent leaders such as Master Tara Singh of the Akali Dal for instance, were preoccupied with representing the interests of the Sikh community rather than working with the leftist end of the political spectrum. That said, even individuals like Tara Singh were compelled to engage with leftist idioms which had by now become a regular feature of Punjabi politics. Rhetorical invocations of ‘communism’ aside, the leadership of these organizations were also compelled to appropriate radical activists that

had been firmly associated with the 'Left.' Thus, even relatively centrist organizations like the Central Sikh League were compelled to organize conferences at which Bhagat Singh and 'revolutionary terrorism' were glorified.<sup>34</sup> The same held true for the 'martyrs' of the Ghadar uprising as well as prisoners serving sentences for their radical, and often violent, political activism. In part, these exercises were important for appropriating these individuals as exclusively 'Sikh', rather than anti-imperialist or even 'communist,' heroes in a bid to gain popularity within the Sikh community. But beyond Sikh communitarian politics, this was also a reflection of a wider political culture in which even mildly anti-colonial organizations were influenced by and forced to negotiate with leftist political idioms.

### The Emerging Split

Despite these significant overlaps, there were underlying differences and tensions that emerged to the fore from the mid-1930s onwards. In part, and as far as the Kirti Kisan and Akali movements were concerned, these fissures were perhaps an inevitable outcome of drawing from and appealing to an almost identical support base. Indications to this political competition first emerged by the turn of the decade in the early 1930s. In recognition of the popularity quickly attained by the Kirti Kisan movement, the Akalis, along with other bodies, established their own 'Kisan Sabhas,' which, while working on identical issues, 'abjure(d) the communism of the Kirti Kisan Sabha proper.'<sup>35</sup> The qualification of 'proper' was of course important in distinguishing the orthodox and more ideologically committed of the Kirtis from others who inhabited a multi-organizational,

---

<sup>34</sup> PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 11<sup>th</sup> April, No. 15, pp 236-7.

<sup>35</sup> PPSAI 1931, Simla-E, 30<sup>th</sup> May, No. 21, pp 337.

ill-defined – at least for colonial intelligence – and yet radical end of the political spectrum. But rather than simply being a backhanded compliment to the ground gained by communism, the creation of these front organizations was also a reflection of how political parties functioned in the Punjab generally. Thus, each political party, from the Unionists to the Congress and the Akalis, had their own *Zamindar Sabhas*, *Zamindar Leagues*, *Kisan* and *Mazdoor Sabhas* which worked on similar issues and sought to co-inhabit a political space that had been gained by the Left in the late 1920s. Similarly, for their part, Kirti activists were also anxious not to cede the communitarian field to their Akali counterparts. After all, many of them were still part of the SGPC and the Akali movement. At the same time however, in the spirit of a period in which political boundaries were blurred and anti-colonial struggles shared, Kirti activists were keen to moderate their tone in order not to antagonize their ‘communitarian’ and/or ‘nationalist’ counterparts.<sup>36</sup>

But such episodes of cooperation intermixed with subtle competition were always vulnerable to shifts in the wider political climate. For as far as the engagement between Sikh communitarianism and Leftist politics was concerned, a marked shift occurred in the mid-1930s as discussions on constitutional reform and the divisive issue of communal representation began to have an impact in the Punjab. In this regard, a key shift had already taken place in Sikh communitarian politics with the passing of the Communal Award in 1932. The fear of ‘Muslim domination’ which would sound a ‘death-knell’ for the community<sup>37</sup> united all parties claiming to represent the interests of the Sikh community. In this vitriolic atmosphere, in which insults and threats of violence were

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> PPSAI 1934, Lahore, 31<sup>st</sup> March, No. 13, pp 169

freely bandied about, any attempt at advocating communal unity and blaming the state for communal unrest were invariably greeted with scepticism. This inevitably placed those who belonged to both the Left and communitarian blocs in an increasingly difficult position.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the focus of communitarian politics shifted more towards attempting to assert and claim a greater share of the 'Sikhs' to the constitutional spoils on offer. A good indication of this overriding preoccupation came with the manifold attempts at reclaiming untouchables into the Sikh fold. Indeed, the latter found themselves in the strange position of being approached by various communities who were seeking to increase their population in a constitutional game in which numbers clearly mattered.<sup>39</sup> While the distinction between communitarian and leftist politics gradually sharpened by the changing political climate, the state too directly drove a wedge between the two by singling out and persecuting 'communists' for their allegedly subversive activities.<sup>40</sup>

With the emergence of rough boundaries and the shifting of priorities, political competition between various organizations intensified. Communitarian parties like the Central Akali Dal and SA Dal now manoeuvred to exercise influence over the Sikh peasantry through their *Kisan*, *Zamindara* and *Qarza* Leagues.<sup>41</sup> While these moves may have been viewed with relative indifference by their rivals a few years ago, in the charged political atmosphere of the Punjab they were now perceived as a part of a zero-sum game

---

<sup>38</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1932, Simla, 20<sup>th</sup> August, No. 34, pp 469 and PPSAI 1932, Simla, 3rd September, No. 36, pp 496

<sup>39</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1934, Lahore, 20<sup>th</sup> January, No. 3, pp 26 and PPSSAI 1936, Lahore, 18th April, No. 16, pp 178

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, a number of 'communist' organizations were also banned in 1934. This episode has been extensively covered in chapter 4.

<sup>41</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1934 Lahore, 14<sup>th</sup> April, No. 15, pp 186, PPSAI 1934, 'Departmental Notice,' Simla-E, 26<sup>th</sup> May, No. 28, pp 245 and PPSAI 1934, Simla-E, 21<sup>st</sup> July, No. 28, pp 307

aimed at claiming the sole right to speak for the Sikhs.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, these manoeuvres were not just an attempt to counteract the influence of the ‘communists,’ but were also aimed at displacing other communitarian rivals. In short, these organizations had not been created with a progressive intent. Naturally, for some within the Left, the establishment of an assortment of *sabhas* and leagues was a challenge that needed to be met with increased activities and rival *sabhas*. Sohan Singh Josh and his compatriots for instance, viewed the formation of Akali backed leagues as an attempt to ‘cut the ground from beneath the feet of Communist workers.’ These individuals correctly perceived that these front organizations will be ‘communal in character’ and ‘will follow the lead’ of those who brought them into existence, while their activities would ‘make it more difficult for communist workers to gain any hold on the rural population.’ Thus, it was proposed that an issue specific Punjab Kisan Qarza League should be established to start an agitation against rural indebtedness and reclaim the ground gained by ‘communal’ leagues.<sup>43</sup> Inevitably, and true to the pattern of an increasingly fratricidal Punjabi landscape, this move was soon followed by a decision of the Akali Dal to establish their very own Qarza League.<sup>44</sup>

These contradictions were further sharpened with the onset of elections. These elections were fought between Sikh communitarian parties and leftists on multiple fronts. The first were elections to the SGPC, which were contested on a regular basis. But given the emerging rift between the Left and its communitarian rivals, these elections were fought with increasing ferocity. While the predominance of the Akali Party was almost

---

<sup>42</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1935, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> February, No. 5, pp 5

<sup>43</sup> PPSAI 1935, Lahore, 9<sup>th</sup> February, No. 6, pp 59

<sup>44</sup> PPSAI 1935, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> November, No. 41 pp 491-2

guaranteed in these contests, 'Communists' and/or 'Ghadarites' also managed to get themselves nominated and elected on nearly all local Gurdwara committees where they attempted to influence the tone and policy of these bodies.<sup>45</sup> On the external front, the provincial elections in 1936-7 provided a further impetus to these rivalries. True to the prediction that they would provide an 'interesting spectacle of interparty strife,'<sup>46</sup> these contests encouraged rival camps to distinguish themselves from their rivals. For the first time then, verbal attacks were publicly launched against each other. While 'communalism' and 'communal parties' had always been condemned by leftists, the Akalis were, for the most part, spared this criticism on account of their anti-imperialist pedigree. The logic of elections, however, ensured that the Akalis were singled out and accused of 'communalism,' 'dishonesty' and 'corruption.' The Akalis were condemned for being worse than the *mahants* they displaced during the Gurdwara Reform Movement. Sikhs were therefore warned not to vote for Akali leaders in favour of the electoral front for many leftists, the Punjab Congress Socialist Party. After all, the 'present struggle for existence was a class struggle between capitalism and labour.'<sup>47</sup> The aftermath of the elections cemented these political divisions. With notable exceptions, many within Sikh communitarian and leftist parties now viewed themselves as bitter rivals and involved in a zero-sum game. In this regard, an excerpt from a police report on an Akali meeting is worth reproducing in detail:

S Partap Singh M.L.A viewed with great concern the effects of socialist preaching's on the Sikh masses. He said that the Sikhs were discarding their faith and having their hair trimmed and beards shaved under the influence of socialist propaganda. He felt that immediate measures should be adopted to counteract the

---

<sup>45</sup> PPSAI 1936, Lahore, 29<sup>th</sup> February, No. 9, pp 106

<sup>46</sup> PPSAI 1936, Lahore, 25<sup>th</sup> April, No. 17, pp 191

<sup>47</sup> PPSAI 1936, Simla-E, 3<sup>rd</sup> October, No. 39, pp 478

anti-religious tendencies engendered by the spread of socialism. At this stage, Phuman Singh Ajit pointed out that there appeared to him a clear contradiction in the professions and actions of the Akalis inasmuch as, while the Akali party was inveighing against the socialists as the inveterate enemies of its faith, several Gurdwara committees in which the Akali element predominated were financing socialist workers from Gurdwara funds and presenting them with *saropas*...Master Tara Singh promised to make an early enquiry into the allegations. The majority of those present at the meetings was of the opinion that the only solution of the party's difficulties lay in adopting the congress and socialist programmes in their entirety and thereby weaning the Sikh masses from the pernicious influence of communism. Particular stress was laid on the importance of a comprehensive agrarian programme of work.' Following this, a resolution was also passed 'urging the necessity of counteracting socialist propaganda against Sikhism',<sup>48</sup>

While this extract in many ways speaks for itself, it is significant for the explicit way it sets out the dividing lines between Sikh communitarianism and 'communism/socialism.'

What was also crucial was how, in a shift from earlier attitudes, leftists were now perceived as being a threat to faith and identity itself. In part, this was undoubtedly an attempt to detract from the political successes of the Left, and it would eventually prove to be a successful tactic in the ensuing decade. Moreover, the discrepancy between the positions articulated by the leadership and the realities of local politics is also reflected in this extract. Again, this was a pattern that was replicated across the Punjabi political spectrum. Crucially however, this exchange pointed towards the ground that had – or was perceived to have – been gained by the Left, despite relentless state persecution and active oppositional politics. Thus, the line between the two political forces was drawn in part by using idioms that are normatively associated with the 'Left' alone. 'Socialist programmes' were being appropriated to counteract 'socialist propaganda against Sikhism.' While demonstrating that parties within the 'Left' did not have the sole monopoly on certain political idioms, this extract also showed how the Akali Party

---

<sup>48</sup>PPSAI 1937, Lahore, 1<sup>st</sup> May, No. 18, pp 244-5

adopted a policy of using progressive rhetoric to undercut the Left's influence within the Sikh peasantry. The division between many in the 'Left' and the Akalis was now beyond repair, and the contest amongst them was carried out in similar terms over the next decade.

#### The Rivalry Intensifies: Support for 'Peoples War' and 'Pakistan'

The onset of the Second World War and the ensuing political shifts in the Punjabi and sub-continental landscape formed the backdrop for an intensification of the rivalry between the Punjabi Left and Sikh communitarianism. By this time the former was represented by the PCP, the PKC and the Punjab CSP, out of which the first two, notwithstanding the ferocious factionalism within their ranks, were politically and ideologically aligned to a greater degree as opposed to the CSP. All three however, were mutually hostile towards the Akali Party which was the most prominent party amongst all Sikh communitarian organizations. The Akali Party was now characterized as a pro-imperialist organization, especially insofar as their awkward political positioning was concerned. The Party found itself in this position owing to the ambivalent attitude it adopted towards the war effort. Nominally part of the Congress and answerable to a constituency amongst whom they had established their position over the past two decades as a vaguely anti-imperialist organization, the Akalis could not afford to be seen to openly support the war effort. And yet, in a wider political climate in which loyalty to Empire was crucial for asserting a greater influence in any future constitutional negotiations, the Akali party was compelled to encourage the enlistment of Sikh soldiers in the British Indian Army. This awkward position emerged to the fore in a very public

spat between Master Tara Singh and Gandhi, with the latter dismissing him as a rank communalist.<sup>49</sup> As a result, Tara Singh tendered his resignation from the Congress, while Akali workers as a whole managed to stay within the Congress fold only very tenuously. As far as the Left was concerned, episodes like these only underlined the ‘reactionary,’ ‘communalist’ and pro-imperialist nature of the Akali Party. At this time of course, the Left had the luxury of discrediting the Akali Party on this basis, as it was, as a whole, opposed to the ‘imperialist war.’

A sea change, however, occurred with the invasion of the Soviet Union and the declaration of the Peoples War line. Aside from the consistent opposition of the CSP, the provincial Communist Party and Kisan Committee was compelled to follow the lead of the All India Party and reluctantly support the war effort. The tables had fully turned and as far as the Akali Party was concerned, the boot was firmly on the other foot. The Akali Party now had a tremendous opportunity of attacking the Communists’ formerly unequivocal anti-imperialist credentials. As a result, propaganda parties were now formed with the express purpose of discrediting the communists. Among the many damaging rumours that were spread, the most prevalent one was that the communists had been released after tendering apologies to and assuring the Government of their help in the war

---

<sup>49</sup> This was an outcome of a very famous exchange between Master Tara Singh and the Congress leadership. Initially, Master Tara Singh outlined his position to the Congress President Abul Kalam Azad and Gandhi, by stating that he found it ‘impossible to ignore the reality of the war.’ He argued that even if the Congress was compelled to embark on civil disobedience, ‘it should do nothing to prevent recruitment to the Army.’ After all, it was only through mass recruitment that the Sikhs could ‘maintain their position in any Government.’ As far as Gandhi was concerned however, Tara Singh and the Congress had ‘nothing in common’ with each other. He accused Tara Singh of believing in the ‘rule of the sword’ and of having ‘‘my community’ in mind’ all the time. Stunned by this very public denunciation, Master Tara Singh was forced to declare that if forced to choose between Swaraj and the Army, he would prefer the latter. See, PPSAI 1941, Supplement ‘Sikh Politics,’ Lahore, 29<sup>th</sup> March, No. 13, pp 4-5.

effort.<sup>50</sup> In a further ironical twist, it was also decided by the Akalis to form a new ‘Kisan Committee’ to replace the PKC as the latter ‘no longer represented the anti-imperialist viewpoint of the Kisans.’<sup>51</sup> To add fuel to the fire, the communists were also accused of betraying the economic interests of Kisans.<sup>52</sup> In their attacks the Akalis were of course wholeheartedly supported by Congress and CSP workers – or at any rate, those individuals who were not in prison – furious at the ‘betrayal’ of the Communist Party and its Punjabi affiliates.

But by far the most important weapon in the Akalis propaganda armoury was the invocation of faith and community. The use of this card was especially effective in a time when religious rhetoric was more prevalent than ever before and communal hostilities were rapidly increasing across the Province.<sup>53</sup> In such an atmosphere, the use of religion against the communists – who already had an unfortunate reputation with respect to it – was especially potent. An orchestrated campaign of slander was initiated in which communists were condemned as *nastiks* (atheists), which, as a police report later remarked, proved to be their biggest handicap.<sup>54</sup> Not having a credible rejoinder to these accusations, leftist activists were forced to conduct their politics on terms set by the Akali Party. As a result, in certain localities, communist activists decided to grow beards and to wear their hair long in order to be politically effective.<sup>55</sup> In some cases, local communist workers resorted to giving the impression that they were Akalis, by wearing black

---

<sup>50</sup> PPSAI 1942, Simla-E, 20<sup>th</sup> June, No. 25, pp 336

<sup>51</sup> PPSAI 1942, Simla-E, 8<sup>th</sup> August, No. 32, pp 458

<sup>52</sup> PPSAI 1943, Lahore, 18<sup>th</sup> December, No. 51, pp 732

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, an excellent parallel was also witnessed in the Muslim League’s activities. It would be interesting to investigate whether both parties were learning from each other.

<sup>54</sup> PPSAI 1944, Lahore, 4<sup>th</sup> March, No. 10 pp 133

<sup>55</sup> PPSAI 1944, Lahore, 5<sup>th</sup> February, No. 6, pp 86

clothes, hoisting the yellow flag and exhibiting a *Granth Sahib*.<sup>56</sup> In others they created the pretence of administering *amrit* to villagers as part of their electioneering activities.<sup>57</sup>

Aside from publicly affirming their faith there was little the Left could do except for launching feeble attacks against the Akalis for their 'opportunism,' 'toadyism' and corrupt practices in gurdwaras.

Neither could these counterattacks be more effective. For the Communist Party and its Punjabi affiliates had been thoroughly discredited in the eyes of the overwhelming majority of the Sikh population for their ill-conceived support for Pakistan. At loggerheads with a party that styled itself as the defender of the Sikh community, the leftist support for Pakistan could hardly be expected to generate mass enthusiasm. The hopelessness of this position was apparent from its earliest days to the rank and file of the provincial communist movement, but under party discipline they were compelled to stick to the line for 'national self-determination' that had been crafted in Bombay. Even the intellectual driving force behind this line, Gangadhar Adhikari, was unable to explain to communist workers how they could possibly reconcile the pro-Pakistan policy of the CPI with the 'universal opposition to the Muslim League on the part of the Sikhs.'<sup>58</sup> Quickly put on the defensive, Communist leaders were compelled to voice their belated support to the creation of a Sikh homeland that could offset the damage caused by their support to the Muslim League.<sup>59</sup> Opposed to both *Akhand Hindustan* and the *Azad Punjab* scheme floated by the Akalis, the Communists began lending their weight to both *Pakistan* and

---

<sup>56</sup> PPSAI 1945, Lahore, 27<sup>th</sup> January, No. 4, pp 36

<sup>57</sup> PPSAI 1945, Simla, 11<sup>th</sup> August, No. 30, pp 274

<sup>58</sup> PPSAI 1944, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> December, No. 49, pp 675

<sup>59</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1944, Simla, 5<sup>th</sup> August, No. 32, pp 442

*Khalistan* by 1943-44.<sup>60</sup> This vision of a Sikh state was later concretely spelt out in a pamphlet – which could be better described as a rejoinder to the Akali Party – issued by Adhikari on the eve of the 1945-46 elections. This state was to be formed in the Sikhs’ central Punjabi heartland which has held to have a ‘cultural unity’ that had been forged by centuries of rich Sikh history.<sup>61</sup> Adhikari’s plan called for the demarcation of the Punjabi speaking Punjab – with the Hindi speaking east Punjab acceding to India – into two zones with separate constituent assemblies. The western Punjabi zone would be Muslim dominated with its capital at Lahore while the central Punjabi zone would be dominated by non-Muslims with Amritsar as its capital.<sup>62</sup> The pamphlet ended with an unconvincing plea to the Sikh community for support in the upcoming elections, as a vote for the communists would be a vote ‘for winning a Sikh homeland in a free India’ as well as a vote for ‘free Gurdwaras – for their democratic and non-partisan administration in the interests of all Sikhs.’ And lastly, it would also be a vote ‘against the opportunist, pro-toady policy of the Akali leadership.’<sup>63</sup>

The electorate, however, was not swayed by these appeals. Neither could it have been otherwise, as party workers, including Adhikari himself, did not think much of this scheme.<sup>64</sup> The result was predictable. Given a series of political miscalculations as well as the broader political climate, the communists failed to win even a single seat in the provincial assembly.<sup>65</sup> Prior to the elections communist activists had done their best to salvage anything they could out of a hopeless situation. They had approached other Sikh

---

<sup>60</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1944, Simla-E, 17<sup>th</sup> June, No. 25, pp 340

<sup>61</sup> Gangadhar Adhikari, *Sikh homeland through Hindu-Muslim-Sikh Unity* (Bombay: Sharaf Athar Ali, 1945), pp 5

<sup>62</sup> Ibid pp 8-9

<sup>63</sup> Ibid pp 20

<sup>64</sup> PPSAI 1945, Lahore, 17<sup>th</sup> November, No. 43, pp 409

<sup>65</sup> PPSAI 1946, Lahore, 23<sup>rd</sup> Feb, No. 8, pp 96

communitarian parties for the formation of a pro-Congress, pro-League and anti-Unionist political front.<sup>66</sup> They had even made overtures to certain factions within the Akali party in the hope of soliciting some support from their relatively 'progressive' members. They also tried to contest the Gurdwara elections through other parties in a bid to counteract the influence of the Akali Party.<sup>67</sup> But all these efforts came to naught. These desperate moves were all the more ironical especially as their chief opponents, despite their relative ascendancy, consistently acknowledged the popularity of the communist programme and discussed ways and means through which their influence in the rural areas could be effectively counteracted.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the Communists were also dealt severe blows by a vengeful Congress and CSP. In the end, the communist party made a decision to oppose Unionists and Akalis on all seats and to support Muslim League candidates against all others. The Akalis for their part, negotiated with the Congress to jointly contest seats where prominent communists had been nominated for election.<sup>69</sup> The Punjabi Left therefore, or the majority of it at any rate, had been consigned to near political oblivion. Their political miscalculations and, crucially, their inevitable inability to make much of an impression in a political landscape, in which electoral support was tied to the expected winners of the colonial endgame, had cost them dearly.

