The Spiked Ashram

Situating the Indian Anarchist Tradition

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Introduction

Anarchism in India has rarely been treated as a coherent tradition, yet its traces run deep in the country's political history. Too often, it is either contained under the vocabulary of Gandhian nonviolence or overlooked in favor of Marxist and communist narratives. This misrepresentation has obscured the fact that anarchism has been a living current in the subcontinent, shaped not only by global ideas but also by distinctly local struggles against authority and domination. From pre-colonial communal practices that emphasized voluntary cooperation and self-rule, to militant anti-colonial conspiracies against the British Raj, to post-independence struggles against caste, state repression, and capitalist exploitation, anarchism in India has developed across shifting contexts while retaining its core rejection of hierarchy. To understand these anarchist traditions is not to impose a Western label on Indian resistance or even spirituality, but to recognize that anti-authoritarian thought and practice in South Asia, like Indian banyan trees, has deep roots. This essay situates the Indian anarchist tradition across three overlapping waves, pre-colonial, anti-colonial, and post-colonial, arguing that what emerges is not a borrowed ideology but a distinctive anarchist framework embedded in the region's history of autonomy and resistance. This approach allows for a mapping of anarchic tendencies that highlights both historical depth and the diversity of strategies employed to live outside or against dominant political and economic systems.

The intent of this piece is not to create an anthology of Indian anarchism, for it would take years exploring the "enlightened anarchism" of Mahatma Gandhi, British assassinations, the activism of Ambedkar, anti-Brahminism, and African American support for Indian independence. Instead, my goal is to simply bring the topic into recent anarchist scholarship memory through intentional vagueness, and hope that other accomplices can fill the gap and expand upon this historiography and theory. The title "spiked ashram" is a reference to ashrams, a place for spiritual retreat that I am reframing as a space of withdrawal. Mixed with the imagery of spikes, it becomes a retreat that is not passive but defensive, refuses intrusion, and resists domination.

Historical Background

At the beginning of the 18th century, India accounted for about 30% of the world's wealth. By the time independence was declared in 1947, that figure had dropped to just 3%. Prior to British involvement, India was world renowned for its textiles, jewelry, gems, pottery, ceramics, spices, and more. Its trade networks expanded to nearly all of Eurasia, Eastern, and Southern Africa, and by the 18th century, India was producing almost a fourth of the world's textiles. These same routes were used for cotton, dyes, and handicrafts, further establishing India as one of the biggest manufacturing nations in the world. However, after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 and the decline of centralized Mughal authority, the British saw an opportunity to turn India's wealth into imperial profit. They began positioning themselves to convert India's immense wealth and trade networks into sources of imperial control.

Unlike settler colonialism where colonizers displace the Indigenous population, British rule in India was primarily focused on exploiting India's resources and labor for its own benefit. The first step was to disrupt the gargantuan trade network, which they did so by cutting off every trade route exiting India. Hoisting themselves as the main buyers of everything India had to

offer, Britain sealed the coffin shut by paying with revenues extracted from Indian taxes. This completely froze the economy and forced Indian artisans and farmers to sell their goods at prices set by the British, while the profits themselves flowed straight to Britain. Upon completely burning down any ability for Indians to make textiles for a profit, they were forced "back onto the soil" to become farmers, de-industrializing around 80% of all artisans. Now beginning to twist the knife, Britain then forced Indian farmers to be their primarily source of revenue powering the entire administration. Taxes on the farmers were set before the harvests, which forced the Indians to pay more than what they were making whether or not it was a poor harvest. It is estimated that the British Empire extracted around $45 trillion (USD, 2025 rates) from India the entire time they were there. This massive economic extraction raises an important question: what does any of this have to do with anarchism?

> "The fundamental principle of the British has been to make the whole Indian nation subservient to the interest and benefit of themselves" - F.J. Shore, House of Commons, 1857

The collapse of local economies, destruction of artisan communities, and the forced dependence on British economic structures generated anti-colonial thought. The people and organizations activated were a response to the severe control the British had. The devastation of local production, the extraction of wealth, and the imposition of centralized governance created conditions in which withdrawal and local self-governance were not only practical strategies, but the only responses to oppression. Anarchist tendencies emerged in reaction to British imperialism, which as time went on, drew on newly developed philosophical ideas mixed with the material realities of colonial exploitation in India. Being against the British was to be anti-colonial, and to some, being anti-colonial meant being an anarchist. Understanding this economic history clarifies why Indian anarchist practices not only arose, but arose as a form of material necessity and not something that educated elites chose. The strategies deployed were developed in response to a British state that had violently disrupted and encroached on pre-colonial forms of social and economic life.