And yet, the mutual acrimony between the two political forces was not exhibited in all contexts. As ever, politics at the local level revealed an internal logic that was at odds with the calculations being made at the provincial and central stage. An interesting

---

<sup>66</sup> PPSAI 1945, Simla-E, 25<sup>th</sup> August, No. 31, pp 285

<sup>67</sup> PPSAI 1945, Lahore, 14<sup>th</sup> April, No. 14, pp 142

<sup>68</sup> PPSAI 1944, Lahore, 4<sup>th</sup> November, No. 45, pp 617 – A typical method discussed was the formation of 'National Kisan Committee' to counteract the influence of the 'Communist' Punjab Kisan Committee.

<sup>69</sup> PPSAI 1946, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb, No. 5, pp 54

example of this came from the Harse Chinna agitation in Amritsar district, which was conducted over a few months in mid 1946. Starting from the village of the prominent communist radical Achhar Singh Chinna, this agitation against the remodelling of certain canal outlets soon grew to envelop other villages as well. While the agitation was mostly led by local leftists, it was also supported by local representatives of the Congress, Akali Dal, and the Muslim League. In the typical fashion of a *morcha* agitation, *jathas* of fifteen agitators courted arrest on a daily basis and would be led by either Akalis or Communists, or would even have an Akali, a Congressite and a Leaguer within the same *jatha*, each of whom would be bearing the flag of their respective organizations.<sup>70</sup> In doing so, these individuals, and particularly the representatives of the Akali and Congress party, after having initially advised against a *morcha*, were following the lead of the local communists who had strongly pressed for an agitation.<sup>71</sup> Clearly then, at the local level, the question of acrimony or cooperation was frequently issue based. It was also a function of pragmatic politics that was at times, and even in the bitter post election atmosphere of 1946, often independent of the wider political currents prevailing in the province or at the centre.

## **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, the engagement between the Punjabi Left and Sikh communitarianism also provides some telling insights into the political contours of the provincial landscape. In terms of a broader chronological narrative, it shows the gradual narrowing of a political landscape, which during the 1920s provided an incredible space

---

<sup>70</sup> PPSAI 1946, Simla-E, 27<sup>th</sup> July, No. 29, pp 366

<sup>71</sup> PPSAI 1946, Simla-E, 20<sup>th</sup> July, No. 28, pp 360

for accommodating diverse political impulses. These emanated from the ‘local’ as well as the ‘global.’ All of which demonstrated that there was little to separate during this period, and especially at the local level, between the retrospectively constructed categories of ‘communitarianism,’ ‘nationalism,’ and ‘communism.’ The fact that these dividing lines became clearer during the 1930s, and starker still in the 1940s, also gives some indications about the power of a state which managed to craft a political space in which multiple organizational affiliations and ideological orientations were increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to negotiate.

On a more specific note, this story is also important for the way it highlights how this one aspect of Punjabi ‘communism’ was also a product of particular struggles, among particular groups, in particular localities. That made it distinctly Punjabi, or rather distinctly central Punjabi, in character. While organizations such the KKP and its succeeding avatars, such as the PKC, could always claim a cross-communal membership and ideology, in practice, their support base was mostly composed of the central Punjabi Jat Sikh peasantry. Thus, this form of politics was not representative of the agricultural poor or lower castes for that matter. If anything, as Gurharpal Singh and others have pointed out, political mobilization was along the lines of both community and class.<sup>72</sup> This did not represent a failure of this particular variant of Leftist politics to appeal to non-Sikh Jat rural tracts beyond central Punjab. Neither did it signify that ‘Muslims,’ in particular, considered communism to be essentially ‘non-Muslim’. Indeed there has been a significant commentary on the lack of ‘Muslims’ in the communist movement, not least by the Left itself, which resorted to colonial tropes in referring to the ‘backward’ and

---

<sup>72</sup> Gurharpal Singh, pp 111. That said, these accounts do not adequately explain why this was so.

religiously inclined ‘Muslim masses.’ Other writers on the Left have commented on this as well, thereby leading to a hint of religious and cultural explanations concerning the predominance of ‘Sikhs’ in the ‘communist’ movement. Needless to say, I disagree with this assessment. As has been shown, the development of ‘communism’ was the outcome of a convergence of specific factors. The failure of the Left to create a lasting impression in areas beyond central Punjab was a limitation of the Punjabi provincial landscape, in vast areas of which, local politics was held hostage to restrictive patron-client networks. These did not just include feudal lords and *pirs*. Rather it also encompassed the relations between the landed and non-landed, high caste and low caste and so on. With central Punjab, these networks, while relatively loose from the rest of the province, were also significantly shaped by the experience of long periods of anti-colonial struggle and migration. Moreover, in the ‘indigenization’ of ‘communism,’ it was obviously far easier to target familiar and proximate groups with similar reference points and a shared history of political struggle. This was where certain localities became important. As an obvious example, the villages of revered Ghadarite *Babas* and prominent leftists acted as prominent sites for radical politics and certainly more so than others. And it was this differentiation which partly explained how central Punjab could be a military recruiting ground as well as a centre for radical politics.<sup>73</sup> Thus, in the context of local politics, the Punjabi Left inevitably had a greater impact amongst certain groups of central Punjabi ‘Jat Sikhs’. Its engagement with ‘Muslim politics’ of course is another story, which deserves to be told in the next chapter.

---

<sup>73</sup> That said, the two developments could not naturally occur without some tension between them. Thus, this political atmosphere inevitably had an impact on the serving and demobilized soldiery from this area. For instance, the Sikh Central India Horse regiment, which mutinied during the Second World War, was largely recruited from these areas. See Chapter four for a brief account of this episode.

## Dealing with Communitarianism II: The Muslim League and the Punjabi Left

In contrast to ‘Sikh’ communitarian politics, the Left’s engagement with ‘Muslim’ communitarianism was far more limited and largely restricted to a period in which the Muslim League was ascendant within the provincial landscape. For a variety of reasons, this is a relatively understudied aspect of the Punjabi Left’s history. For one, ‘Muslim’ communitarian politics was largely restricted to fringe groups within the Punjab. Other than the Muslim League, which in any case emerged as a serious contender in Punjabi politics only after the onset of the Second World War, there were a number of fringe organizations that claimed to represent ‘Muslims.’ The most prominent amongst these were the *Majlis-i-Ahrar* and the *Khaksar Tehreek*. The former was mostly aligned with the Congress movement while the latter, under the leadership of the enigmatic Allama Mashriqi, was a militarist movement fiercely opposed to British Imperialism.<sup>1</sup> In any case, unlike its Sikh equivalent, ‘Muslim communitarianism’ was not a serious political force, especially as the powerful cross-communal Unionist Party was dominated by Muslim politicians.

Thus, aside from ritualistic critiques of ‘communalism,’ the Punjabi Left was not meaningfully engaged with ‘Muslim politics’ until the Muslim League began to emerge as powerful political force. While brief, this relationship was crucial for defining the Left’s political future in British Punjab as well as the post-colonial states that followed it. And yet, this brief episode tends to be inexplicably ignored in most works that focus on the Leftist movement.<sup>2</sup> This chapter then, in addition to adding to

---

<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Ali Raza, ‘Contesting Dominant Narratives: The Khaksar Tehreek in Punjab, 1932-44,’ (SOAS, MA thesis, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> At best, it has been briefly alluded to by the three seminal works – by Shalini Sharma, Gurharpal Singh, and Bhagwan Josh – on the Punjabi Left.

the broader argument of this thesis, is also a contribution towards rectifying this historiographical gap.

Before analysing this relationship in depth, a few points should be noted at the very outset. Firstly, the underlying theme in much of the narrative that follows is based on the idea of adaptability, which has been one of the defining hallmarks of leftist politics not just in the Punjab, but in British India in general. Thus, the Left continually found itself in a position where it had to negotiate between the demands placed on it by wider political changes and the sacrosanct principles it claimed to cherish and uphold. Indeed, this necessarily had to be the case if this movement was ever to be a viable and relevant political force. Consequently, the Left applied this process of negotiation when it came to its relations with the Muslim League. Secondly, in this context, I use the term 'Left' to refer to the Punjab Communist Party which was affiliated with the CPI. Even so, it is difficult to speak of the provincial party as one entity. True to the tradition of factionalism within the Punjabi Left, the provincial party was composed of three factions that were often at loggerheads with each other. The most vocal amongst these were factions led by Sohan Singh Josh and Teja Singh Swatantar. As was pointed out in the third chapter, these factions came together under the aegis of the CPI in 1942. There was of course the other section of the Punjabi Left, the Provincial CSP, which was often at odds with the provincial communist party and its central leadership. Indeed, this was the only prominent leftist group that resolutely opposed the positions of 'Peoples War' and 'National Self-Determination' that were adopted by the CPI and its Punjabi affiliates.

#### Endorsement of the Pakistan Demand

The onset of the Second World War and the ensuing polarization of politics within British India posed a set of uncomfortable questions for the Indian Left. How it chose to answer them would determine its political future. The first issue related to the position that should be adopted on the War itself. The resulting doctrine of 'Peoples War' further deepened the divide between the CPI and its Congress and Socialist rivals. This discord only grew with the Left's response to the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the Congress and the Muslim League. This was the famous principle of 'National Self Determination' that signalled the beginning of the Left's relationship with the Muslim League.

This principle was agreed upon in a resolution that was passed by the Enlarged Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPI in September 1942, and it subsequently gained wider endorsement through its confirmation by the First Congress of the CPI in May 1943. The resolution itself was premised on the need to preserve communal harmony and build national unity, a refrain that was to form the central pillar of the CPI's rhetoric till independence. A 'United National Front' then, was deemed to be an 'urgent and pressing necessity' for winning independence and resisting the advances of the 'fascist aggressor.' Before achieving this however, the issue of Pakistan had to be adequately dealt with. The CPI did so by outlining a number of principles which it believed should constitute the primary programme of the UNF. First and foremost, the principle of 'perfect equality between nationalities and communities' had to be recognized. In order to do so, and in what is perhaps the most famous passage of this resolution, the following rights were deemed to an essential part of this programme:

Every section of the Indian people which has a contiguous territory as its homeland, common historical tradition, common language, culture, psychological makeup and common economic life would be recognized as a distinct nationality with the right to exist as an autonomous state within the free Indian union or federation and will have the right to secede from it if it may so desire. This means that the territories which are homelands of such

nationalities and which today are split up by the artificial boundaries of the present British provinces and of the so-called "Indian states" would be reunited and restored to them in free India. Thus, free India would be federation or union of autonomous states of the various nationalities such as the Pathans, Western Punjabis (dominantly Muslims), Sikhs, Sindhis, Hindustanis, Rajasthanis, Gujaratis, Bengalis, Assamese, Biharis, Oriyas, Andhras, Tamils, Karnatakis, Maharashtrians, Malayalees, etc.

...Such a declaration of rights in as much as it concedes to every nationality as defined above, and therefore, to nationalities having Muslim faith, the right of autonomous state existence and of secession, can form the basis for unity between the National Congress and the League. For this would give to the Muslims where ever they are in an overwhelming majority in a contiguous territory which is their homeland, the right to form their autonomous states and even to separate if they so desire...Such a declaration therefore concedes the just essence of the Pakistan demand and has nothing in common with the separatist theory of dividing India into two nations on the basis of religion.<sup>3</sup>

Adhering as it did to the Stalinist view of what constituted a 'nation,' the resolution nevertheless managed to entangle ethnic and religious identities without questioning their specificities and the demarcations between them. In a way, it quite explicitly endorsed the 'two nation theory' in its exclusivist entirety by the implicit assertion that the Muslims of India had, according to the very definition of a 'distinct nationality,' a 'common historical tradition, common language, culture, psychological makeup and common economic life.' And yet, it also recognized that communities organized on the basis of ethnic or linguistic affiliations, including Muslims, could also claim the right of self determination. Religious and/or ethnic identities therefore, were now considered to be defining markers of 'nations.' In other terms, this resolution signified a clear shift in Leftist thinking, which had hitherto upheld the territorial unity of India and taken a rather dim view of the assertion of religious identity and dismissed all such attempts as 'communal.' By the 1940s however, the Left was clearly faced with the political reality of a resurgent League. It was thus no longer feasible to dismiss the prevailing religious divide as merely a 'communal problem.' The CPI line then, was an attempt to negotiate these demands within an

---

<sup>3</sup> Gangadhar Adhikari, *Pakistan and Indian National Unity* (London: Labour Monthly, 1983) pp 31

ostensibly principled and progressive framework. But as the resolution was at pains to point out, this concession was primarily intended as a means to resolve mutual differences within a framework of a loosely federated but united India. Indeed, this proposal was considered as an adequate means of ‘dispelling mutual suspicions’ and laying the basis for greater unity, particularly between the League and the Congress. That in turn was crucial for defeating the imminent threat from ‘fascism.’ Far from being divisive then, as was alleged by the CPI’s Congress and Akali rivals, this resolution was intended as a means of bridging irreconcilable differences between two mutually hostile political forces.

### United Front

In pursuance of the much sought after National Front, the Punjabi Left, under instructions from the CPI, actively started to support the Muslim League in its demand for Pakistan. Initially, this support was couched in terms of a ‘National Unity’ campaign under which communist party members and kisan workers were required to conduct propaganda in its support. Kisan workers, for instance, were instructed to organize secret ‘cells’ in villages for the dual purpose of strengthening their internal organization and conducting propaganda in rural areas in pursuance of this campaign.<sup>4</sup> Assorted ‘Unity Weeks’ were also organized to spread the message of ‘Unity’ in which communist workers toured urban areas on cycles ‘carrying Congress, League and Communist flags and exhibiting slogans advocating national unity.’ Demands were also made for the immediate establishment of a National Government with the inclusion of the Muslim League and the Congress. In joint meetings held with local Muslim League office bearers, the Congress was also implored to accept

---

<sup>4</sup> PPSAI 1942, ‘Extract from the Summary of Communist and other Subversive Activities for the fortnight ending the 15<sup>th</sup> October,’ (henceforth referred to as ‘Extract’), Lahore, pp 655

the Pakistan demand to bridge the misunderstanding that existed between it and the Muslim League.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, rural propaganda was also carried out through the joint platform of the Communist Party and the Muslim League. One of the first instances of this was a joint public meeting organized by the local offices of the two parties in Jullundur in September 1943, in which economic grievances, with an emphasis on the food shortages prevailing in the Punjab on account of the war, were discussed.<sup>6</sup> The food situation and adverse wartime economic conditions, in particular, were issues on which the Punjabi Left hoped to gain popularity. This was to be achieved through the organization of 'food committees' at the local level which dealt with issues of rationing and distribution. More crucially however, these issues were also intended as platforms on which other political parties could be united under the aegis of the Communist Party, thereby lending it a greater political significance.<sup>7</sup> This arrangement worked for the Muslim League as well. For at the local level, such populist causes were important for the Muslim League in augmenting their meagre support base at a time when discontent with their Unionist rivals, at their handling of a wartime economy, was at an unprecedented level.<sup>8</sup>

These public pronouncements of unity clearly indicated that the Muslim League, unlike other communitarian political forces, was not perceived as a 'communal' organization by the Left. It was instead considered as a 'nationalist' and 'patriotic' political party. Consequently, the Punjabi Left never attempted to back rival Muslim organizations against it. Notwithstanding the role that convoluted political theories may have had in its development, this view can more practically be seen as the

---

<sup>5</sup> PPSAI 1942, Lahore, 7<sup>th</sup> November, No 45, pp 696

<sup>6</sup> PPSAI 1943, Simla-E, 11<sup>th</sup> September, No. 37, pp 508

<sup>7</sup> PPSAI 1943, Extract, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> January, pp 39. Also see, PPSAI 1943, Lahore, 9<sup>th</sup> October, No. 41, pp 562.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance, Ian Talbot, 'The Growth of the Muslim League in the Punjab, 1937-1946' (Royal Holloway College, University of London, Ph.D thesis, 1981)

politics of pragmatism, even if highly misplaced, by the communist leadership and their Punjabi counterparts. For by this time, the League was a force to be reckoned with at the All India level where it had virtually been granted a veto by Lord Linlithgow over any constitutional arrangements concerning the future of India. The decision of the communists to endorse the League's demands, then, was merely an appropriate recognition of its potential power and influence over All India matters, in which Punjab, as a key Muslim majority province, was to play a decisive role. Despite this virtually unconditional support however, the Communist Party was still regarded by many Leaguers as merely a 'Hindu Party' with sensible views on Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

Disappointed at the results of the National Unity campaign and the mutual belligerence between the League and the Congress – whose leadership was in any case in prison during this time – the Left adopted a more interventionist stance. Believing that the 'progressive' elements within both parties were pressing for a mutual agreement, the CPI leadership initiated a shift in policy, which would in the end prove to be a fateful decision. Under this, Communist workers were required to persuade 'progressive Muslims' and Muslim members of their own party to join the League in order to strengthen it. This was to be coupled with a renewed drive to extend Communist influence amongst the 'Muslim masses.' Crucial to this campaign was the publication of propaganda literature designed to appeal to the 'educated Muslim' such as the Urdu edition of *Peoples War*, which was appropriately named as the *Qaumi Jang*. The task for Punjabi Communists then was clear. They were to join the League with the objective of forming a 'progressive bloc within it which will eventually be sufficiently powerful to expel the 'reactionary' elements who were irreconcilably opposed to the Congress. In this way, it was hoped that the League

---

<sup>9</sup> PPSAI 1943, Extract, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, pp 581

would play a more proactive role than it had played thus far in pursuance of 'national unity.'<sup>10</sup>

This strategy was tempered by the realization that the rather crude attempts at infiltration could result in a rift between the League and the Communist party.<sup>11</sup> As it happened, this apprehension was more than justified when Jinnah warned the Leaguers early in 1944 to have nothing to do with the Communists. This was despite a meeting between Jinnah and prominent Punjabi leftists, including Josh and Daniel Latifi, in which the latter offered their unqualified support to the League if it chose to overthrow the Unionist Ministry in the Punjab.<sup>12</sup> A Muslim League Ministry in the considered opinion of many Punjabi leftists would not only have been a setback to British Imperialism and other 'reactionary' forces such as the Akalis and the Unionists, but would also have provided an opportunity for them to advance their cause of Congress-League Unity. Nevertheless, the result of these schemes was all too predictable. Jinnah's warning had made Leaguers more cautious in their approach towards the Communists, with one outcome being the rift between the Muslim Students Federation and the leftist Punjab Students Federation.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, the Communists' decision to conduct propaganda in favour of Jinnah and to form branches of the League with their own workers further alienated staunch nationalists within the Congress whose sympathy they were always attempting to win.<sup>14</sup>

### Elections

Notwithstanding Jinnah's distaste for the Left, the fact still remained that the League, or at the very least its local branches, still required a means through which they could

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid pp 582, PPSAI 1943, Lahore, 9<sup>th</sup> October, No. 41, pp 562