The Pre- and Anti-Colonial Currents

In the case of this writing, there existed three "waves" of Indian anarchism, the first of which existed prior to any European involvement. Starting thousands of years ago, "Indian" society already had classifiable anarchistic elements such as the egalitarianism of the Bhakti movement, Sufi communal practices, and Jain and Buddhist monastic communities which emphasized voluntary community living. The Bhakti movement rejected caste, Sufi practices created spiritual communities that usually operated outside state religious orthodoxy, and Buddhist practices inherently promoted self-governance without state authority. However, these philosophies were not explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, nor anti-imperialistic as they dealt more with spiritual discipline, ethical conduct, and communal harmony. If anything, the takeaway is that these early tendencies demonstrated that these principles were not imported concepts but were cultivated organically within local communities, eventually leading to anti- and post-colonial anarchist movements. To suggest these traditions of self-rule and self-governance were not part of the region's history of anti-authoritarianism would be disingenuous. This also suggests that anarchism as a

field has evolved over time, expanding from practices of self-rule to organized resistance against larger structures of oppression, including colonial and post-colonial state power.

Moving onto the second wave, there historically was a clear wave of anarchist thought in India that was fundamentally anti-colonial and aimed directly at dismantling British rule. This included revolutionary networks like the Ghadar Party and Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, various village uprisings regarding taxation and land grabs, and Gandhian and non-Gandhian experiments with self-reliance. It is also worth noting that 20th century anarcho-syndicalist M.P.T. Acharya played a large role in integrating anti-colonial vocabulary into the greater anarchist body of thought. In colonial India, known as the British Raj, anarchist tendencies became explicitly anti-colonial, connecting the fight against state authority with resistance to imperial exploitation. This period saw anarchism in India move from mostly spiritual tendencies toward organized revolutionary activity, blending ideas of socialism and anti-capitalism. The aforementioned Ghadar organization played an extremely large role in organizing against the British Raj. Founded by Sohan Singh Bhakna in Oregon in 1913, the organization was home to expatriate Indians who were outspoken about British rule. These individuals, based largely in California's San Francisco Bay Area, allied closely with Germany, who in return considered the Indians vital against the British Empire. Working with Germans, the Ghadar Party drafted a plan to sneak weapons through Afghanistan into Northwestern India. Unfortunately, the entire plan was uncovered by British intelligence, with many of the revolutionaries being arrested, imprisoned, or executed. Many of the Ghadar members can reasonably be considered anarchists, primarily due to their target being the British Raj. While they did not adopt the label "anarchist," their writings and pamphlets emphasized self-determination, mass mobilization, and the overthrow of coercive authority. Outside of the Ghadar Party, other Indian anarchists were present in the Bay Area, such as Lala Har Dayal, who created the "first monastery of anarchism" in Oakland. Unfortunately, more information on Har Dayal's monastery is yet to be uncovered.

It's incredibly easy to suggest that anything anti-authoritarian is anarchistic. However, it's just that: anarchistic, and not genuine anarchism. Anarchism as a movement originates from Europe, which means only people familiar with that Eurocentric vocabulary would consider themselves anarchists. As Peter Marshall says in *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, "anarchism" is reserved for those who consider themselves anarchists, otherwise, their actions are regarded as "anarchistic" simply for having anti-authoritarian and anti-statist values. The Ghadar activists were anarchistic in their networks and ideologies to an extent, all of which operated and generated outside of formal hierarchies and coordinated direct action. This "reevaluation" of past organizations' ideologies is not new. For example, keeping with the Bay Area, the Black Panther Party have always been considered to be marxist-leninists. However, recent thought has reevaluated and situated them to be more in line with anarcho-vanguardists, which I say recognizing the contradiction. An anarchism against hierarchies is an anarchism against vanguardism. However, the individuals who ran book clubs, teach-ins, and health clinics were all individuals with knowledge that was being shared to radicalize and help Black youth. Teachers who gave out Black Panther reading lists were individuals who had deep knowledge of Afrocentric radical theory, with their position within the Party allowing them to incite revolution and consciousness within newer Panthers. Tying it back to the Indian radical tradition, the Ghadar Party deserves a similar reevaluation in a similar way. While they may not have explicitly used anarchist language, their emphasis on mass political awakening against British imperialism displays are clearly anarchic. Much like the Panthers, their praxis operated in tension with formal political structures like the

American state, making them valuable subjects for anarchist historiography even if they never claimed the label themselves. For what it's worth, Bhagat Singh, the famed marxist Indian revolutionary executed at 21 years young (similar to Chairman Fred Hampton, who was assassinated at 23 years young), also daydreamed about anarchism.