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp 582

<sup>12</sup> PPSAI 1944, Extract, Lahore, 13<sup>th</sup> April, pp 217

<sup>13</sup> PPSAI 1944, Extract, Lahore, 29<sup>th</sup> March, pp 193

<sup>14</sup> PPSAI 1944, Extract, Lahore, 13<sup>th</sup> April, pp 217

carry out their activities in the rural areas. This was particularly important as most of the League's personnel were drawn from the urban classes.<sup>15</sup> To circumvent this gap, the Provincial League drew plans to strengthen its organization in the rural sphere. Clerks, peons, *chaprassis*, *chowkidars*, and workers were employed in the Provincial and district branches while lists were maintained of *zaildars*, Municipal Commissioners, District Board members, and other local notables. In line with administrative demarcations, the province was divided into five divisions with supervisors and convenors appointed for each and tasked with supervising propaganda work in rural areas. To meet the expenses of this propaganda drive, convenors were paid a travelling allowance of 50 rupees per month while preachers 'well versed in Islamic history' were employed for conducting propaganda in villages at the monthly salary of 150 rupees. It was also planned to inaugurate 'Jinnah Libraries' which would be supplied with 'Islamic and Pakistan literature' while a series of pamphlets and newspapers, in both Urdu and English, were commissioned.<sup>16</sup> Later, to supplement their propaganda activities close to the provincial elections, hundreds of students from Aligarh University were drafted to work in the rural areas of Punjab.<sup>17</sup>

By themselves however, these measures were hardly enough to counteract the influence of the Unionist Party in the rural areas. The crucial breakthrough, as Ian Talbot shows, came with the defection of prominent Unionists who recognized which way the winds were blowing.<sup>18</sup> These elite politicians were often large landowners and/or *pirs* who wielded tremendous influence over their tenants or *murids*<sup>19</sup> through complex patron-client networks. Indeed they were the very foundation which the Raj relied on to maintain 'order' and 'stability' in the province. Quite expectantly, this

---

<sup>15</sup> PPSAI 1944, Simla-E, 27<sup>th</sup> May, No. 22, Pp 301

<sup>16</sup> PPSAI 1944, Simla-E, 3<sup>rd</sup> June, No. 23, Pp 312

<sup>17</sup> PPSAI 1945, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> December, No. 47, Pp 447

<sup>18</sup> See for instance his thesis 'Growth of the Muslim League'

<sup>19</sup> Disciples/followers

power and influence also translated into votes, especially owing to the limited franchise, at the municipal or provincial elections. Until the defection of these powerbrokers, the Muslim League was never able to make substantial inroads into rural powerbases, particularly in West Punjab. With these shifts the League became a prominent force by the eve of the 1945-46 elections. This series of defections, despite being couched in terms of Islamic solidarity, were mostly calculated political moves that were predicated on the Unionist Party's unpopularity, the imminent departure of the British, and the rising star of the Muslim League at the all India level. Indeed some were quite unapologetic about their motivations for joining the League. For instance, one Subedar Major Farman Ali, an MLA from Rawalpindi, quite frankly stated at a meeting in Gujar Khan in early 1945 that 'he would join the Muslim League Assembly Party when that Party had gained in strength.'<sup>20</sup>

Aside from these crucial shifts in party loyalty, appeals to Islam and communal solidarity were also important for garnering votes and in popularizing the League's propaganda. In this regard, another aspect of the patron-client network, this time in the form of *pir-muridi* relationship, proved to be quite useful. Thus, stark warnings were issued that 'whoever is disloyal to the Muslim League will be regarded as non-Muslim and will not be buried in a Muslim graveyard.'<sup>21</sup> This method of combining a strong religious appeal with League propaganda only became pronounced as the elections drew nearer. Audiences were asked to repeat in the name of '*Khuda, Rasul,*<sup>22</sup> and Islam' that they should give their votes to League candidates.<sup>23</sup> The cry of 'Islam in danger' was given wider currency while propagandists 'urged each

---

<sup>20</sup> PPSAI 1945, Lahore, 3<sup>rd</sup> February, No. 5, pp 47

<sup>21</sup> PPSAI 1945, Lahore, 10<sup>th</sup> November, No. 42, pp 392

<sup>22</sup> God and the Prophet.

<sup>23</sup> PPSAI 1946, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> February, No. 5, pp 54

Muslim to regard the campaign to obtain Pakistan as a crusade.<sup>24</sup> It mattered little at this stage that the idea and demand of Pakistan was anything but clear. In fact, this deliberate vagueness proved to be quite useful as a recruiting tool and a propaganda tactic, as the appeals and meaning of *swaraj* had proved to be earlier. The strength of the cry for 'Pakistan,' then, lay in its emotive appeal and its flexibility to incorporate an almost infinite variety of imaginations and interpretations. In this way, a variety of groups, at times with conflicting interests, with each projecting their own meaning and vision on 'Pakistan,' could unite under one platform to give the League the prominence it sought. Needless to suggest, these emotive appeals did not fail to have an impact. Thus, it was reported in the aftermath of the 1946 provincial elections that:

The combined efforts of Pirs, students, and political speakers aroused a wave of pro-Muslim League sympathy amongst Muslim villagers, especially in the Rawalpindi Division, and so genuine was the fear of Divine displeasure which they managed to inculcate, that, to give one instance, a Muslim voter in Gujrat who voted for the Unionist candidate by mistake, was so convinced of his having become a *kafir* that he has decided to expiate his sin by feeding 40 orphans.<sup>25</sup>

The Punjabi Left too stepped into this emotive fray of socio-political imaginations with their own articulation of what they perceived 'Pakistan' to be. Their active participation formed the last plank of the League's propaganda efforts, especially insofar as the rural arena was concerned. To precipitate this, the central communist leadership gave instructions for the first tangible shift of what would eventually be a mass exodus of Muslim communists towards the Muslim League. This began with the resignation of the prominent leftist Daniel Latifi from the Communist Party in mid-1944 and his subsequent membership in the League.<sup>26</sup> The most significant defection of course was of Mian Iftikharuddin, a prominent Punjabi leftist, member of the Communist Party, former president of the Provincial Congress Committee and a

---

<sup>24</sup> PPSAI 1946, Lahore, 26<sup>th</sup> January, No. 4, pp 42

<sup>25</sup> PPSAI 1946, Lahore, 16<sup>th</sup> February, No. 7, pp 84

<sup>26</sup> PPSAI 1944, Simla-E, 1<sup>st</sup> July, No. 27, pp 362

member of the AICC.<sup>27</sup> The importance of such individuals to the League can be assessed from the fact that they were immediately appointed to high positions within the party while their less prominent comrades were tasked to assist League workers on their propaganda tours.<sup>28</sup> Their apparent shift in loyalties did not of course prevent most individuals from clearly indicating where their priorities lay. Thus, one Abdullah Malik, an 'ex-communist', was seen selling copies of the *Peoples War* in the League's propaganda tours,<sup>29</sup> much to the chagrin of some Leaguers.<sup>30</sup> Then again, the utility of the leftists could not be denied, as was evidenced by instructions to League workers to work in ever closer contact with communists and kisans.<sup>31</sup> They were instrumental in providing access to areas and constituencies where the Punjabi Left claimed its fair share of support and a number of public meetings were successful owing to their active participation.<sup>32</sup> This active collaboration meant that rhetoric in public meetings took on a more populist tinge with even former Unionist stalwarts like Shuakat Hyat Khan claiming that the 'Muslim League now truly represented the Muslim masses and was no longer a body of aristocrats, *Khan Bahadurs*, *jagirdars*, and capitalists acting under official influence.'<sup>33</sup>

This engagement also went the other way. Muslim League workers and office bearers were regularly given a prominent platform in Kisan conferences and public meetings. Thus, for instance, a Women's Conference organized as part of the Provincial Kisan Conference in Jullundur in mid-1944 was presided over by Begum Tassaduq Hussain, general secretary of the Women's Section of the Provincial Muslim League. In her

---

<sup>27</sup> PPSAI 1945, Lahore, 13<sup>th</sup> October, No. 38, pp 344

<sup>28</sup> PPSAI 1944, Simla-E, 15<sup>th</sup> July, No. 29, pp 395

<sup>29</sup> PPSAI 1944, Simla-E, 22<sup>nd</sup> July, No. 30, pp 414

<sup>30</sup> PPSAI 1944, Simla-E, 29<sup>th</sup> July, No. 31, pp 427

<sup>31</sup> PPSAI 1944, Lahore, 16<sup>th</sup> December, No. 51, pp 693

<sup>32</sup> See for instance, PPSAI 1945, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> January, No. 2, pp 19, and Lahore, 20<sup>th</sup> January, No. 3 pp 24

<sup>33</sup> PPSAI 1944, Lahore, 21<sup>st</sup> October, No. 43, Pp 595

address she appealed to women to fight for the freedom of the country and assured Sikhs that their rights would be looked after in Pakistan. In following addresses women were also asked to work for unity between Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus while the ‘importance of women who give birth to sons like Bhagat Singh was emphasized.’ Socially progressive resolutions were also passed which asked for the prohibition of early marriages and equal inheritance between sons and daughters.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, even in public meetings where Leaguers were not present, Communist and Kisan workers were quick to support the cause of Pakistan despite its unpopularity within their traditional support base of the Sikh Jat peasantry. This tension also existed at the highest levels of the CPI in which Party leaders like G. Adhikari were unable to explain to their Punjabi comrades, and they in turn to the workers in the field, how they could reconcile the pro Pakistan policy of the CPI with the near universal opposition to the Muslim League and, resultantly, the Communists on the part of nearly all Sikh political parties.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, the true extent of the Left’s influence over League propaganda became clear in the latter’s declared manifesto. Co-Authored by Daniel Latifi himself, the manifesto, according to a police report, bore the ‘stamp of Communist ideology.’<sup>36</sup> Among a series of progressive pledges, the manifesto promised the nationalization of key industries and banks, the control of private industry, the abolition of imperial preferences, and an improvement in the standard of living and labour conditions for all individuals. A plan for agricultural development was also put forward, in which the reduction of rural indebtedness, provision of cheap credit facilities, cooperative and state marketing at guaranteed prices, extension of the Land Alienation Act, provision of state land to poor individuals and the general welfare and

---

<sup>34</sup> PPSAI 1944, Simla-E, 30<sup>th</sup> September, No. 40, pp 552

<sup>35</sup> PPSAI 1944, Extract, Simla-E, 30<sup>th</sup> September, pp 675

<sup>36</sup> PPSAI 1944, Lahore, 18<sup>th</sup> November, No. 47, pp 637

advancement of all agricultural classes irrespective of religious affiliation was promised.<sup>37</sup> The circle of cooperation and collaboration then was complete. The manifesto had crucially provided the League election campaign, according to (nationalist historian) Sharif al Mujahid, with a 'direly needed progressive streak.'<sup>38</sup> During this the provincial and central communist party had still not given up hope of a united front between the Congress and the League. This was despite the repeated disillusionment they suffered on account of failed negotiations between the two parties. Thus the failure of the Gandhi-Jinnah talks and the outcome of the Simla conference were greeted with dismay by the Communists.<sup>39</sup> Still they remained undeterred at working towards their much vaunted ambitions of national unity. In doing so, they ignored a number of obvious signs and gestures that clearly indicted that in any All-India discussions between the Congress, League and the Imperial Government, their concerns would, at best, remain peripheral to any political or strategic calculations. Thus, a clear illustration of this stark reality came when a joint deputation at the Simla Conference led by leftist rivals, S.S Josh and T.S Swatantar, was unceremoniously ignored by all the parties concerned.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, it was all too tempting to ignore such signs especially given the prevailing political uncertainty and the numerous permutations of a constitutional settlement that were being proposed during this period.

However, the internal contradictions of working for unity between what now seemed to be implacable foes was fully uncovered in the elections of 1945-46. Much to the chagrin of the Left, the Congress decided to contest seats against the Muslim League thereby putting to rest any speculation regarding reconciliation between the two. It

---

<sup>37</sup> PPSAI 1944, Lahore, 18<sup>th</sup> November, No. 47, pp 641

<sup>38</sup> Sharif-al-Mujahid, '1945-46 Elections and Pakistan: Punjab's Pivotal Role' *Journal of Pakistan Vision* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2010) Pakistan Study Centre, University of Punjab, pp 5

<sup>39</sup> See PPSAI 1945, Extract, Simla-E, 31<sup>st</sup> July, pp 269. Also see *People's War* July 22, 1945.

<sup>40</sup> PPSAI 1945, Extract, Simla-E, 15<sup>th</sup> July, pp 255

was therefore decided to support the Muslim League against any other rivals, even if put up by the Congress, in return for the League's support for Communist candidates contesting Labour seats.<sup>41</sup> This decision was also precipitated by the decision of the CPI to call upon its members to resign from the Congress, on whose platform prominent leftists had previously contested elections. The Party had sensed that Congress leaders returning from a prolonged hiatus in prison would soon expel them on account of their 'Peoples War' line. This move was therefore made to pre-empt any actions that the Congress might take against them. The decision to resign however did not involve unqualified opposition to the Congress; it was still supported as a party working for 'National Independence' and assisted against 'reactionaries' such as the Unionists, the Akalis, and the Hindu Mahasaba.<sup>42</sup> In all cases thus, Congress candidates were to be supported against Akali and Unionist candidates except in constituencies contested by the Muslim League where League nominees would be supported against all others. Somewhat expectedly then, the direct result of this delicate positioning proved to be the complete obliteration of the Communists in the provincial elections.<sup>43</sup> Not a single Communist nominee was returned to the Punjab Assembly. Their balancing acts were ridiculed and branded as traitorous by their rivals, whose combined efforts at counter propaganda had led to the leftists losing even in their traditional strongholds. There were of course other reasons as well, such as the lack of funds, the continued incarceration of prominent communists and lack of preparation on the part of the Left. Moreover, in an increasingly tense political atmosphere in which votes were mostly tied with communal solidarities, the Communists could hardly have expected to make any electoral breakthroughs,

---

<sup>41</sup> PPSAI 1945, Extract, Simla-E, 31<sup>st</sup> August, pp 301

<sup>42</sup> PPSAI 1945, Extract, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> October, pp 347

<sup>43</sup> PPSAI 1946, Extract, Lahore, 28<sup>th</sup> February, pp 119

especially since they had been further marginalized by parties dominating the provincial landscape.

### Post Election Phase

The 1945/46 elections proved to be a watershed in Punjabi politics. The Akali, Congress and Unionist coalition ministry took office while the Muslim League embarked on a series of demonstrations and direct actions to topple it. Much of this story is well known.<sup>44</sup> As far as the Communists were concerned, the coalition ministry was the least desirable outcome, especially since they kept entertaining the near impossibility of a Congress-League ministry in the Punjab once election results were declared. More importantly however, the elections also marked an irreversible turning point in relations between the League and the Left. Indications of the worsening relations between the two had already been clear in the run-up to the elections. The Muslim League, while relying on the Left for propaganda in rural areas was nevertheless cautious of it, as was evidenced by Jinnah's cold attitude towards Communist approaches to him. At the local level, the Communists also proved to be an irritant to prominent Leaguers. For instance, prior to the elections, suggestions had been made by leftists that 'Muslim peasants should be persuaded to present demands to landowning Leaguers that the latter should make a start by implementing the provisions of the ML manifesto on their own estates.' In pursuance of the policy certain communists were found to be 'enquiring into the conditions of the tenants of the Nawab of Mamdot.' It was hardly surprising therefore when such activities failed to impress the League.<sup>45</sup> In the post election phase then, and especially as the utility of

---

<sup>44</sup> See for instance Ian Talbot *Provincial politics and the Pakistan movement: The Growth of the Muslim League in North-West and North-East India 1937-47* (Karachi ; Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1988)

<sup>45</sup> PPSAI 1945, Extract, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> January, pp 27

the Communists had worn increasingly thin, the barely concealed tension between the two erupted to the fore.

By mid 1946, proposals were being floated within the Punjab Muslim League to expel Communists from the party. These moves were aimed at prominent leftists, such as Mian Ifitikharuddin and Daniel Latifi, who occupied positions of authority within the provincial party.<sup>46</sup> During this time, other sections within the Punjabi Left and the central leadership itself were beginning to internally question its 'Pakistan' policy. Statements had started trickling in from Prithvi Singh Azad criticizing the 'present idea of Pakistan' and Palme Dutt that the policy of the League was 'undemocratic.'<sup>47</sup> PC Joshi also admitted that 'party members had been misled in the past into thinking that blind support for the League was advocated whereas the real intention was that the principle of Muslim self-determination was to receive Communist support.'<sup>48</sup> There couldn't have been a more damning indictment of the confusion sown by the Communist leadership themselves within their rank and file in the Punjab, who despite rhetorically supporting the Pakistan demand, were nevertheless uneasy and bewildered by the Party's seemingly unequivocal support for the League. Neither could there have been a clearer illustration that the Party's stand on 'self-determination' had actually proven to be divisive rather than conciliatory, as the utter failure of the fabled 'united front' and the mutual belligerence between the League and the Congress had so vividly demonstrated. Between the League and the CPI itself, the clearest break came in August 1946 when P.C Joshi denounced the Muslim League, since its 'desire to fight imperialism (was) not genuine but tainted with the hope of threatening the Imperialist Government into giving the League better terms.'<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> PPSAI 1946, Simla-E, 25<sup>th</sup> May, No. 20, pp 251; Simla-E, 1<sup>st</sup> June, No.21, pp 267

<sup>47</sup> PPSAI 1946, Extract, Simla-E, 31<sup>st</sup> March, pp 171; Extract, Simla-E, 15<sup>th</sup> April, PPSAI 1946, pp 185

<sup>48</sup> PPSAI 1946, Extract, Simla-E, 31<sup>st</sup> May, pp 271

<sup>49</sup> PPSAI 1946, Extract, Simla-E, 15<sup>th</sup> August, pp 405

This was a reaction to a series of decisions taken by the League to participate in the constitutional discussions of the Cabinet Mission and the subsequent arrangements of a Constituent Assembly and formation of a Interim Government. These were considered as divisive ploys engineered by the British to impose a constitutional settlement on India that would be the antithesis of the cherished leftist ideal of a completely independent, socialist state constituted on the basis of universal adult suffrage. As a partner in this process, the Congress too was equally vilified on this count.<sup>50</sup> Both the League and the Congress had dashed any hopes that the Communists entertained of working on a progressive and joint anti-imperialist platform. Instead, what they increasingly faced was the prospect of two mutually hostile states. The support of Pakistan had not only discredited them in all political quarters but had also lost them their crucial grounds in central Punjab.

Generally then, the provincial party remained quite ineffectual. This was despite the fact that at the local level, leftists continued working even up until mid 1947 in their traditional constituencies and strongholds on issues that were locally of importance, though not often with gratifying results. Thus, labour agitation within the unions of Lahore and Amritsar and especially within the Communist dominated North Western Railway Union, continued unabated. Similarly, Kisan agitations were conducted in districts other than Amritsar, specifically in Multan and Montgomery<sup>51</sup> and in large estates owned by, among others, the Nawab of Mamdot.<sup>52</sup> But viewed overall, Punjabi leftists were embittered over their crushing defeat in the elections, which led to the flight of a number of cadres to rival political parties like the Congress and the CSP; continually outpaced by fast moving developments in the central and provincial political sphere; severely weakened by internal squabbles, which had erupted to the

---

<sup>50</sup> PPSAI 1946, Extract, Lahore, 31<sup>st</sup> October, pp 519

<sup>51</sup> PPSAI 1947, Extract, Lahore, 31<sup>st</sup> December (1946), pp 7-8; Lahore, 10<sup>th</sup> May, No. 19, pp 240

<sup>52</sup> PPSAI 1947, Lahore, 3<sup>rd</sup> May, No. 18, pp 215

fore following the elections; and in danger of losing their influence in their traditional strongholds. Thus, an added reason for increased labour agitation was to counterbalance the increasing influence of the Congress, the CSP and the League over labour unions.<sup>53</sup> All this while, the other section within the Left, the CSP, was triumphantly increasing the scope of its political activities following a prolonged hiatus owing to the party's uncompromising anti-British stance and the subsequent incarceration of many of its leaders. Thus, the party was busy enrolling new members, infiltrating labour circles, participating in agitations, campaigning against the communists, and organizing province wide tours by central leaders like Jai Prakash Narain.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, within Communist circles, there was growing unease as the Congress and the Muslim League prepared to take over the reins of power. It was feared in some quarters that both, and especially the Congress, would not hesitate to persecute the Communists should the latter prove to be inconvenient or unwanted.<sup>55</sup> As of one many issued by the Left, perhaps this prediction alone was distinctive for being prescient.

The party was also plagued, much to the delight of the Punjab police, by certain dilemmas. The best indication of this lay in the frequent factionalism and internal strife that plagued the provincial party. Generally, the party was dominated by two main factions, led by S.S Josh and T.S Swatantar, who represented the Kirti group within the party. Both factions along with the Ghadarites had come together under the aegis of the CPI after it had been revived but tensions remained between the two and the centre, which often expressed its irritation at the continual squabbling between these groups. While the underlying rift between the two factions was the clash of the

---

<sup>53</sup> PPSAI 1946, Simla-E, 28<sup>th</sup> September, No. 38, pp 471

<sup>54</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1946, Simla-E, 3<sup>rd</sup> August, No. 30, pp 380-1

<sup>55</sup> PPSAI 1946, Extract, Simla-E, 15<sup>th</sup> August, pp 405; Also see PPSAI 1947, Extract, Lahore, 31<sup>st</sup> December (1946), pp 7

two dominant personalities of Josh and Swatantar, there were other political compulsions as well. Generally, the Kirti group exhibited an initial and continued reluctance in unequivocally supporting the Pakistan demand. As a faction whose primary support base lay in the Jat Sikh peasantry, it was perhaps conscious of how the Pakistan line would be interpreted by their constituents and especially by their rivals, the Akalis. Nevertheless, both factions continued to support the Pakistan demand in pursuance of the directives from the central leadership and the imperatives of maintaining party discipline.<sup>56</sup> In the aftermath of the elections however, mutual differences that had been ignored owing to the demands of electioneering, erupted to the fore of the provincial Communist Party.<sup>57</sup> Dissatisfied and embittered, Teja Singh's faction, blaming the party leadership for their resounding defeat, launched abortive attempts to capture the provincial party while the Josh group, with the connivance of the central leadership, parried off their attempts to do so.

### Partition

These disputes became all the more aggravated as the reality of Partition started to sink in. On the whole, the partition of the Punjab was condemned as an imperialist conspiracy intended to create a truncated Pakistan that would act as a base for the British and a buffer state against Russia.<sup>58</sup> The demand of Pakistan, then, had come full circle. Far from being viewed as the achievement of Muslim self determination, Pakistan was now viewed as a solely British creation. Indeed, if India were to be partitioned, it would have to be on a linguistic and cultural basis as the Socialist Party and Teja Singh's faction were quick to point out.<sup>59</sup> To circumvent this, fantastical

---

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Amarjit Chandan, 13/11/2010, London

<sup>57</sup> PPSAI 1946, Extract, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> March, pp 139

<sup>58</sup> PPSAI 1947, Lahore, 7<sup>th</sup> June, No. 23, pp 292

<sup>59</sup> PPSAI 1947, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> March, No. 11, pp 119

plans were even laid out by certain sections to participate in the expected violence but only in order to shift it from a religious strife to a class based one.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, the bickering between Swatanter and Josh, with the central leadership also weighing in, culminated in the former deciding to form a short lived Pakistan Communist Party, which he explained as a natural outcome of the division of India into two Dominions. In part this was a logical outcome of the decision by the CPI to split the party into its respective Pakistani and Indian chapters, which would however still be under the aegis of the All India Party. Nevertheless, Teja Singh was roundly condemned for his action and expelled (not for the first time) from the CPI. Inevitably though, an important declaration of Teja Singh's Pakistan Communist Party was the determined expression 'to save Pakistan from (being) a prey to British and American Imperialism and...a Military base directed against Eastern countries struggling for their Independence.'<sup>61</sup> This expression was an admission of defeat for a cause which had been pursued by the Communists and yet, at the same time, a demonstration of palpable fear and a remarkable, if perhaps coincidental, insight into the future trajectory of the Pakistani state, especially once became one of the frontline states in the Cold War.

While such doctrinal and personal disputes were dividing the Party, the Punjab itself was rapidly sliding into chaos. The resignation of the Khizar Hayat Ministry in the face of a sustained onslaught by the Muslim League gave way to a series of massacres, mostly perpetrated by the Muslim League National Guards, the RSS, and the Akal Fauj. Interestingly, individuals within the Muslim League who had declared themselves as either communists or as sympathizers of the communist cause, like Mian Iftikharuddin and Mumtaz Daultana, also assumed an active role in mobilizing

---

<sup>60</sup> PPSAI 1947, Lahore, 31<sup>st</sup> May, No. 22, pp 279

<sup>61</sup> PPSAI 1947, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> August, No. 31, pp 405

the League for direct action.<sup>62</sup> For other leftists who were still within the provincial party however, the League's actions were unequivocally condemned as 'communal' even while there was some sympathy for their cause. An indication of the impact of such demonstrations and poisoned rhetoric was that the Communists found their hold slipping over certain groups that had been regarded as sympathizers to their cause. Already, the Communist inspired Lahore Tonga Drivers Union in Lahore had been divided by virtue of its Muslim members opting to go on strike in response to the League's call for a *hartal*.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the communal atmosphere had also started to seep through the rank and file of the Left in certain localities and had started to worry Kisan leaders that they might lose the support of their Muslim workers.<sup>64</sup> In response, Punjabi leftists established peace committees in whichever districts they had a presence in and argued that the riots were orchestrated by paid workers of political parties and agents of British Imperialism.<sup>65</sup> Such committees could have a valuable impact in terms of saving lives, even if such events were rare and all too negligible when compared to the wider atmosphere prevailing throughout the province. Nevertheless, examples of such acts were found, particularly in areas, such as the villages in the Doaba region, where the Communists and the Kisan Sabha had a firm hold within the predominantly Jat Sikh peasantry.

Thus, in Kisan villages, patrols were mounted and protection was assured to the Muslim minority within the villages. Once again, the politics of locality and personality played an instrumental role in determining which villages were associated

---

<sup>62</sup> See for instance PPSAI 1947, Extract, Lahore, 31<sup>st</sup> January, pp 53; Lahore, 8<sup>th</sup> March, No. 10, pp 104-5

<sup>63</sup> PPSAI 1947, Extract, Lahore, 28<sup>th</sup> February, pp 97

<sup>64</sup> PPSAI 1947, Lahore, 12<sup>th</sup> April, No. 15, pp 173; Lahore, 7<sup>th</sup> June, No. 23, pp 295

<sup>65</sup> PPSAI 1947, Lahore, 24<sup>th</sup> May, No. 21, pp 266; Also see, PC Joshi, 'From Punjab, Danger to Us All', in Jyoti Basu (ed.), *Documents of the Communist Movement in India 1944-48* Vol. 5 (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997-1999), pp 396-8. Joshi claimed that the riots were sparked by the British to create the conditions for a civil war and the consequent emergence of an India and Pakistan which would be perpetually hostile to one another.

with this form of solidarity. In villages around Bhakna then, which was the ancestral village of the veteran and lionized revolutionary Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, the Muslim minority was fed and protected by Sikh Kisans under the red banner.<sup>66</sup> This was in stark contrast to villages like Nagoke, ancestral home to the prominent Akali leader, Udham Singh Nagoke, where an attack on Muslims within the village became the signal for a general flare up across the region.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, in 'red' villages, Muslims were protected until the repeated raids of Akali bands made their situation far too dangerous. In such circumstances, Sikh Kisans escorted their Muslim counterparts to refugee camps, railway stations and other villages which were deemed to be safer. In this instance, a graphic illustration was provided by the Punjabi leftist and Congressite, Dhanwantri, who reported that:

In village Kharparkheri, Amritsar District, the Sikh kisans had sheltered 900 Muslims. When the situation became too unsafe for them they escorted them to the Amritsar Station to see them safely off. In those days, when armed bands equipped with sten guns, were shooting down Muslims wherever they were seen, it was the most inspiring thing to see those 900 Muslims being escorted by the Sikh kisans who with drawn swords marched on either side of them to keep them safe.<sup>68</sup>

## **Conclusion**

A section of the 'thesis' presented to the Second Party Congress of the CPI held in independent India in 1948 commented that:

The leadership of the Muslim League...representing the interests of the Muslim capitalists and landlords, had *always*<sup>69</sup> played a disruptive and anti national role. The Muslim League leadership capitalizes the backwardness of the Muslim

---

<sup>66</sup> Dhanwantri, 'Bleeding Punjab Warns', *Documents of the Communist Movement in India 1944-48* Vol. 5, pp 385

<sup>67</sup> Ibid pp 380. The case of Udham Singh Nagoke is particularly interesting as he was closely associated with the 'Left' in the 1920s. More so than Master Tara Singh, he wrote in the *Kirti* and was a regular feature in *Kirti Kisan* and other leftist conferences. The fact that he later terminated his links with the 'Left' and became a firebrand Akali leader who allegedly orchestrated massacres during Partition was an excellent indication, if any more were needed, of how far the flexible Punjabi political landscape of the 1920s had travelled within the space of two decades.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid pp 386

<sup>69</sup> My emphasis

masses and the failure of the National Reformist leadership (read: the Congress) to draw the Muslim masses into the common struggle.<sup>70</sup> Viewed in isolation, this statement was a damning indictment of the stand taken by the CPI in supporting the League's demand for Muslim self-determination. It mattered little that the support was for the *concept* of self-determination, for when it came to actual politics, the Muslim League had to be supported by the CPI and its Punjabi affiliates since it was the only prominent party to champion the cause of Muslim self-determination. Moreover, political decisions from the party high command, no matter how nuanced, were bound to be translated in simple terms by the rank and file as well as their affiliates and opponents. Thus, even a cautious endorsement of the League's demands was inevitably interpreted as unconditional support for Pakistan. In doing so, the League was at times lionized as a patriotic and progressive political party. That only rendered the accusation that the party had always played a regressive role, quite ironical, if not comical. To this day then, the line of self-determination is viewed as an egregious mistake by a section of the Left in both India and Pakistan, while in (Indian) nationalist historiography, this doctrine is viewed as yet another instance when the Communist leadership betrayed and damaged the 'national cause.'

All such narratives, however, largely overlook a fundamental point. The colonial state had seen to it that leftist radicals, whether in Punjab or elsewhere, would remain a fringe movement at best. Given its political marginality and relative weakness, the Left was hardly in a position to affect the final outcome of the colonial end game. Whether it supported or objected to the Pakistan scheme was hardly significant. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise given that power was to be devolved along the lines of primordial solidarities, in which the voice of the Left, as the self

---

<sup>70</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 (Communist Activities in India and Pakistan, Jan 1947 – Oct 1949) (henceforth referred to as CAIP) Despatch No. 90 (Secret) from Office of the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom, Karachi, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1948, POL 7416 1948 (henceforth referred to as 'Despatch from Office of HCUK, Karachi') pp 127

proclaimed defender of the defenceless, was inevitably ignored. This arrangement of course, suited both the Congress and the Muslim League. Yet, the importance given to the Left in this debate is a function of an exaggerated sense of its significance that has been advanced by the Left as well as its imperial and nationalist (of both secular and communitarian varieties) adversaries.

More useful than the question of impact, then, is what the Left's engagement with the League tells us about the shifting provincial and national political landscape. For one, given the relative weakness of the Left, it was hardly surprising that it chose to support the principle of self-determination. Debates regarding this positioning have mostly focussed on its ideological basis and have consequently missed the point. While ideology was undeniably one of the driving forces behind the adoption of this principle, what mattered more was that the Left, and especially its Punjabi affiliate, was compelled to hedge its bets with the expected winners in the colonial end game. By the mid 1940s, it was clear that the Muslim League was clearly going to be one of them. The League had been given a virtual veto over any proposed constitutional arrangements and the Lahore Resolution in 1940 had made it clear that the Leaguers were pushing for the creation of autonomous Muslim states. Faced with this political reality and chastised by the experience of permanently remaining either in prison or at the political fringe, the stance taken by the Left was an example of pragmatism couched in terms that would not conflict with broader ideological positions. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise if the Left hoped to be a viable political entity in independent India. Much to its misfortune however, in hedging its bets with all the main political players at the Centre and the Province, the Left ended up being widely discredited and distrusted by all concerned. Perhaps this was only inevitable. But to suggest that this was the only possible outcome would be to unfairly understate the

political uncertainty prevailing at the time and the numerous possibilities being envisioned by political actors once discussions relating to the transfer of power took place. In supporting the Muslim League and its demand for Pakistan then, the Left was acting upon one of these imagined possibilities. The fact that the final outcome of Partition was bitterly denounced by the Indian Left, and especially its Punjabi counterpart, indicated that the actual realization of Pakistan was at complete odds with the 'Pakistan' envisioned by these activists. In this however, the Left was hardly alone, for one of the most striking features about Partition was that it was an undesirable outcome for all political forces concerned. The Left, and especially its Punjabi counterpart then, was overwhelmed by events largely beyond its control.

Related to this is the rather obvious point that the experience of the Left also highlights the limits to radicalism in a political space that was from the very outset engineered against the sort of socio-political visions articulated by it. Indeed, this has been a major theme of this thesis. Moreover, and as I have pointed out in previous chapters, this space was itself rapidly changing. The Left's engagements with the Congress, Akalis, and the League showed how the space for political manoeuvrability rapidly shrank as the end of the Raj drew nearer. In this context, if politics was ever to be a successful endeavour, it necessarily had to engage with the limitations posed on it. The Left then was compelled to approach the particular structure of politics – that remained broadly fixed despite the rapid changes within it – and the power formations that were deemed to be legitimate by the State. The support for Pakistan and the Muslim League, therefore, necessarily has to be viewed in this broader context. How that support affected the Left in Pakistan, however, is a story that is briefly narrated in the following section.

## Epilogue

The division of British Punjab rendered a devastating blow to the provincial leftist movement. The horrific scale of the communal massacres ensured that the majority of Punjabi leftists, Hindu and Sikh, were compelled to either migrate to or stay in East Punjab. Teja Singh's short lived 'Pakistan Communist Party' had also been dismembered and rendered non-functional with him being restricted to the eastern side of the new border. Activists on both halves of the divide were now subject to a new round of persecution by their states. That, however, is where the similarity ended. Being more grounded in their districts and far more prominent in a smaller Indian Punjab, the activists from the Ghadar-Kirti network were able to form a new group called the Lal (Red) Communist Party in 1948. Under the leadership of Kirti stalwarts like Teja Singh and others, this network played a seminal role in East Punjabi politics in pushing for land and agrarian reform. Viewed this way, and notwithstanding the continual persecution against them, the East Punjabi leftists recovered and possibly benefitted from the damage wrought by Partition.

This relative success was in stark contrast to the fortunes of their West Punjabi and now 'Pakistani' comrades. In contrast to their Indian counterparts though, the story of the Pakistani Left has been virtually ignored in South Asian historiography.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Gurharpal Singh's work, all histories of the Punjabi Left in colonial India end, for obvious reasons, in 1947. For this thesis though, a case can be made for a brief

---

<sup>1</sup> The recent exception to this norm is a paper by Kamran A. Ali, 'Communists in a Muslim Land: Cultural Debates in Pakistan's Early Years' *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 45, No. 3 (2011) pp 501 - 534 in which he skillfully charts the dilemmas faced by and the debates within the 'Pakistani' Left after independence.

recounting of the period immediately following Partition. Given the gap in historiography and the relatively well covered ground in East Punjab,<sup>2</sup> this section will mostly focus on West Punjab and the nascent state of Pakistan. But this is not simply an attempt at contributing to a history of the ‘Pakistani’ Left. Rather, in some respects, it is also a proper culmination of the discussion in the previous chapter. Already on a steep decline, the relations between the Muslim League and their erstwhile allies were defined more sharply and irreversibly in the post-partition period. In the case of West Punjab, this brief analysis also shows how the space for progressive politics rapidly shrunk owing to the devastation wrought by Partition and the onslaught of triumphal nationalist chauvinism. It also sheds insights into a formative period in which various political actors were attempting to mould the nascent state in their own image. More importantly, this narrative shows how the political landscape crafted by the colonial state outlived the formal transfer of power. The fact that this sphere was not just contingent on the presence of a ‘colonial entity’ raises in turn what ‘decolonization’ meant, particularly for those political actors whose understanding of identity, sovereignty, and socio-political objectives was at odds with the inheritors of the colonial state. This perhaps is the most compelling reason for continuing the wider narrative into the ‘post-colonial’ period. After all, ‘decolonization,’ as viewed from the eyes of the Left, was a betrayal of everything they had struggled for. If anything, independence merely brought about a change of ‘masters’ who willingly inherited the colonial state instead of displacing it. True freedom and independence was therefore still awaited by these activists.

---

<sup>2</sup> Aside from Gurharpal Singh see Mohinder Singh *Peasant Movement in PEPSU*. These are in addition to the numerous monographs on the Leftist movement in post-colonial India. For a brief overview see Overstreet and Windmiller.

## Independence

The first police report after August 15, 1947 remarked at very outset that ‘the inauguration of Pakistan, which had been so eagerly awaited by the Muslims, brought very little joy.’<sup>3</sup> As far as observations went, this was perhaps understating the widespread sense of disillusionment and collective depression that marked the birth of Pakistan. From the highest echelons of a struggling government to the society as a whole, this sense has been emotively immortalized in much of the literature that has been devoted to Partition and perhaps none more so than in the renowned poet and leftist, Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s poem, *Subah-e-Azadi*.<sup>4</sup> But Faiz’s lament and his call for continuing the search ‘for that promised Dawn’ resonated more with the Punjabi Left, or at the very least, the section of it which had been left behind in Pakistan. What remained was an isolated and embittered group of leftists who had not joined the Muslim League and were still affiliated with a few labour unions and either the CPI or the Socialist Party. Nevertheless, the perennial (if misplaced) optimism that was a hallmark of the Left, soon expressed itself in the determination of the remaining radicals to work in Pakistan. The Pakistan flag was hoisted alongside the red banner on party offices, while resolutions were passed offering cooperation to the Pakistan Government in solving the ‘problems of the people,’ appealing for acceptance of minority rights and suggesting cooperation between Pakistan and India in economic, defence and foreign policy questions. Further appeals were made for Pakistan to be a secular democratic republic and not a communal state or British Dominion.<sup>5</sup> Plans were also made for overcoming the dearth, partly through killings, of Muslim workers by encouraging the employment of Sikhs converted

---

<sup>3</sup> PPSAI – West Punjab (WP) 1947, Lahore, 23<sup>rd</sup> August, No. 34, pp 419

<sup>4</sup> ‘Dawn of Freedom’

<sup>5</sup> PPSAI – WP 1947, Lahore, 16<sup>th</sup> August, No. 33, pp 417

as Muslims and calling for the ‘import’ of Muslim workers from Delhi and other provinces of India.<sup>6</sup>

Viewed in a broader context, the Left in Pakistan was clearly faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges. The immediate issue facing the nascent state was resettling millions of refugees who had mostly flooded into West Punjab. Disposed of their material possessions and sources of income, the refugees were an enormous burden on the scarce resources of both state and society. In some cases, the plight of refugees was reported to be so desperate that they had resorted to eating raw crops.<sup>7</sup> In some districts the refugees also came into open conflict with the settled residents, which is a narrative at odds with the nationalist myth of a nation receiving its dispossessed members with open arms. Thus, conflicts over evacuee property, which in some cases had been quickly claimed by local leaguers and prominent locals, and scarce resources predominated. At times, these tensions boiled over and led to violence from both sides. Thus in January 1948, in village Ladhewal, Montgomery district, ‘refugees from Rohtak, ‘at the instigation of a local resident, raided and looted the house of a new convert to Islam and caused injuries to the inmates.’ In response, local residents from Ladhewal and the surrounding villages attacked the refugees with fire arms, causing dozens of injuries and evicting them from the village.<sup>8</sup> Such incidents were hardly untypical and were replicated across the Punjab. There were also apprehensions that the non-Muslim refugees might return to reclaim their properties<sup>9</sup> while there were also moves within Muslim refugees to return to their homes

---

<sup>6</sup> PPSAI – WP 1947, Lahore, 23<sup>rd</sup> August, No. 35, pp 426; Lahore, 13<sup>th</sup> September, No. 38, pp 454

<sup>7</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 28<sup>th</sup> February, No. 9, pp 65

<sup>8</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 17<sup>th</sup> January, No.3, pp 22

<sup>9</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 28<sup>th</sup> February, No. 9, pp 67

in India.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, local conditions, which ranged from personal vendettas to the availability of sufficient resources, were instrumental in determining how and on what terms the refugees would be resettled.