> "…Anarchists do not wish for any kind of government, and this is true. But such a thought scares us…Under such circumstances, how can we think even for one moment that such a day will dawn when we can live happily and freely without a government? But this is, in fact, our own weakness. The ideal or the feeling is not to be blamed." - Bhagat Singh, *What is Anarchism?*

The Hindu Nationalist Problem and Post-Colonial Anarchism

Nationalism is defined as an ideology and movement that emphasizes loyalty and devotion to a nation, which is a very anti-anarchist framework. Anarchists by definition do not pay loyalty nor devotion to nation states, which is seen through the core belief of states being oppressive entities that perpetuate hierarchies. However, in colonial India, anarchists and marxists were bumping elbows with nationalists as they were all in anti-British organizations. As an interesting case study, and potentially even the subject of a future book by someone (or maybe myself), the left-leaning revolutionaries and right-wing religious nationalists all wanted an end to British rule. We've already discussed the intent of the leftist revolutionaries, but what about the religious nationalists? To flip it, were leftist anti-colonial anarchists also nationalists? In short, yes. While many early anti-colonial figures had anarchistic tendencies in their opposition to the British Raj, not all revolutionaries aligned with the principle of anti-hierarchy that today defines anarchism. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a central figure in the development of the Hindutva ideology, is where nationalism began to cross with anti-colonialism in India. Savarkar's vision of Indian independence was inseparable from his desire to establish a Hindu-majority state, promoting the idea that Hindu culture and religion were inherently superior to other religions. Despite this, figures like M.P.T. Acharya initially engaged with and even lived alongside figures like Savarkar because they shared a common goal of removing British rule. The difference, however, lies in motivation and method. Whereas Acharya and other anarchists sought liberation from oppressive authority, Savarkar and other Hindu nationalists viewed independence as a means to consolidate Hinduism and its cultural power. Overtime, Acharya completely wrote off Savarkar, remarking that he had completely lost his mind as he increasingly embraced anti-Muslim rhetoric.

> "He has ended politically nowhere. Others are much blacker reactionaries than Savarkar… [he] is now old and too decrepit to do anything." - M.P.T. Acharya, December, 1950.

This shows that not everyone was against British rule for the same reason, which is expected. People are going to activate for different and personal reasons. However, there is no legacy to Savarkar's ideology, for Hindutva is still rampant in Indian society and government today. The *Sangh Parivar* refers to any organization that aligns with Savarkar's Hindu supremacist politics, which include the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a far-right Hindutva paramilitary organization, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's current presidential administration, and roughly

48 other organizations. Individuals who have Hindutva-inspired beliefs are known derogatorily as *Sanghis*. It is also worth noting that the RSS collaborated with the British and played no role in the Indian independence movement. The role of nationalists in anarchist India is a topic I tread on very lightly when attempting to expand the anarchist historiography of the region. Just because some individuals desired an independent India, they should not be considered anarchists. I do not consider fascist Savarkar an anarchist despite being anti-colonial and anti-British. This falsely assumes that anyone who was against the British empire was an anarchist, which is not the case. It also sidelines actual anarchists like Acharya, his friend Virendranath "Chatto" Chattopadhyaya, other agitators, and future anarchists who were not only against the British, but also the subsequent Indian state that would emerge in 1947.

The post-colonial wave of anarchism that emerged had nothing to do with Britain and had everything to do against the state of India. This movement had more to do with caste discrimination, various groups such as the *Chipko* and *Narmada Bachao Andolan* movements for environmental justice, and overall anarchist and mutual aid cooperatives. This wave of anarchism is also the one that current South Asian and Indian anarchists reside in and operate within. The issue of caste, one not touched heavily upon by Acharya, existed long before British colonization. However, colonial rule deepened and institutionalized caste divisions, particularly through census classifications, land revenue systems, and legal codification. British economic policy also led to massive deindustrialization, which as mentioned before, forced over 80% of artisans into agricultural labor, tightening caste-based occupational roles. The struggles and desires remained the same, but with the British out of the picture, Indians understood that some problems were the Indian government's doing and not the British's. Even after independence, anti-British revolutionaries remained active critics of the Indian state. To the aforementioned Acharya, the only thing that changed was the oppressor.