To add to the list of woes were other factors which threatened to engulf the new government. There was a food grain shortage across the Province which resulted in an astronomical rise in the prices of foodstuffs, particularly in the black market.<sup>11</sup> There was also a concurrent shortage of cloth and other commodities while criminal incidents also increased manifold. Moreover, the Punjab at this time was an open field for 'Pathan tribesmen' who roved throughout the province in search of loot and plunder. While also being responsible for the looting and massacres of non-Muslims, such bands also targeted refugees, Muslim residents and members of the depressed classes.<sup>12</sup> More crucially however, the political uncertainty surrounding the new state and its future direction proved to be an invitation for various groups ranging from Islamist parties to the Communists attempting to fill the vacuum through their respective articulations of socio-political visions for the new state. In doing so, they were seeking to address the prevailing discontent and opposition to a seemingly indifferent government and, in many cases, to the idea of Pakistan itself. Thus, one Qazi Ahmed Jan, Imam of a mosque in Thata, Attock district, spoke for many when he was reported to declare at a public gathering that:

Hindustan and Hindu Government were better than Pakistan and Muslim Government, as under the latter Government, the people could not even get enough to eat. He (Qazi Ahmed Jan) shouted slogans of *Pakistan Murdabad* and

---

<sup>10</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 17<sup>th</sup> April, No. 16, pp 135

<sup>11</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 14<sup>th</sup> February, No. 7, pp 47

<sup>12</sup> See for instance PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore 11<sup>h</sup> January, No. 2, pp 13 and 17

*Muslim League Murdabad* and said the Pakistan Government was encouraging corruption and doing injustice.<sup>13</sup>

### The Condition of the Left

The Left, however, was in no position to channel this discontentment into a more progressive direction. The experience of Partition had divided leftist groups, with many of their best cadres and leaders migrating to East Punjab, and left with them with a weakened base. Even the remaining strongholds of union and kisan activity had been weakened by the migration of non Muslim workers and kisans. To add to that, there was no united leftist party operating in West Punjab, let alone the rest of the country. Rather, leftist groups exhibited the established norms of infighting between and within themselves. As a result, there were a number of leftist groups that often ended up working in cross purposes to each other. The most significant of these was the All Pakistan Trades Union Federation, which was set up by the now ‘Pakistani’ representatives of the ‘Communist controlled’ All India Trades Union Federation. The Federation was led by Mirza Muhammad Ibrahim, a veteran labour leader of the North Western Railways Union in Lahore. Other than this, there was also a Pakistan Socialist Party, led by Munshi Ahmed Din, former member and leader of the Punjab CSP, and a parliamentary ‘Pakistan Peoples’ Party’. There were also a slew of parties and agrarian movements operating in Sindh, East Pakistan, and, to some extent, the NWFP. Lastly there was a scattering of Leftists within the Muslim League, such as Mian Iftikharuddin who was the party’s Punjab President.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 14<sup>th</sup> February, No. 7, pp 48

<sup>14</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Despatch from Office of HCUK, Karachi, pp 127-30

As for the Pakistan Communist Party itself, it was established again in 1948 after Teja Singh's first attempt foundered in the massacres of Partition. Typically though, the Party was born out of heated debates which provided a revealing insight into how the prevailing political situation was understood by these activists. The debate centred between two prominent Punjabi Leftists, Fazal Elahi Qurban and Feroze-ud-Din Mansur. Qurban was in favour of setting up a party that would be independent of the CPI and reflective of a political reality in which the two dominions of India and Pakistan were functioning independently of each other. In doing so, he was reiterating the line argued by Teja Singh's group, of which he was a member prior to Partition. Mansur on the other hand did not perceive the need to establish an autonomous party or cutting of any links with the CPI even if the party was formed as he felt that the two Dominions would be reunited soon. FD Mansur then was representing a substantial section of the Left and the initial line of the CPI which felt that the two autonomous states were a transient reality. This line was also pursued by the envoy of the CPI, Sajjad Zaheer, who was deputed by the party to visit Lahore and assist and guide the leftists there in pursuing the directives issued by the All India Party.<sup>15</sup> These debates thus were an indication of the uncertainty prevailing after Partition and a reflection of the various visions that political actors held, and not just in leftist circles, over the future direction and political orientation of the two states. Soon though, the CPI at its Second Party Congress held at Calcutta in March 1948 relented to its branches in Pakistan forming a separate party, the headquarters of which were in Lahore.<sup>16</sup> Sajjad Zaheer was entrusted to organize the Party but he was soon

---

<sup>15</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 4<sup>th</sup> January, No. 7, pp 7

<sup>16</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, From the High Commissioner for the UK in Pakistan, Karachi, to Commonwealth Relations Office, London, No. 61, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1948, POL 7069 1948, pp 138

forced to go underground to escape state persecution.<sup>17</sup> The founding principles of the party had already been laid and were similar to the demands and political principles articulated by other leftist groups. These included the nationalization of key industries, radical agrarian reform, and the repeal of regressive and repressive laws. More interestingly, a proposal was also made for reorganizing the new state on a linguistic basis, in which the resulting federating states would be granted the principle of self determination.<sup>18</sup> This demand thus reflected an understanding and recognition of the ethnic and linguistic cleavages within the new nation as much as it was a continuation of the standard CPI line of self-determination.

### Persecution

The Communists or the broader left, though, was handicapped from the start in pursuing these objectives. For in addition to organizational problems and external events beyond its control, the leftists soon became the favoured target of state persecution. Indeed, in this regard, both India and Pakistan showed a remarkable degree of continuity in criminalizing the very same groups that had been the primary target of their predecessor. Both states clung onto a larger than life image of the Left and this official hysteria led to a series of repressive measures being put in place. This was as much an outcome of a political movement that had fallen foul of the ruling parties in both countries in the run up to independence as much as it was of a bureaucracy which had been institutionalized and habituated into imagining the Left as a seditious movement that was a proxy for the Soviet Union. Thus, in India for instance, the party was banned under a variety of

---

<sup>17</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Communism in the West Punjab, pp 356-7

<sup>18</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Letter from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Karachi to the Commonwealth Relations Office, London dated 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1948, pp 81

pretexts between 1948 and 1951 in all its major strongholds. This was foreshadowed by hundreds of arrests and the search of party and union offices.<sup>19</sup> The extent of this official hysteria was reflected in the statement of an East Punjab Minister who accused the Communists of being involved in Mahatma Gandhi's assassination as well as being partly responsible, owing to their support for Pakistan, for the recent massacres in the Punjab<sup>20</sup> In this persecution Pakistan soon followed suit, and in ways that suggested at most, a suspicious degree of coordination between the two states or at very least, one of the rare instances when the official policies of both states were perfectly aligned with each other. This was especially the case in East Bengal which clamped down on communist activity immediately after a ban had been imposed on the party in its Western counterpart.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike India, where the communists were still a substantial force and involved in agrarian agitations and uprisings against the state, the Left in Pakistan was hardly equipped to withstand the onslaught of state repression. If anything, the paranoia in Pakistan was much worse than that exhibited in India. This primarily had to do with the fear that Pakistan, in the words of the British High Commissioner, 'abound(ed) with excellent material for communist agitation.'<sup>22</sup> Indeed the British representatives were petrified at the possibility of communist activism within the new state and closely liaised with their former colleagues within the Pakistan bureaucracy to get a better sense of the 'threat' it faced. The 'danger,' as was acknowledged time and again, and reported by the head of the CID to a British consular official in Lahore, did not come from the present state of

---

<sup>19</sup> See for instance, IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Extract from the 'Economist' dated 22 November 1947 POL 12015 1947 and Reuters India and Pakistan Service 29.3.48,

<sup>20</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, 'Sixty nine Communists arrested in Punjab Simla,' Reuters India and Pakistan Service 3/4/48 pp 146.

<sup>21</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Communist Movement in East Bengal, pp 345

<sup>22</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Despatch from Office of HCUK, Karachi, pp 132

organization by the Left. Rather, it 'lay in the misery which could be so easily exploited.'<sup>23</sup> There were potentialities for agrarian unrest in the Bengal<sup>24</sup> and NWFP<sup>25</sup> while there was also cause for apprehension in Sindh and West Punjab of peasant and labour agitations. However, by far the biggest 'reservoir of discontent and potential agitation' was the mass of refugees who had flooded into West Punjab. Those already resettled provided a potential audience for leftists while those still in camps, 'living in conditions of appalling squalor and discomfort, demoralised by what they have suffered and by lack of employment, provide(d) even more fertile material.' Thus, according to a report given by former Indian Army officer who volunteered for service with the refugees:

'The refugees themselves say, 'we were promised Pakistan, what we got is *Qabristan* (cemetery)' and from the thousands and thousands who have died from exposure one can but sympathize with them. I have met quite a number of wealthy people who lost their all owing to partition, (and) they, as a class, all complain that nothing is done for them and they are the bitterest critics of most of the 'tops' now in office. The wish for Communism – which is so foreign to the nature of the Mussalman – is very freely expressed and particularly by the former wealthy classes, the more educated types. Of one thing I am certain, and that is that unless the refugees are very speedily rehabilitated Pakistan will have a permanent problem of hundreds of thousands of *ghoondas*.<sup>26</sup>

Further compounding the problem was the feared encirclement of Pakistan by international communism. This anxiety of course has to be viewed in the broader context of the cold war and the joint Anglo-American efforts to check the spread of Communism in Asia. For this was a period when the Communists were on the verge of victory in

---

<sup>23</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Extract from letter from Deputy UKHC, Lahore, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1948 Pol. 7071/48, pp 83

<sup>24</sup> See for instance IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Communist Movement in East Bengal, pp 345, 349-50

<sup>25</sup> See for instance, IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, NWFP Peasantry Asks Government to End Feudal Tyranny' Extract from Pakistan Times Date 20th February 1948, pp 136

<sup>26</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Despatch from Office of HCUK, Karachi, pp 133

China and the advance of the Revolution was anticipated in South East Asia, and especially in Malaya, Burma, Indonesia and French Indo-China. In this regard, conversations were reported to take place between Britain and the United States expressing the desirability of 'sustaining and siding with the stable nations of Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, as their examples offer the best counter-irritant to the 'co-prosperity sphere' kind of propaganda that is likely to be increased once a Communist regime is established in China.'<sup>27</sup> The reality however was that Pakistan, as the worried dispatches of the British representatives indicated, was anything but stable. There was thus a danger that Pakistan could provide 'a fertile field for Soviet intervention.' Already in an ominous development for West Pakistan, the Soviet Union was active in fomenting 'unrest' in Central Asia, and more worryingly Sinkiang, and it was feared that the northernmost princely states of Hunza and Nagar had pro-Soviet inclinations.<sup>28</sup> On the Eastern front, Communist infiltration from Burma or more realistically, West Bengal, remained a threat.<sup>29</sup> Unexpectedly enough, this fear was also echoed by the Pakistani establishment itself. Thus Mian Anwer Ali, head of the CID, wrote later that:

Communism is the most inexorable and momentous political force in the contemporary world: it's strength and potentialities are often under-estimated. In Pakistan the complacency is partly due to the common belief that Islam and communism are incompatible. How many people realize that the Muslims of the southern states of the U.S.S.R and China could not avert its advent? Malay, despite its Muslim population is engaged in a gruelling life and death struggle; in Iran the Tudeh Party is gathering strength: in Egypt the horizon becomes marked with red streaks. Strangest of all, Afghanistan, in spite of its despotic masters, has a nucleus of a party whose leader, at any rate, hopes to overthrow the existing regime...The threat of the Red expansion is now turning towards India. Guerrillas battled for years with armed forces in the States of Hyderabad and Madras and kept them at bay. In certain provincial assemblies enough communist M.L.A's

---

<sup>27</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Reuters Indian and Pakistan Service 20/1/49 POL 10496 1949, pp 259

<sup>28</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Despatch from Office of HCUK, Karachi, pp 130-1

<sup>29</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Communist Movement in East Bengal, pp 353

have been returned as to hold the balance of power. These factors must have their effect in Pakistan.<sup>30</sup>

Both this passage and the report given by the former Indian Army officer gave an insight into the hopes within certain official and British circles about what they thought to be the ultimate defence against communist advances: the 'Musalmaan' and his faith. Indeed, in some sections it was felt that communism was 'largely beyond the Muslim mental grasp.'<sup>31</sup> Additionally, one of the reasons why the godless communist 'virus' was believed not to have attained a strong growth in 1948 was of the 'discipline inherent in an Islamic State' that had been augmented by the strength of a victorious political party machine whose appeal had been primarily religious and reinforced by fear of India and communal hatred of the Hindus and Sikhs. It was thus felt that the expansion of secular Government would naturally weaken Muslim League Party discipline and gradually diminish the strength of the religious bonds that were helping ward off imagined communist advances.<sup>32</sup> This was particularly so where the population was strongly bound to 'custom' and the 'tenets of Islam,' like Baluchistan and the NWFP,<sup>33</sup> while in Sindh, the 'extreme backwardness' of the Sindhi *hari*<sup>34</sup> made for 'poor subversive material.'<sup>35</sup> In addition to these sentiments, the official establishment and the local press were only too eager to replicate these colonial tropes in their pronouncements. The daily 'Dawn' for instance felt that 'the spiritual force of Islam' could play its part in repulsing 'the false philosophy of Communism' for the Muslim people were 'naturally embattled' against the

---

<sup>30</sup> From the preface of the report compiled on the Communist Party of Pakistan and obtained by Rauf Malik of the Peoples Publishing House, dated 18<sup>th</sup> March 1952.

<sup>31</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Despatch from Office of HCUK, Karachi, pp 129

<sup>32</sup> Pp 127, 133 Ibid

<sup>33</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Communism in the NWFP, pp 363

<sup>34</sup> 'Peasant'

<sup>35</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Despatch from Office of HCUK, Karachi, pp 128

onslaught of Communism.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it was still felt, as Mian Anwer Ali's report indicated, that Islam itself won't be a sufficient deterrent against communist advances. Indeed, there was no discounting 'the ease with which ignorant Muslim crowds (could) be swayed by unscrupulous orators assisted by real economic distress.'<sup>37</sup>

However, Islam was still an absolutely necessary tool in the defence against communism. In this, sufficient groundwork was already being laid by the Islamist parties, who, much like any other political movement during this time, attempted to direct the prevailing uncertainty towards their imagined polity. While demands for making Pakistan an Islamic State had been raised in the run up to Partition, these calls grew more vociferous after the state had been established, and especially as it set itself to agreeing on a Constitution. The implementation of Sharia law and the establishment of a *Hukumat-I-Ilahia*<sup>38</sup> were held to be the solution to the manifold problems plaguing the new state. Instead, the incumbent Muslim League leadership were (perceived to be) preventing this from happening.<sup>39</sup> The League leadership was accused of protecting an immoral, indecent (particularly with regard to women) and corrupt system and of not adopting the 'Muslim mode of life' and allowing their women to disregard the observance of *purdah*. Even the Premier, Nawab Liaquat Ali Khan, was urged to 'become a true Muslim, say prayers five times, and give up drinking, instead of exhorting others to become true Muslims.' Nevertheless the 'Mullahs,' as they were derogatorily called, saved their special ire for the Left. In part this was due to their perceived secular or even 'godless' credentials, especially since secularism was deemed to be the most contentious issue facing the state. In this regard,

---

<sup>36</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Extract No.28, from High Commissioner for the UK in Pakistan, Karachi to Commonwealth Relations Office, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1949, Pol. 10825/49

<sup>37</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Despatch from Office of HCUK, Karachi, pp 130

<sup>38</sup> Translated as 'Divine Rule'

<sup>39</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 6<sup>th</sup> March, No 10, pp 78

the *Jamaat-i-Islami* had publicly declared that its loyalty to Pakistan was only contingent on its being an Islamic State.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the more extreme form of this dichotomy was found in Islamist posters declaring: ‘Islam *Zindabad*, Pakistan *Murdabad*.’<sup>41</sup> In attempting to mould Pakistan into a secular state, the Communists were of course especially culpable. It was in recognition of this ‘threat’ that the prominent Islamist, Maulana Maudoodi, characterized communists as dangerous as they were gradually getting a hold in Government departments, and particularly in the Press and Broadcasting Departments.<sup>42</sup> For others, the Left’s demands for abolishing the *zamindari* system and nationalizing industry were particularly pernicious while Islam and its system of *zakat*<sup>43</sup> were considered sufficient to resolve the present inequalities of the system.<sup>44</sup> It was also argued that the promulgation of Sharia law was the only way to ‘build a bulwark against the advancing tide of Communism.’<sup>45</sup> Despite this fierce rhetoric though, the ‘Mullahs’ still implicitly recognized some of the legitimacy of the Left’s claims as speeches calling for the establishment of an Islamic State contained frequent references to the excesses of the ‘capitalist’ system, inequity of the prevailing agrarian structure and the imperialist slant of the incumbent leadership.<sup>46</sup> If anything then, these acts of ventriloquism indicated that the Left commanded an influence in terms of affecting such discourses that was starkly disproportionate to its actual presence or political clout.

This relationship, though, inevitably went both ways as even the Left was compelled to incorporate some of the Islamist discourse in order to counter the accusations made

---

<sup>40</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 13<sup>th</sup> November, No. 46, pp 370

<sup>41</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 4<sup>th</sup> December, No. 49, pp 396

<sup>42</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 24<sup>th</sup> April, No. 17, pp 143

<sup>43</sup> Under Islamic law, this is an obligatory tax levied on the rich for the uplift of the poor.

<sup>44</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 10<sup>th</sup> April, No 15, pp 121

<sup>45</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 18<sup>th</sup> December, No. 51, pp 412

<sup>46</sup> See for instance PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 24<sup>th</sup> April, No. 17, pp 143; Lahore, 29<sup>th</sup> May, No. 22, pp 181 and Lahore, 28<sup>th</sup> August, No. 35, pp 318

against it and to remain politically viable, and crucially, legitimate in the eyes of the state. As a result, individuals like Mian Iftikharuddin, who, along with their standard demands, were also compelled to declare their support for the imposition of Quranic laws.<sup>47</sup> While it could be tempting to view Iftikharuddin's statements in terms of his position as a prominent Leaguer, the fact nevertheless remained that the pressures to conform to a particular type of Islamic discourse extended to other sections of the Left as well. Within labour circles for instance, alongside with the typical rhetoric, the necessity for the imposition of Sharia law was frequently invoked<sup>48</sup> while Kisan meetings were inaugurated with recitations from the Quran.<sup>49</sup> Audiences were also asked 'not to get startled at the word 'Communism' as it advocated equality which was also the essence of Islam.'<sup>50</sup> And yet, invocations to Islam were the supreme tactics used to delegitimize leftist politics. The potency of this tactic is reflected in a report filed by a British High Commissioner on a May Day rally in Lahore:

In Lahore...where a meeting under the auspices of the Progressive Writers Association was presided over by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the Acting President of the Pakistan Trades Unions Federation, an openly communist note was struck. Revolutionary messages from the West Punjab Committee of the CPP and from Sajjad Zaheer, the Communist leader at present in hiding, were read out to the meeting, which followed the Moscow line in pledging itself against war and condemning the Marshall Plan and the Atlantic Pact. The cry of 'Islam in danger' was however, promptly and successfully raised against the organizers of the meeting. The Lahore Press carried a series of articles alleging that speakers at the meeting had proclaimed the superiority of Communistic over Islamic doctrines, and widespread indignation culminated in the passage of resolutions condemning Communist activity on over 40 mosques in Lahore on the Friday following May Day. This encouraging demonstration of the ease with which the Pakistan public

---

<sup>47</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 15<sup>th</sup> May, No. 29, pp 167

<sup>48</sup> See for instance PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 14<sup>th</sup> February, No. 7, pp 52-3

<sup>49</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 6<sup>th</sup> March, No. 10, pp 81

<sup>50</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 29<sup>th</sup> May, No. 22, pp 188

can be rallied to the defence of Islam against attacks by Communist agitators is not likely to have been lost on the authorities.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, the success of this delegitimizing tactic was such that even within labour circles, invocations to Islam were frequently employed to discredit other factions and leaders. For instance, the leadership of M.M Ibrahim was challenged by his opponents with the demand that he should convince them that 'he was a Muslim and not a Communist.'<sup>52</sup> The same individual later asked the workers to choose between Communism and Islam.<sup>53</sup> This was therefore a very powerful indication of the influence that Islamist discourse came to wield within leftist politics – both as a legitimating and delegitimizing force – almost immediately after Partition.

In this respect the State too was not above employing Islam to denigrate the Left, though its tactic also involved using the 'anti-national' or 'anti-Pakistan' card. Indeed, the State and the ruling Muslim League provided the ultimate sanction for legitimizing the use of Islam and 'Pakistan' to discredit the Left and other regional, linguistic, and ethnic movements that sought to challenge the hegemony of the prevailing state ideology. Often this was accomplished, and indeed could not have been possible without direct intervention. With respect to labour politics for example, the state suppressed trade unions which had been 'infiltrated' by Communists, and replaced them with other unions which worked under the auspices of the Muslim League with the express purpose of 'working for Pakistan' rather than exploiting the Government's difficulties. Quite often,

---

<sup>51</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Despatch No. 305, Office of the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom Karachi, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1949 POL 13980 1949, pp 341

<sup>52</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 27<sup>th</sup> November, No. 48, pp 391

<sup>53</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore 18<sup>th</sup> December, No. 51, pp 414

this meant directly supporting or encouraging a trend towards ‘Islamizing trade unions.’<sup>54</sup> For instance, a ‘Muslim Employees Association’ was established as a counterbalance to the more radical unions working within the North Western Railways, which was in many ways the hotbed of radical labour activism. Thus, this ‘Association’ was reported to be issuing posters in Urdu, replete with quotations from the Holy Quran, ‘advising the workers to work hard and in an upright manner.’<sup>55</sup> Moreover, similar tactics were also employed at the local level to undercut any influence that the local leftist organizations may have had. In districts like Gujranwala for example, the local Muslim Leaguers set up a rival Labour Party under a cadre of the MLNG in order to counteract Communist influence within local politics.<sup>56</sup> Most effective however, was the use of the ‘anti-national’ label against the Left. Often this was dovetailed with the use of Islam but increasingly and in the context of a developing cold war, the potency of this allegation grew all the more effective especially as the Left was long suspected, even before Partition, of having dual loyalties. This rhetoric was even used by the highest personality of all, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who expressed the determination to root out all ‘enemies of the state,’ who were officially described as saboteurs, fifth columnists, socialists and communists.<sup>57</sup>

This rhetoric was naturally a signal for state persecution. Accordingly, a prolonged campaign to suppress leftists was initiated in which techniques of harassment, intimidation, appeals to nation and religion, searches of party and union offices, and arrests proved to be the norm. The most prominent casualties of these tactics were

---

<sup>54</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Extract from Weekly Report No. 43 for the Period Ending 31<sup>st</sup> October 1948, from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan,

<sup>55</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, No. 14, pp 117

<sup>56</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 27<sup>th</sup> November, No. 48, pp 392

<sup>57</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Communist Movement in East Bengal, pp 351

prominent leftists like Sajjad Zaheer, ‘Dada’ Amir Haider Khan, and M.M Ibrahim, among others. Sajjad Zaheer was compelled to go underground while Khan and Ibrahim were arrested a number of times. The arrest of M.M Ibrahim was in particular quite ironic as he was one of the first prominent labour leaders to declare his loyalty to ‘Pakistan’ on the eve of Partition. He had promised Jinnah full support ‘in the establishment and progress of Pakistan and given the assurance that no strikes will be organized by the Railway employees to the detriment of the new Dominion.’<sup>58</sup> And yet, this assurance was not enough to protect both Ibrahim and the Union he represented from state repression. For Ibrahim, like other leftists, independence hardly proved to be the panacea for the problems faced by labourers or peasants. He thus soon accused the government of apathy<sup>59</sup> and stated that Pakistan had not been achieved by ‘the Quaid-e-Azam, Gandhi and Pandit Nehru, but by the individual sacrifices of labourers, kisans, military men and policemen.’ As a result ‘the workers had expected that with the establishment of Pakistan they would get better treatment, but their legitimate demands had not been accepted.’ He therefore feared a confrontation between the Government and labourers.<sup>60</sup> His prediction came true as he was soon arrested for fomenting unrest and ‘disaffection’ amongst railway workers.<sup>61</sup> As an instance of state repression, this was but one of many arrests that took place across Pakistan, particularly in West Punjab and East Pakistan, which were both provinces in which the Left commanded a significant presence in relation to other regions. Indeed the fear of arrest and suppression was so acute that workers were

---

<sup>58</sup> PPSAI 1947, Extract, Lahore, July 31<sup>st</sup>, pp 406

<sup>59</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 14<sup>th</sup> February, No. 7, pp 47

<sup>60</sup> Ibid pp 52-53

<sup>61</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore 31<sup>st</sup> February, No. 8, pp 55

compelled to go underground and to destroy their party and union records.<sup>62</sup> Ironically enough, these tactics of survival had been learnt during the height of colonial persecution. Accordingly, the Left was also compelled to adopt other means in order to both ensure its survival and to remain viable and legitimate as a political entity. As in the 1930s during the height of state persecution, leftists were again compelled to deliberately eschew the terms ‘communism’ and ‘communist,’ especially as they were loaded with the connotation of being an ‘enemy of the state.’ Indeed, these labels were also pejoratively used by ‘loyalist’ unions to denigrate their more radical counterparts by warning labourers to present their demands in a constitutional manner and not to succumb to the machinations of ‘Russian agents.’<sup>63</sup> Faced with the dual assault of the state and its supporters or proxies, the more radical element within leftist circles was soon compelled to publicly defend themselves against the charge of being ‘anti-national’ and ‘Indian’ or ‘Russian’ agents. Time and again they had to protest their innocence against the suspicion that they were ‘set out to destroy Pakistan.’<sup>64</sup> This tendency spread to ordinary workers as well who were left to meekly speak out against the travesty of being labelled as ‘communists’ merely for demanding a living wage.<sup>65</sup> Conversely, there were concerted attempts by certain leftists to consciously adopt nationalist symbols and publicly affirm their patriotism, which was at the same time a tactic to escape immediate state repression as well as wider public censure. Thus, quite frequently, in labour rallies, the red banner and the Pakistani flag were raised alongside each other. Moreover, M.M Ibrahim for instance, after being suitably chastised during his first stint in jail, felt compelled to declare after

---

<sup>62</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, No. 40, pp 343

<sup>63</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 1<sup>st</sup> May, No. 18, pp 154

<sup>64</sup> See for instance PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore 20<sup>th</sup> November, No. 47, pp 377

<sup>65</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 10<sup>th</sup> April, No. 15, pp 22

his release that he was a ‘faithful citizen of Pakistan and not a citizen of a foreign country.’<sup>66</sup> Interestingly enough, following his release, he was also bestowed with the title of ‘Quaid-e-Azam Mazdooran’<sup>67</sup> by his fellow workers; a tongue in cheek attempt perhaps at signalling that the appropriation of nationalist symbols was not the prerogative of the ruling dispensation alone. Nevertheless, these attempts in near futility indicated the extent to which the Left was under pressure by a state that sanctioned the use of a hegemonic discourse that effectively criminalized dissenting voices.

This repression only intensified in the subsequent years. The Left, and specifically the communist party, was relentlessly persecuted and found to be implicated in the famous Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case in 1951.<sup>68</sup> As with its colonial predecessor, the post colonial state too clung onto an image of the Left that was far greater than the presence it actually commanded, which was in any case never more than a few hundred active members.<sup>69</sup> An indication of this can be found in the report filed by M.A Ali, head of the CID in 1951. While freely admitting that ‘very little is known about the working of the party machine, its underground methods, its insidious technique, the fanatic zeal of its followers and their single mindedness of purpose,’ he nevertheless felt confident enough to state that:

After the partition, the communist party in Pakistan lost all its veteran workers and was left without financial resources; yet within three years, a powerful party machine has been built up. The budget of the party is perhaps only next to that of the Muslim League. It employs more paid workers than any other political party. New links have been forged and work organized amongst students, factory workers, other labourers, kisans and writers, including journalists. Two candidates were put up for the last assembly elections. Innumerable strikes, processions and demonstrations have been organized. Class consciousness, which was unknown in

---

<sup>66</sup> PPSAI – WP 1948, Lahore, 8<sup>th</sup> May, No. 19, pp 162

<sup>67</sup> Literally translated as ‘Great Leader of Workers’

<sup>68</sup> This concerned an attempted coup that was planned by army officers against the government of Liaqat Ali Khan with the alleged support of prominent leaders of the Communist Party. For a rare insight into this landmark event see Hasan Zaheer, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy 1951: The First Coup Attempt in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998)

<sup>69</sup> IOR/L/P&J/12/772 CAIP, Communism in West Punjab, pp 357

these parts, has been developed and a distrust of the British created. Sajjad Zaheer, at any rate felt so sure of himself that in February 1951, he decided to plunge his party into the conspiracy hatched at Rawalpindi.<sup>70</sup>

Viewed within the backdrop of the Cold War in which Pakistan had decisively aligned itself with the Anglo-American power bloc, this extract was typical of the mindset prevailing within the official establishment, which had also been institutionalized with certain (colonial) norms and practices with which to govern the political arena. With regards to the case itself, the state succeeded in convicting and imprisoning prominent leaders like Faiz and Zaheer. Indeed, the latter was later extradited to India at Nehru's personal intervention, which in turn was a profound commentary on how far the ruling dispensation had come in its relationship with its erstwhile supporters. As for the Communist Party itself; it was banned along with its sister organizations in 1954 but only, and in a process starkly reminiscent of the colonial era, to remerge in various shapes and forms in response to the almost consistently acrimonious relationship that the Left had with the State in subsequent decades.

## **Conclusion**

The coming of independence hardly proved to be the panacea that many were imagining it to be. And this was particularly true for the Left. In the run-up to independence, many radicals could have been forgiven for hoping that there would be a greater tolerance for their politics in the post-colonial states. Yet, if anything, the new rulers proved to be harsher than their colonial predecessors in dealing with politics deemed to be 'subversive.' This was particularly the case insofar as Pakistan was concerned. This

---

<sup>70</sup> From the preface of the report compiled on the Communist Party of Pakistan and obtained by Rauf Malik of the Peoples Publishing House, dated 18<sup>th</sup> March 1952.

persecution was particularly ironic as the cause of Pakistan had been supported by the Left. And yet, any mention of the Left or the role played by progressive movements in the nation's creation has been deliberately eschewed in nationalist historiography. After all, mentioning this would only dent the mythical linearity of Pakistan's emergence and would highlight the inconvenient truth of a nation striking down its erstwhile supporters immediately after its formation.

Finally, and in continuation of the arguments made in previous chapters, the leftist movement was subsumed by the very structures it sought to oppose. While part of this real and imagined failure was an outcome of its own shortcomings, the fact still remains that the Left was compelled to mould its activism according to what passed as legitimate politics. This remained true for both the colonial and the post-colonial state. The only difference lay in the subtle shift of what counted as 'legitimate.' When it failed to do so, the Left was promptly crushed and banished to the political wilderness. Again, this was true for both the colonial and the post-colonial state. In turn, these continuities only highlight the enduring nature of the colonial state and the political sphere delineated by it. Both survived long after the formal transfer of power. Viewed this way, leftist radicals were justified in asking what exactly 'decolonization' and 'independence' meant. Indeed, this is the fundamental reason why I have not ended the broader narrative in August 1947, which is often portrayed as a decisive break with the past. Thus, in a study on the province and the wider political landscape constructed by the colonial state, it is perhaps inevitable that the post-colonial period would also be taken into account. This of course is only possible once the focus is shifted to the nature of the state itself, rather than who

governs it. And as this section showed, the experience of the Left amply bears this observation out.

## Conclusion

Despite the Left's declining fortunes over the three decades and more in which it operated, it still had a profound impact on local, provincial and national politics. Its mode of politics distinguished it as perhaps the only movement that was considered to be subversive by both the colonial and post-colonial states. And yet, the Left's memory still survives through grassroots initiatives that romanticize its contributions in the liberation struggle and its efforts to reshape the post-colonial state. Admittedly though, these projects are far more popular and widespread in India than in Pakistan, which in turn is a reflection of the varying strength of the movement in both countries as well as a commentary on their different trajectories. In East Punjab for instance, there is even a Shahid Bhagat Singh Nagar district. This is in addition to the many neighborhoods, streets and public spaces that are named after Bhagat Singh as well as other 'martyrs' who 'sacrificed' their lives during the freedom movement. In Pakistan, of course, the opposite has taken place for a variety of reasons.

The dualistic way in which memory has both been revived and suppressed relates in some ways to the far more vexing question of whether the Left was a 'success' or a 'failure.' Indeed, this question has preoccupied historians of the Left as well as those who participated in the movement themselves. Perhaps no other movement has been subjected to this line of questioning, which is based on an arbitrary performance index, as much as the Left has. But, in a sense, that in of itself is a reflection of the potential the Left was perceived to have. These expectations become all the more surprising in light of the fact that the Leftist movement, as a whole, never had even a fraction of the cadres and

activists that mainstream political parties could lay claim to. Moreover, in the Punjab, their election results were dismal, to say the least. Even in the 1937 elections, Leftist candidates were returned to the Provincial Assembly only after being nominated as candidates of other political parties. Added to that is the fact that the Left was never able to command a mass movement, however defined. More importantly, though, it was perhaps the only political movement that was constantly subjected to relentless persecution by the colonial state. What little potential remained after these daunting odds was systematically lessened by fierce factionalism within the Left itself. All things considered, the Left was numerically small, internally divided, restricted to a few and localized pockets, unable to command a mass movement or to present a political programme attractive to the ‘masses,’ vociferously opposed by their political detractors, and relentlessly persecuted by the State. Given this, it would be tempting to simply pass the Left off as a ‘failure’ as some have already done.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, the question of ‘success’, or its lack thereof, is still asked of the Left. This question though, is curiously posed in the absence of a discerning analysis into what ‘success’ might actually have looked like in the context of British India. To be sure, the Left singularly failed to achieve its utopian republic for ‘workers and peasants.’ But if rhetorical socio-political objectives are adopted as a yardstick for measuring success or failure, then by those strict standards, every political movement, including the inheritors of the post-colonial states, conclusively failed. That brings us to the question of ‘success’ again. How is it to be measured? What would be its metrics? At what point would a movement qualify as being successful? Clearly, there are no definitive answers to these questions; at least none that would satisfy most historians. In my view, these questions

---

<sup>1</sup> See Bhagwan Josh and Shashi Joshi, *Struggle for Hegemony in India, 1920-47*

are, to a large extent, superfluous. Nevertheless, it would be still be useful to cursorily engage with this question simply because it is asked so often and, if only, so that the issue of ‘success’ or ‘failure’ can be thought of in different terms.

One of the foremost ways in which this issue can be thought of differently is by examining the realm of ideas. For one, the Left did not have a monopoly on the ideas and socio-political visions it articulated. Ideas normatively characterized as ‘socialist’ or ‘communist’ enjoyed a wider currency within society as well as political organizations that later grew to be staunch opponents of many within the Left. The impact of the Bolshevik Revolution, for instance, caused reverberations in circles far beyond the limited confines of the Left itself. The far reaching impact of these ideas marks them out, in some ways, as a ‘success.’ It is another debate altogether whether they were put into practice or not, as that raises a whole host of new questions for which there are few, if any, answers. What is a valid question within the scope of this discussion is the extent to which the Left was responsible for spreading these ideas. Given the interconnectedness of the globe in the twentieth century, it is plausible that these ideas could have had a profound impact by themselves. And yet, it is hard, if not impossible, to imagine how this could have been possible without the carriers of ideas playing an instrumental role. After all, what are ideas without their carriers? Can the two ever be separated? In this respect, the Indian Left and its Punjabi counterpart certainly had a significant role to play in popularizing these ideas that percolated in other forms to wider society. The fact that their eventual form may not bear a resemblance to the ideas ‘originally’ espoused does not detract from their ability to encourage a change, no matter how limited, in dominant thinking. But, this relative ‘success’ has to be qualified. As shown in this thesis, these

ideas clearly had a greater currency in certain periods than they had in others. Nevertheless, what remains true is that the Left certainly had an impact that was far above and beyond then what their numerical strength or electoral returns would suggest. This was true in other respects as well. Unlike any other movement, the Left was also distinguished by the fact that it consistently projected an image that was far out of sync with their actual strength. This was both a function of leftist politics as well as a state bureaucracy paranoid about the spread of communism. The Left's real and imagined contacts with the Soviet Union constantly marked it out as a political force that was perpetually viewed with anxiety. Both the State and the Left, ironically enough, believed in this larger than life image. The state bureaucracy for its part was mostly concerned about *potentialities* not *actualities*. Thus, anxieties were expressed for any situation, even in the midst of the communal holocaust of 1947, which the Left might exploit for its purpose. That by itself may be taken as a grudging recognition of the political potential held out by the Left. On another level, it indicates a genuine fear that the forces of 'international communism' were inexorably destined for final victory. The State therefore, was compelled to intervene with the political space in order to ensure that much of the Left was effectively delegitimized. The fact that these measures largely succeeded do not detract from the impact the Left and its international partners had on the political landscape. Thinking of this asymmetric projection, then, is one of the many ways in which we can reassess the question of 'success' or 'failure.'

There are, however, more useful ways to think about the Left. For once it is removed from the question of 'success' or otherwise, the Left can provide some rewarding insights into the political spaces it inhabited and the political actors it came in contact with. It also

provides a glimpse into what drove individuals to engage with a form of politics that was often accompanied by great personal risk. Together, these insights encourage a reassessment into how the political histories of Punjab, and South Asia in general, are written. It is to these issues that I now turn to.

### *Spaces*

As the first chapter pointed out, the global arena provided manifold opportunities to aspiring radicals to engage with the project of Communist Internationalism. As the case of many Ghadarites demonstrated, the journey to political radicalism started in communities settled in the diaspora. Similar opportunities were on offer for individuals who travelled beyond British India on account of their professional obligations or political inclinations. The best examples of these were activists who emerged from the Lascar network and the Hijrat movement respectively. Many of these individuals passed through or converged at centres that afforded opportunities for intellectual and political engagements with like minded radicals from around the globe. What was remarkable was how these *zones of engagements*, which were as spatially distant as San Francisco, Paris, Berlin, Kabul, Amritsar, and, not least, Moscow, were together tied through a unique geographical imagination which viewed them as connected centres of anti-colonial radicalism and revolutionary activism. In short, it was a novel way of perceiving the world and of contesting the political boundaries that cut across it. This was matched by a politics which, during its zenith at least, strongly identified with other struggles around the world and viewed the Indian movement for liberation as part of a global project to reshape the future of humanity at large. In other words, it was perfectly possible for many

to ascribe to a politics of working class internationalism which was at the same rooted in and directed towards a specific socio-political and anti-colonial struggle within the Indian subcontinent. There was thus, for a specific period during the interwar years, little contradiction between the impulses of ‘internationalism’ and ‘nationalism.’ Both fed into and drew from each other. In doing so, they pointed towards an idea of nationalism that could be expansive and accommodating; which puts it in stark contrast to its later formulation when it became parochial and exclusive.

More importantly, these political formulations and ways of perceiving the world contest the arbitrary spatial demarcations that are often drawn between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’. The engagements of Punjabi radicals showed that both had an intimate relationship in terms of politics and lived experiences. In particular, these experiences have a direct bearing on the recent shift within historiography towards ‘transnational’ history.<sup>2</sup> For a start, these networks add the movements of ideas and political non-elites to historiography, which in the South Asian context has mostly been concerned with themes relating to migration and trade. More importantly though, the politics of these networks indicated how there were few, if any, spatial or conceptual boundaries that prevented Punjabi radicals from regularly transcending them. Relying on a literal reading therefore, these narratives do not belong to ‘transnational’ history as such. Rather, in contemporaneous terms, or at least going by how these individuals understood themselves, these narratives carve out a new paradigm of ‘internationalist history’.