> "Capitalism will be "tied up" whether socialists are prepared for the situation or not. If it does not cease existing, there can be no hope of socialism coming, and no use for it. Capitalism will collapse even without a general strike for social revolution. Otherwise, let us not think of socialism at all. It would be only intellectual delectation without any practical use. Many socialists appear to have the attitude that "it will come someday anyhow," so why worry about the situation? But capitalism will crash about their heads with a deafening roar. It will be too late then to think of socialism."
> - M.P.T. Acharya, "How Long Will Capitalism Last?" *World Scene from the Libertarian Point of View* (Chicago: Free Society Group of Chicago, 1951), p.52–56.

Anarchism in India Today and Conclusion

What emerged from these movements was not a scattered set of isolated protests but a living continuum of India's anarchist tradition. From the decentralized women-led sit-ins of Shaheen Bagh to the farmer encampments that built autonomous infrastructures of care, from Shramik Mukti Dal's decades-long anti-caste and ecological organizing to urban collectives like the Scarlet Underground in Kolkata, anarchism in India today reveals itself as both intersectional and adaptive. With the population nearing 1.5 billion, contemporary anarchist practices in India are most visible at the level of local politics. Here, communities are carving out autonomous

spaces in defiance of, or uneasy negotiation with, the larger state apparatus. Farmers' encampments, village assemblies, and urban mutual-aid collectives are operating horizontally, sustaining themselves through direct democracy, communal kitchens, and federated decision-making. While these grassroots experiments embody anarchist principles of self-rule, they remain entangled with the coercive power of the Indian state, whether through police repression, surveillance, or the economic structures that bind them to global capital. The current right-wing and Hindutva-embracing administration under Prime Minister Narenda Modi has an open policy of anti-Muslim rhetoric, harrowing back to what disillusioned Acharya with Savarkar. Speaking of Acharya, anarcho-syndicalism, along with green anarchism, remain two of the largest sects in India. Despite communist, Marxist, Maoist, and even Ambedkarites vastly outnumbering the total number of anarchists, they are occupying space within the Indian left and far-left. The result is an onion-like layered political landscape where local struggles generate real zones of autonomy that exist within a Hindu-nationalist and neoliberal state. What this demonstrates is not the absence of widespread anarchism, but its persistence and consistency under constant constraint. It takes form where people confront the intersectional violences of caste supremacy, religious majoritarianism, patriarchy, male violence, infanticide, capitalist extraction, and state repression. While few Indians activists may claim the explicit label of "anarchist," their past shows an extensive history of defiance, anti-colonialism, and anti-authoritarianism. If someone were to say "an anarchist movement never existed in India," they are factually incorrect. After all, the number one rule of fight club is that you do not talk about fight club. How much history is there? How much has been written about?

Across the three waves of Indian anarchism during the pre-colonial, anti-colonial, and post-colonial eras, a clear and persistent thread of anti-authoritarian practice emerges. It revealed how decentralized, non-hierarchical strategies had been adapted to specific historical circumstances. From pre-colonial spiritual and communal tenets to anti-colonial revolutionary networks such as the Ghadar Party, Indian anarchism has consistently resisted hierarchy and centralized authority. Each wave responded to concrete material and political conditions, showing that these practices were not abstract philosophical exercises but rooted in the materialism of local communities. Whether through experiments in cooperative economics, revolutionary activity, or organized withdrawal from oppressive state structures, these anarchist tendencies demonstrate a remarkable adaptability, evolving over centuries to meet shifting forms of domination while maintaining core principles of autonomy, self-determination, and mutual aid.

Reading recommendations

Anarchy or Chaos: M.P.T. Acharya and the Indian Struggle for Freedom - Ole Birk Laursen

We Are Anarchists: Essays on Anarchism, Pacifism, and the Indian Independence Movement, 1923-1953 - edited by Ole Birk Laursen

Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire - Maia Ramnath

Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India's Liberation Struggle - Maia Ramnath

The Political Writings of Bhagat Singh - edited by Chaman Lal and Micahel D. Yates

The RSS: A Menace to India - A.G. Noorani
Savarkar and Hindutva: The Godse Connections - A.G. Noorani
The United States of India: Anticolonial Literature and Transnational Refraction - Manan Desai
Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History - J.V. Pawar
Colonizing Kashmir: State-Building Under Indian Occupation - Hafsa Kanjwal

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