Viewed this way, Punjab, and by extension British India, ceases to be a territorially, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Its worth pointing out though that there is very little consensus on what ‘transnational’ history really is. See for instance the debate in the AHR with C A Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, Patricia Seed, ‘AHR Conversation: On Transnational History’ *American Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 5 (2006) pp. 1441-1464. Also see Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier (eds.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

hence, conceptually bound unit of historical analysis. Instead, these narratives invite a re-envisioning of Punjab as part of a wider, even global, *network of exchanges*, in which this region cannot be fully understood without references to places as diverse and spatially distant as South East Asia, North America, or indeed, the Soviet Union. Given the global outreach of Empire and the position of various localities in it, – let alone the impact that an increasingly interconnected world had on the movements of ideas, individuals and institutions – such a claim is hardly counter intuitive. And yet, what is surprising is just how rarely historians have ventured beyond their specializations which are usually governed by and restricted to geographical demarcations.

The experiences of the Punjabi and Indian Left also provide some useful insights into national, provincial and local political arenas. In terms of the first two, the continued persecution of radical organizations and the individuals associated with it pointed towards a political space that had been carved out to explicitly delegitimize leftist politics. Despite its internal differentiations, the state managed to successfully demarcate a political arena in which it was the sole arbiter of what was considered to be ‘legitimate’ politics. The Left, for the most part, lay outside this sphere, though, as the Peoples War shift indicated, this arena could also be changed to accommodate its politics, or at least the variant that was acceptable to the state. Thus, the ability to arbitrarily demarcate this sphere is precisely where the hegemony of the state lay. And it is in relation to this hegemony that the much celebrated ‘agency’ of marginalized actors can be located. But this still raises an open question of whether this ‘agency’ is to be sought within the sphere demarcated by the state or beyond it. For in the long run, the Left was subsumed by the very structures it opposed and paradoxically participated in. In terms of its general

direction, this political space, both in the national and provincial arenas, gradually narrowed from the 1920s to the onset of independence. That, at least, was apparent from the Left's restricted abilities to freely conduct its politics. This was particularly true for the Punjabi context where deepening divides in provincial politics meant that the Left was gradually asphyxiated. This became further evident in the hopeless positioning of the Left between the chosen successors to the colonial state, while its experience in the newly independent states indicated that this restricted political space remained unchanged.

The local political arena, however, was another matter altogether. As the experience of the Kirti network indicated, the Left was also a product of local conditions and politics. This is particularly borne out by the fact that much of the Punjabi Left emerged from particular regions in central Punjab which had a prior engagement with radical politics. Certain conditions also facilitated this development. Among other factors for instance, these districts were also closely tied in with the movement of individuals and ideas to and from the wider global arena. Paradoxically, these conditions had been facilitated by the Empire itself. As a result, despite the careful crafting of the provincial political arena and the rigorous policing of it, the State was unable to halt the spread of 'subversive' ideas. There was thus a differentiation within the provincial political space, which shifted from one locality to the other. And this variation also points towards the fact that the dichotomy often drawn between urban and rural arenas can in certain respects be greatly complicated. The experience of the Punjabi Left showed how the rural could also be as politically charged as the urban. It also demonstrated how the rural arena was in many ways, as connected to a global political and intellectual milieu as its urban counterpart.

The central Punjabi tracts therefore complicate the portrayal of a quiescent rural arena that was a bulwark for colonial rule in the region.

Returning to the issue of politics, the local arena was also distinctive for providing a space where political differences were less defined. This was certainly true in contrast to the provincial and national levels. These afforded a level of abstraction at which ideological and political disagreements were more pronounced. But at the grassroots level, where local and immediate issues were of greater importance, politics rarely followed the logic of provincial and national arenas. This was true even till the eve of partition when the combined efforts of various political actors in the Harse Chhina agitation demonstrated an ability to overcome the deep divides that were evident elsewhere. That is not to suggest, however, that the local arena was completely autonomous from the levels above it. Indeed, local politics could be just as divisive and defined. And it could both draw from and feed into provincial and national arenas. But that was largely a function of particular moments and circumstances. Largely speaking then, all three realms had a significant degree of autonomy from each other, and local politics was no exception to this trend.

### *Organizations*

The relative distinctiveness of these realms also point towards the variegated nature of political organizations themselves. As the chapters on the Congress, Akalis, and the Muslim League showed, political parties were a sum of many constituent parts that varied across vertical and horizontal levels. Vertically, political organizations worked according to strategic calculations that varied from the national to the local level. Horizontally, this

variation was also in evidence from one province or district to the other. As a result, political parties rarely functioned as disciplined and cohesive organizations. As the section above alluded to, this was necessitated in part by how the state itself gave shape to political arenas that were differentiated along vertical and horizontal lines. On a similar note, political alliances and organizational loyalties were transitory and contingent on specific issues as well as the shifting political landscape. This was particularly evident in the 1920s and 30s when multiple memberships and frequent shifts from one party to the other were fairly common. This was particularly true for the local level where politics was less defined. Party membership and ideological orientation therefore had little in common with each other.

All this also held true for the Left as well, if not more. For the most part, the Left was constituted of a number of organizations which initially emerged from different contexts. Unlike other mainstream parties, these organizations had short political lives. This was primarily down to the repeated proscription of these bodies by the state. This was part of a tedious game in which new radical organizations quickly sprung up to replace the ones that had been proscribed. The state therefore was largely successful in splintering the Left. But this process also took place because of the never ending quest for unity within the Left. Generally, these bodies had a mixed relationship between themselves in which bitter strife was as much a part of political life as periodic amity. Reasons for political strife ranged from personal – usually around money and ego – to ideological disputes. Moreover, each and every organization was also split within itself. Thus, endemic factionalism, for much the same reasons, remained an essential part of each organization's narrative. Additionally, some organizations were founded for different

purposes. These were issue specific bodies that worked on a gamut of issues that ranged from rural indebtedness to campaigns for the welfare of the families of political prisoners. There was also a tenuous link between local chapters and their provincial and national bodies, as the former followed a political logic that was dictated by personal and local circumstances. This was particularly evident in the Peoples War shift when, in violation of CPI guidelines, some local activists still pursued a virulently anti-imperialist and anti-recruitment campaign. There was thus a frequent disconnect between the organization and the individual.

Moreover, rampant factionalism also pointed towards the fact that the Left could *afford* to be sectarian. Again, this was because of the exceptionalism of the moment, in which leftist activists genuinely believed that they were on the cusp of victory. Indeed, their writings were replete with a sense that their much awaited revolution was inevitable. Neither could one fault them for anticipating this. The State, with its paranoia, certainly seemed to agree with this assessment. After all, within thirty or so years of the revolution, ‘one third of the human race and all governments between the Elbe and the China seas lived under the rule of Communist Parties.’<sup>3</sup> Internal divisions therefore were also a sign of imagined strength and a luxury that only self-declared victors could afford. This was also why many clung to a form of politics that was bound to incur the wrath of Empire. After all, the ardent belief in eventual victory was psychologically necessary for many to withstand the intense persecution of the state. For the doctrinaire, Marxism offered a universal and a scientific law of historical development under which their own society would eventually achieve the imagined utopia that the Soviets had already established. Therefore, all that had to be done was to faithfully replicate a blueprint which had already

---

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life*, (London: Abacus, 2010) pp 127.

proven to be successful. That is why, for many, ideological orthodoxy was a particularly divisive issue. This was true even for the non-orthodox, for whom Marxism was an inspiration instead of a boxed set of rigid ideas. After all, these individuals drew strength from ideas that were already rooted in power. This was why the very *presence* of the Soviet Union was of monumental importance. Whether one was directly supported by Moscow, or not, was immaterial. As long as the Soviet Union survived, it gave hope and succour to others struggling in different contexts.

That is why leftist parties, despite being hopelessly divided and numerically insignificant, consistently postured as political players that were as significant as other mainstream parties. It is also why they often made decisions and adopted strategies that are retrospectively viewed as ‘irrational.’ But this portrayal inevitably misses out on the anticipation and euphoria of the times in which political decisions were premised on the seemingly unstoppable tide of communist successes and the apparent collapse of the old world order. As a result contemporaneous leftist publications retrospectively seem to be either delusional or hopelessly idealistic and utopian. Thus, the belief that came from being on the right side of history was enough to inspire leftist radicals to cling to an overblown image of themselves. As has been pointed out though, this was one of the ways in the Left and the State were mirror images of each other. One was elated while the other was terrified by the seemingly inexorable tide of history. Both were driven by potentialities not actualities. And both believed in an image of the Left that was far out of sync with its actual strength. But this was also owed to the structural formation of many of these groups. Owing to internal divisions and the isolation that intense state persecution drove radical activists to, it was all too easy to look inward and misinterpret

political ‘realities’ which would normally encourage a reassessment of strongly held beliefs. Indeed, it is hard to escape the bewilderment that some expressed at the fact that other political actors did not feel or act the way they did. This not only reflected in some ways an alienation from society but also gave an insight into the impact of genuinely held beliefs and convictions. All together then, the myriad of political choices made by these individuals and their organizations provides a valuable, if crude, glimpse into the sociology (and perhaps, psychology) of revolutionary and radical groups.

### *Individuals*

This analysis only points towards the importance of the individual within the Left and in politics generally. It also provides clues into why these individuals made their political choices the way they did. Generally, most studies on the Left have inevitably chosen to examine the class basis behind the development of leftist politics. In doing so they follow a Marxian teleology that interprets political actions within the framework of dialectical materialism. These frameworks, however, do not explain why only certain groups from certain regions engaged with the leftist idiom of politics. After all, there were other groups and regions that were more disadvantaged than the ones who made a transition to radicalism. Similarly, in the case of ‘Sikh’ radicals, some studies have pointed towards the Sikh ideals of egalitarianism, martyrdom and valour as factors that drove many towards this mode of politics. Others, as in the case of the Ghadar Party, have emphasized how experiences of racism and discrimination were instrumental in the development of a radical bent of anti-imperialist politics.

While I do not intend to discount the explanatory value of these frameworks, I do want to suggest another approach that could partly help in understanding the political journeys of these individuals. In my view, these trajectories can partly be understood within a framework that can best be termed as the *politics of proximity*. In other words, individuals were most likely to engage with politics through entry points that were most adjacent or proximate to them. Proximity, to the people one knew or was influenced by, to the spaces one inhabited or happened to pass by, to encounters with racism and discrimination, to ideas one came in contact with, and so on, were instrumental in motivating many to enter politics. Understood in other terms, this was a political expression of lived experiences. As an added example, entry points to politics often went through family networks and localities that were also home to prominent leftists. Experiences in prior political agitations could also be crucial. This was why most Punjabi Leftists were ‘Sikh Jats’ from Central Punjab. After all, this group and region was influenced by migratory trends and was also at the forefront of the Akali agitation. And it was in the Akali agitation that many Leftists acquired their political training. This was why the Leftist movement in the Punjab was mostly restricted to certain groups and regions. The same held true for many ‘Muslims,’ who mostly entered radical politics through their prior experiences in the Hijrat movement. Moving on, the framework of proximity also highlights the importance of localities. Certain localities, for example, became known as centres of radical activism. They were also termed by some as ‘Red Villages.’ Places like Tarn Taran and Guru-ka-Bagh for instance, had occupied a pride of place in both the Akali and Kirti Kisan agitations. There was also a very deep connection between the individual and the locality, for certain villages became inextricably linked with the radicals who came from them.

Thus localities like Bhakna, Chhina, and Chuharkana, were all renowned owing to their association with Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, Achar Singh Chhina and Teja Singh Chuharkana. They in turn were instrumental for acting as entry points for others in their localities.

This framework only emphasizes the multiplicity of *ordinary* ways through which ideas were shaped and politics was conducted. In another sense, it also highlights how certain moments and events inspired many to political action. Owing to the marginality of these narratives, however, these events rarely merit a mention in most chronologies and official memories. Generally, collective memories and most historical chronologies reproduce the official memory of nation states. In doing so, they naturally neglect other events that may have had a profound impact on the political landscape, which in turn only reinforces the marginality of certain narratives. As an obvious example, the Bolshevik Revolution triggered a sea change in the thinking of political actors within the subcontinent and beyond. And yet, the spatially and conceptually bound histories of the Indian subcontinent barely mention the impact this singular event had on the political arena. Thus, by highlighting alternative chronologies and relating their significance to the position an individual occupied within the political spectrum and how that in turn influenced his/her social/cultural/political outlook, a greater space can be made within South Asian historiography for narratives that are sensitive to the multiple inspirations that drive people to make the political choices they do. At the same time, these alternative chronologies or alternate perceptions of significance, transcend spatial demarcations, enrich our understanding of the encounters between South Asia and other regions, and add to the richness of contemporary historiography as a whole.

The experiences of these individuals also highlight how the process of intellectual exchange took place. More specifically, they tell us how ideas were translated, appropriated, and contextualized. These processes were underpinned by political shifts, the response of Empire, changing material conditions, and lived experiences in general. In doing so, they also challenge the often simplistic portrayal of Indians as passive recipients of ideas that were fashioned in Europe. Rather, these individuals were at the forefront of refashioning and creating new synergies and ideas that were appropriate for their context and yet sensitive to the global project they all claimed loyalty to. Indeed, these intellectual exercises were necessary if politics was ever to be a practical endeavour. After all, it was important to develop a common grammar, or a legitimating grammar, which would make sense not just to the activists themselves but also to the audience they were trying to appeal to. In this regard, the following excerpt from Shaukat Usmani's travels in Central Asia provides a fascinating glimpse into this intellectual reworking. After commenting that 'for the first time we learnt from the people there that 'Soviet' meant *Panchayat*,'<sup>4</sup> Usmani goes on to write:

Firstly, villages in the Soviet Union and especially in Eastern Russia, while differing in the details of their organization, present a social picture similar to the villages in India. They are essentially co-operative. The people of the West resent the idea of the Soviet as much as they resent the idea of *Panchayat*. It is due to its coming into direct clash with their social experience which is individualistic in all respects and aspects. But on the other hand the Eastern tribes and clans as well as villages find nothing inconsistent in the Soviet idea since their mode of life is primarily social and not individual.

The social experience of the people of the East, from Siberia to China, from Turkestan to India, from Caucasus to Persia, is communistic. The doctrines of communism or *scientifically advanced Panchayatism* therefore finds a congenial welcome from the eastern people both because of the oppression of the western capitalistic system and more because of its being socially adaptable to them.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Shaukat Usmani, *Peshawar to Moscow*, pp 76

<sup>5</sup> My emphasis. Ibid, pp 168-9

Here then was an intellectual and political realm, in which the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ came together and in which the ‘traditional’ was seamlessly woven into the ‘modern.’ This was a point at which all such categories broke down. It was also an encounter which cannot be understood if normative categories of understanding, which only tend to delimit the vast range of political actions and ideas, are employed. And there were of course numerous examples of this such as Maulvi Barkatullah’s use of ‘Islam’ and the employment of ‘Sikh’ religious idioms in deciphering and vernacularizing ‘Communism.’ It follows then, that such encounters necessarily have to be imagined as a portrait in which the colours are not sharply defined but rather blend into each other depending on time, place, and context.

In turn, this only illustrates the futility of looking for ideological coherence, origin or purity in tracing the political and intellectual genealogies of these networks. In particular, this is one of the pitfalls that intellectual history often succumbs to. I am therefore not interested in tracing the exact contours of ideas and determining which were ‘communist’ or ‘socialist.’ Historians who have gone down that route have inevitably passed judgments on which ideological formulations were sufficiently ‘socialist’ or ‘communist.’ Leaving other issues aside, these interpretations start from the more problematic assumption that either of these ideologies have an ‘original’ and unadulterated template. Thus, in my view, it is more useful to examine the meanings that people attached to these terms. Once this framework is used, we enter a realm of ideas that are dynamic, born out of and in constant dialogue with lived experiences, together with their material basis and social/cultural/religious reference points. In doing so, this framework moves away from locating the much vaunted ‘agency’ of marginalized

individuals within the realms of a fossilized and ‘autonomous’ Subaltern ‘culture.’<sup>6</sup> It also avoids privileging materialist and instrumentalist explanations of political action. Rather, it emphasizes ordinary lived experiences which offer the potential of veering off in a variety of directions. It is at this point, then, that intellectual history becomes almost indistinguishable with social history. And just like the way in which ‘local’ history morphs into ‘global’ or ‘transnational’ history, this too is one of the ways in which the Left compels us to reassess traditional demarcations within historiography. And this is why I am still unsure about which branch of historiography this thesis belongs to.

Which brings this narrative back to the issue of categories. Put together, the insights provided by the Punjabi Left complicate our understanding of not just the Left, but also of politics in British India generally. In what has been the central argument of this thesis, these narratives alert us to the possible pitfalls of an analysis that is premised on an easily navigable social and political landscape. In doing so, they encourage a reassessment of the categories used in social and political histories. Often reproduced from the sources, these categories conceal the multiplicity of ways in which individuals thought of themselves and their politics. In other words, labels that are retrospectively projected into the past were continually contested and refashioned in contemporaneous terms. The Punjabi Left therefore, encourages us to rethink our view of the provincial political landscape and by extension, the tidiness and dominance of certain narratives within Punjabi and South Asian historiography.

---

<sup>6</sup> Which is a theme that can be detected in the later variations of the Subaltern Studies collective.

## Select Bibliography

### Archival and Manuscript Sources

#### *Bodleian Library*

- Report on the Police Administration in the Punjab (RPAP) for the year 1914 - 38

#### *British Library*

- Communism in India 1924-1927 (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1927) IOR/V/27/262/3,
- Communist Activities in India and Pakistan, Jan 1947 – Oct 1949, IOR/L/P&J/12/772
- Indian Political Intelligence files IOR/L/P&J/12 Series. (IPI-2 Islam & the Khilafat Movement 1922–40, IPI-4 Communism: Russia, 1922-38, IPI-6 Communism: India & Indian Communist Party 1921-50, IPI-7 Meerut Conspiracy Case 1928-33, IPI-8 Revolutionary and Terrorist Activities 1914-1942, IPI-9 Control and Censorship 1918-49, IPI-12 Other Organizations and Movements 1921-47, IPI-13 North America 1912-48, IPI-14 Axis Powers 1924-49, IPI-16 Personal Files 1916-49, IPI-17 Miscellaneous Reports and Subjects 1916-49 – Local Governments Fortnightly Reports on the Political Situation, Punjab 1929-44)
- Intelligence Bureau, India and Communism (Home Department, Government of India, 1933 Reprinted 1935) IOR/V/27/262/5
- Intelligence Bureau, The Ghadr Directory (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1934) IOR/V/27/262/6
- Intelligence Summaries, India – Internal IOR/L/WS/1/1433
- J.C Ker, Political Trouble in India, 1907-1917, (Calcutta: 1917) IOR/V/27/262/8

#### *Library of Congress*

- Comintern Archives

#### *National Archives of Pakistan, Islamabad*

- *Civil and Military Gazette*

#### *National Archives of India, Delhi*

- PC Joshi Archives (from which dozens of files were kindly provided by Franziska Roy, Benjamin Zachariah and Michele Louro)

#### *National Documentation Center, Islamabad*

- Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence: 1940-48
- Fortnightly Reports on Situation in Punjab by the Chief Secretary, Punjab Government 1939-46

#### *National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, Islamabad*

- Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence: 1914-39

- Horst Kruger Archives (HKA), Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Shaukat Usmani, 'The Life Story of an Unknown Revolutionary,' Shaukat Usmani Papers, Box 10, No. 58-1

*Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin*

- Horst Kruger Archives
- Meerut Conspiracy Case Papers
- *Peoples' War*
- *Qaumi Jang*

**Printed Primary Sources**

- Adhikari, Gangadhar, *Sikh homeland through Hindu-Muslim-Sikh Unity* (Bombay: Sharaf Athar Ali, 1945)
  - *Pakistan and Indian National Unity* (London: Labour Monthly, 1983)
- Adhikari, Gangadhar M.; Rao, M. B. and Sen, Mohit (eds.), *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India* (1-7 vols., New Delhi: People's Pub. House, 1971)
- Ahmad, Muzaffar, *Myself and the Communist party of India, 1920-1929* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1970)
- Basu, Jyoti (ed.), *Documents of the Communist Party of India, (1917-28) Vol. 1, Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929) Vol. 2, (1929-38) Vol. 3, (1939-43) Vol. 4, (1944-48) Vol. 5* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997)
- Bose, Arun (ed.), *Indian Revolutionaries Abroad, 1905-1927: Select Documents* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2002)
- Brayne, F.L., *Better Villages* 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Bombay; New York: Oxford University Press, 1946)
- Carter, Lionel (ed.), *Punjab politics, 1936-1939: The Start of Provincial Autonomy (Governors' Fortnightly Reports and other key documents)* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004)
  - *Punjab Politics, 1940-43: Strains of War* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005)
  - *Punjab Politics, 1 January 1944 - 3 March 1947: Last Years of the Ministries* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006)
  - *Punjab politics, 3 March - 31 May 1947: At the Abyss* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007)
  - *Punjab politics, 1 June - 14 August 1947: Tragedy* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007)
- Chadda, Tilak Raj, *A Study of the Communist Movement in the Punjab* (Delhi: New India Press, 1954)
- Darling, Malcolm L., *Rusticus Loquitur: Or, The Old Light and the New in the Punjab Village* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930)
  - *Wisdom and Waste in the Punjab Village* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934)
  - *At Freedom's Door* (London: OUP, 1949)
  - *Apprentice to power: India 1904-1908* (London: Hogarth, 1966)
- *Punjab Legislative Assembly Debates* (Simla, 1921-47)

- *Ghadar di Gunj* (Echoes of Mutiny) available at, along with other Ghadar documents, the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) which accessible at <http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/>
- Gupta, D.N (ed.), *Bhagat Singh, Select Speeches & Writings* (New Delhi : National Book Trust, 2007)
- Ibbetson, Denzil, *Outlines of Panjab Ethnography: Being Extracts from the Panjab Census Report of 1881, Treating of Religion, Language, and Caste, 1847-1908* (Calcutta: Printed by the Superintendent of Govt. Print. 1883)
- *Imperial Gazetteer of India Provincial Series Punjab Vol. 1 & II* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1998; originally published in Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907-1909)
- Isemonger, F.C. and Slattery, J, *An Account of the Ghadr Conspiracy*, (Lahore: Punjab Government, 1919)
- Josh, Sohan Singh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party* (New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1970)
  - *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh and on other Early Revolutionaries* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1976)
  - *Hindustan Ghadr Party: A Short History* (2 vols. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1977)
  - *The Great Attack: Meerut Conspiracy Case* (New Delhi: People's Pub. House, 1979)
  - *My Tryst with Secularism: An Autobiography* (Patriot Publishers, 1991)
- Malik, Abdullah, (ed.), *Selected Speeches and Statements of Mian Iftikharuddin*, (Lahore: Nigarishat, 1971)
- Massy, Charles Francis, *Chiefs and Families of Note in the Punjab* (3 vols., Lahore: Government Printing 1940)
- *Memorandum on the Disturbances in the Punjab April 1919* (Lahore: Government Printing Punjab, 1920) republished (Lahore: Sang-e-meel Publications, 1997)
- Mukhopadhyay, A.K. (ed.), *India and Communism: Secret British Documents* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997; Originally Published, Simla: 1935)
- O' Dwyer, Michael, *India as I knew it, 1885-1925*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Constable, 1925)
- Ray, Sibnarayan (ed.), *Selected Works of MN Roy* (4 vols., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1997)
- Rowlatt, S.A.T, *Sedition Committee, 1918: Report*, (Calcutta: Government Printing, 1918)
- Roy, M.N., *M.N Roy's Memoirs*, (Bombay: Allied Publishers Private, 1964)
- Roy, Subodh (ed.), *Communism in India 1919-24* (Calcutta: 1971)
  - *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents, 1925-1934* (Calcutta : Ganasahitya Prakash, 1972)
  - *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents, 1935-1945* (Calcutta : Ganasahitya Prakash, 1976)
- Sareen, T.R. (ed.), *Select Documents on the Ghadr Party* (New Delhi: Mouto Publishing House, 1994)

- Secret Documents On Singapore Mutiny 1915 (New Delhi: Mouto Publishing House, 1995)
- Singh, Bhai Nahar and Singh, Bhai Kirpal (eds.), *Struggle for Free Hindustan: Ghadr Directory 1916-17* (New Delhi: Gobind Sadan Institute for Advanced Studies in Comparative Religion, 1996)
- Singh, Randhir, *Ghadar Heroes: Forgotten Story of the Punjab Revolutionaries 1914-1915* (Bombay, Peoples Publishing House, 1945)
- Spratt, Philip, *Communism and India* (New Delhi: Eastern Economist, 1952)
- *The Punjab and the War*, (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1997; originally published in Lahore: Government Printing Punjab, 1922)
- Thorburn, S. S., *Musalms and Moneylenders in the Punjab* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1886)
- Usmani, Shaukat, *Peshawar to Moscow: Leaves from an Indian Muhajireen's Diary* (Swaraj Publishing House, Benares, 1927)
  - *I Met Stalin Twice* (Bombay: K. Kurian, 1953)
  - *Historic Trips of a Revolutionary: Sojourn in the Soviet Union* (Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd: New Delhi, 1977)

### Secondary Works

- Ahmad, Aijaz, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso 2008)
- Ahuja, Ravi, 'Subaltern Networks under British Imperialism. Exploring the Case of South Asian Maritime Labour (c. 1890-47)' in Jan-Georg Deutsch and Brigitte Reinwald (eds.), *Space on the Move. Transformations of the Indian Ocean Seascape in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*. Arbeitshefte 20 (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, date unknown)
- Ali, Imran, 'Malign Growth? Agricultural Colonization and the Roots of Backwardness in the Punjab,' *Past & Present*, No. 114 (Feb., 1987), pp. 110-132
  - *The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988)
- Ali, Kamran A., 'Communists in a Muslim Land: Cultural Debates in Pakistan's Early Years' *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 45, No. 3 (2011) pp 501 - 534
- Ansari, K.H., 'Pan Islam and the Making of the Early Muslim Socialists', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1986), pp 509-537
  - *The Emergence of Socialist Thought among North Indian Muslims* (Lahore: Book Traders, 1990)
- Arnold, David, *Police Power and Colonial Rule: Madras, 1859-1947* (Delhi : Oxford University Press)
- Balachandran, Gopalan, 'Searching for the Sardar: The State, Pre-Capitalist Institutions and Human Agency in the Maritime Labour Market in Calcutta, 1880-1935,' in Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.) *Institutions and economic change in South Asia*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp 206-306
- Barooah, Nirode K., *Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
- Barrier, Gerald N., *The Punjab Alienation of Land Bill of 1900* (Duke University: Program in Comparative Studies on Southern Asia, 1966)

- 'The Punjab Disturbances of 1907: The Response of the British Government in India to Agrarian Unrest,' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (1967) pp. 354-355
- Barrier, Norman G., 'The Arya Samaj and Congress Politics in the Punjab, 1894-1908' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (May, 1967) pp 364-73
- *Banned: Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India, 1907-1947* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974)
- Bayly, C. A., *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad, 1880-1920* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1975)
- Bayly, CA; Beckert, Sven; Connelly, Matthew; Hofmeyr, Isabel; Kozol, Wendy; Seed, Patricia, 'AHR Conversation: On Transnational History' *American Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 5 (2006) pp. 1441-1464
- Bose, Sugata, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006)
  - *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Candra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011)
- Bose, Sanat, 'Communist International and Indian Trade Union Movement (1919 - 1923),' *Social Scientist*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1979) pp 23-36
- Brar, J. S., *The Communist Party in Punjab: The Politics of Survival* (New Delhi : National Book Organization, 1989)
- Brass, Paul, *Caste, Faction, and Party in Indian politics* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1984-5)
- Brass, Paul and Robinson, Francis (eds.), *The Indian National Congress and Indian society, 1885-1985* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1987)
- Brass, Paul and Franda, Marcus F, *Radical Politics in South Asia* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1973)
- Brown, Emily C., *Har Dayal: Hindu Revolutionary and Rationalist* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1975)
- Brown, Judith M., *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)
  - *Nehru: A Political Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003)
  - *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- Broeze, Frank, 'The Muscles of Empire - Indian Seamen and the Raj,' 1919 – 1939,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review* Vol. 18 no. 1. (1981) pp 43-67
- Butalia, Urvashi, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998)
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Rethinking working-class history: Bengal, 1890-1940* (Princeton University Press, 2000)
- Chandan, Amarjit, *Gopal Singh Chandan: A Short Biography and Memoirs* (The Punjabi Diaspora Series No. 4: A Punjab Centre for Migration Studies Publication, 2004)
- Chandra, Bipan (ed.), 'Marxism in India' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* Vol. 4 No. 4 (1974)

- *The Indian Left: Critical Appraisals*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House 1983)
- Chatterjee, Partha, 'The Colonial State and Peasant Resistance in Bengal 1920-1947,' *Past & Present* No. 110 (Feb., 1986), pp. 169-204
  - 'For an Indian History of Peasant Struggle,' *Social Scientist* Vol. 16, No. 11 (Nov., 1988), pp. 3-17
  - *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1999)
- Chowdhry, Prem, *Punjab Politics: The role of Sir Chhotu Ram* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1984)
  - 'Social Support Base and Electoral Politics: The Congress in Colonial Southeast Punjab,' *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1991), pp. 811-831
- Deol, G.S., *The Role of the Ghadar Party in the National Movement* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers Ltd., 1969)
- Dewey, Clive, *The Mind of the Indian Civil Service* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996)
- Druhe, D. N., *Soviet Russia and Indian Communism* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1959)
- Fischer-Tiné, Harald, 'Indian Nationalism and the 'world forces: Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War.' *Journal of Global History* Vol. 2 (2007) pp. 325-344
  - *Sanskrit, Sociology and Anti-Imperial Struggle: The Life of Shyamji Krishnavarma (1857-1930)* (Delhi: Routledge India, 2008)
- Fox, Richard G., *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1985)
- Fraser, T. G., 'Germany and Indian Revolution, 1914-18.' *Journal of Contemporary History*, *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 12 No. 2 (1977) pp 255-272.
- Gajrani, S., *Peasant movement in Punjab* (Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1987)
  - *Peasants and Princes: Agrarian Unrest in the East Punjab States, 1920-48* (Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1987)
- Gallagher, John and Robinson, Ronald E., *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981)
- Gardezi, Hasan N. (ed.), *Chains to Lose: Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary – Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan* (2 vols. Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1988)
- Gaur, Ishwar D., *Martyr as Bridegroom: A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi: Anthem Press, 2008)
- Gilmartin, David, *Empire and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)
  - 'A Magnificent Gift: Muslim Nationalism and the Election Process in Colonial Punjab,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 40, No. 3. (Jul., 1998), pp. 415-436.
- Gulati, Kailash C., *The Akalis, Past and Present*, (New Delhi: Ashajanak Publications, 1974)

- Gould, Harold A., *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies: The India Lobby in the United States, 1900 - 1946* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006)
- Guha, Ranajit *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press 1997)
  - *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999)
- Guha, Ranajit. and Spivak, Gayatri C. (eds.), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
- D.N Gupta, *Communism and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1939-45* (New Delhi: Sage, 2008)
- Gupta, Sobhanlal D., *Comintern, India, and the Colonial Question, 1920-37* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1980)
  - *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India, 1919-1943: Dialectics of Real and a Possible History*, (Kolkata : Distributor Sreejoni, 2006)
- Habib, Irfan, *To make the Deaf Hear: Ideology and Programme of Bhagat Singh and his Comrades* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2007)
- Haithcox, John P., 'Nationalism and Communism in India: The Impact of the 1927 Comintern Failure in China,' *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1965), pp 459-73
  - 'Left Wing Unity and the Indian Nationalist Movement: M. N. Roy and the Congress Socialist Party,' *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 3, No. 1 (1969)
- Hasan, Khalid S., *The Punjab Muslim League and the Unionists: An Account Based on the Documents in the Shamsul Hasan Collection*, (Ushba Publishing International, 2005)
- Heeger, Gerald A., 'The Growth of the Congress Movement in Punjab, 1920-1940,' *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 32, No. 1 (Nov., 1972)
- Hoare, Quintin & Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey (eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: 1971)
- Hobsbawm, Eric, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life*, (London: Abacus, 2010)
- Iriye, Akira and Saunier, Pierre-Yves (eds.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)
- Javed, Ajeet, *Left Politics in Punjab, 1935-47* (Delhi: Durga Publications, 1988)
- Jalal, Ayesha, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (New York: Routledge, 2000)
- Johnson, Gordon, *Provincial politics and Indian nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress, 1880 to 1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973)
- Johnston, Hugh, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979)
- Jones, Kenneth W., 'Communalism in the Punjab: The Arya Samaj Contribution,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Nov., 1968)
  - 'Ham Hindu Nahin: Arya Sikh Relations 1877-1905,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (May, 1973), pp 457-475

- Josh, Bhagwan, and Joshi, Shashi, *Struggle for Hegemony in India, 1920-47: The Colonial State, the Left and the National Movement* (3 vols., New Delhi; London: Sage, 1992-94)
- Josh, Bhagwan, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-47* (Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1979)
- Juergensmeyer, Mark and Barrier, Gerald, (eds.), *Sikh studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition: Working Papers from the Berkeley Conference on Sikh Studies* (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979)
- Kautsky, John H., *Moscow and the Communist Party of India: A Study in the Postwar Evolution of International Communist Strategy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956)
- Sudipta Kaviraj, 'On the Construction of Colonial Power: Structure, Discourse and Hegemony,' in Engels, D. and Marks, S. (eds.), *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Asia and Africa* (London: British Academic Press, 1994)
  - 'Modernity and Politics in India,' *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, No. 1, Multiple Modernities (Winter, 2000), pp. 137-162
- Khan, Yasmin, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007)
- Kudaisya, Gyanesh, *Region, Nation, "Heartland": Uttar Pradesh in India's Body Politic* (New Delhi ; London : Sage Publications 2006)
- Lee, Harold, *Brothers in the Raj: The Lives of John and Henry Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)
- Low, D.A. (ed.), *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle, 1917-47*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
- Major, Andrew J., *Return to Empire: Punjab Under the Sikhs and British in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1996)
- Manela, Erez, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009)
- Manjapra, Kris, *M.N Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge India, 2010)
- Manjapra, Kris and Bose, Sugata (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)
- Manto, Saadat. H., *Manto Rama* (Lahore: Sang-i Meel, 1990)
  - *Kulliyat-i-Manto* (Lahore: 'Ilm va 'Irfan Publishers, 2005)
- McDermott, Kevin and Agnew, Jeremy, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1996)
- Menon, Ritu and Bhasin, Kamla, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998)
- Metcalf, Thomas, *Forging the Raj: Essays on British India in the Heyday of Empire* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)
  - *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008)
- Mufakhar-ul-Islam, M., 'The Punjab Land Alienation Act and the Professional Moneylenders' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2. (May, 1995) pp 271-291

- Al-Mujahid, Sharif, '1945-46 Elections and Pakistan: Punjab's Pivotal Role' *Journal of Pakistan Vision* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2010) Pakistan Study Centre, University of Punjab
- Mukherjee, Mridula, *Peasants in India's Non-violent Revolution: Practice and Theory* (London: Sage, 2003)
  - *Colonializing Agriculture: The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005)
- Nair, Janaki, 'Imperial Reason, National Honour and New Patriarchal Compacts in Early Twentieth-Century India,' *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 66 No. 1 (2008), pp 208-226.
- Oberoi, Harjot, 'Ghadar Movement and its Anarchist Genealogy' *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XLIV No. 50 (2009) pp 40-46
- Omissi, David, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994)
  - *Indian voices of the Great War: Solders' Letters, 1914-18* (Basingstoke : Macmillan, 1999)
- Overstreet, Gene D. and Windmiller, Marshall, *Communism in India*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959)
- Owen, N, *The British Left and India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Page, David, *Prelude to Partition: The Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control, 1920-32* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999)
- Panday, Gyanendra, *The ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926-34: A Study in Imperfect Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978)
- Popplewell, Richard J., *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire 1904-1924* (London: Frank Cass, 1995)
- Poulantzas, Nicos, *Political power and Social Classes* (London: Verso, 1978)
- Puri, Harish, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organisation & Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983)
  - *Ghadar Movement, and Ghadar Party: Its Role in India's Struggle for Freedom* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1997)
- Ramnath, Maia, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011)
- Rasul, M.A., *A History of the All Indian Kisan Sabha* (Calcutta : National Book Agency Private Ltd., 1974)
- Reetz, Dietrich, *Hijrat - The Flight of the Faithful. A British File on the Exodus of Muslim Peasants from North India to Afghanistan in 1920*, (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1995)
- Robb, P.G., *The Evolution of British Policy Towards Indian Politics, 1880-1920: Essays on Colonial Attitudes, Imperial Strategies, and Bihar* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992)
- Sarkar, Sumit, 'The Communists and 1942' *Social Scientist* Vol. 12 No. 9 (1984)
  - *Writing Social History* (Delhi : Oxford University Press 1998)
- Seal, Anil, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968)

- 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India,' *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 7, No. 3 (1973)
- Seal, Anil; Gallagher, John and Johnson, Gordon (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870 to 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973)
- Singh, Anita I., *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)
- Singh, Gurharpal, *Communism in Punjab: A Study of the Movement up to 1967* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications 1994)
- Singh, Khushwant, *Train to Pakistan* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press 1975)
- Singh, Mohinder, *The Akali Movement* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1978)
  - *Peasant Movement in PEPSU, Punjab* (New Delhi: National Book Organization, 1991)
- Sharma, Shalini, 'Developing a Communist Identity: The Case of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha' *Journal of Punjab Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2007) pp 167-187
  - *Radical Politics in the Punjab: Governance and Sedition* (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2010)
- Stokes, Eric, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978)
- Talbot, Ian, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1988)
  - Khizr Tiwana: *The Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1996)
  - *Provincial politics and the Pakistan Movement: The Growth of the Muslim League in North-West and North-East India 1937-47* (Karachi; Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1988)
- Talbot, I. and Thandi, S. (eds.), *People on the Move: Punjabi Colonial, and Post-colonial Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
- Tan, Tai Yong, 'Maintaining the Military Districts: Civil-Military Integration and District Soldiers' Boards in the Punjab, 1919-1939,' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Oct., 1994), pp. 833-874
  - 'Assuaging the Sikhs: Government Responses to the Akali Movement, 1920-1925,' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July, 1995)
  - *The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab 1849-1947* (Delhi; London : Sage, 2005)
- Tatla, Darshan S., *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood* (London: U.C.L. Press, 1999)
  - *A Guide to Sources, Ghadar Movement* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2003)
- Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin 1991)
- Tomlinson, B. R., *The Indian National Congress and the Raj, 1929-1942: The Penultimate Phase*, (London: Macmillan, 1976)
- Van den Dungen, P.H.M., *The Punjab Tradition: Influence and Authority in Nineteenth-Century India* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972)

- Walia, Ramesh, *Praja Mandal Movement in East Punjab States* (Patiala: Department of Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University, 1972)
- Waraich, Malwinderjit Singh., and Sidhu, Gurdev Singh, (eds.) *Komagata maru, A Challenge to Colonialism: Key Documents* (Chandigarh: Unistar Books, 2005)
- Weiner, Myron, *Party Building in a New Nation: The Indian National Congress* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967)
- Westad, Odd Arne, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- Wolpert, Stanley, *Shameful flight: The Last Years of the British Empire in India* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006)
- Zamindar, Vazira F.Y., *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press 2007)
- Zachariah, Benjamin, *Nehru* (London: Routledge 2004)
  - *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History* (New Delhi ; Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005)
- Zaheer, Hasan, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy 1951: The First Coup Attempt in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998)

#### **Unpublished Theses**

- Mukherjee, S., 'The Experience of the 'England Returned': The Education of Indians in Britain in the Early Twentieth Century and its Long Term Impact', (University of Oxford, DPhil thesis, 2007)
- Raza, Ali, 'Contesting Dominant Narratives: The Khaksar Tehreek in Punjab, 1932-44,' (SOAS, MA thesis, 2006)
- Shalini Sharma, 'The Radical Response to Colonialism: The Organized Left in Punjab 1920-1947,' (School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Ph.D. thesis, 2005)
- Talbot, Ian, 'The Growth of the Muslim League in the Punjab, 1937-1946' (Royal Holloway College, Ph.D thesis, 1981)