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Finding Acharya

An Indian Anarchist in the Archives

Ole Birk Laursen

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The Indian anarchist M. P. T. Acharya passed away on 20 March 1954 in Bombay (Mumbai). He had been ill for the last six years, suffering from tuberculosis since 1948, and his wife Magda Nachman Acharya, had died in January 1951. In his obituary in *Freedom*, Albert Meltzer recalled: “He remained an uncompromising rebel, and when age prevented him from speaking, he continued writing up until his death”. A prolific writer and agitator, however, Acharya has remained an obscure figure within the international anarchist movement until recently, and his writings even more unknown.

To bring his thoughts and ideas to a wider audience, I am currently editing a collection of Acharya’s essays to be published by AK Press. Comprising 50 essays on anarchism, pacifism and the Indian independence movement, as well as a critical biographical introduction to Acharya, the essays open a window onto the global reach of anarchism in this period and enables a more nuanced understanding of Indian anti-colonial struggles against the totalized oppression of the state, be it imperialist, Communist or capitalist.

Finding Acharya and his essays, however, has been difficult, as there is no central archive or repository dedicated to Acharya’s

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papers. He lived in Berlin from 1922 to 1935, but there is almost no trace of him in intelligence reports from that period. In fact, when the British Government put pressure on the German Ministry for Foreign Affairs to deport Acharya and a number of Indians in Berlin in 1925, the Germans noted that: "it is not possible to discover any activities of the person named". What is more, while Acharya had attended the founding meeting of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) in December 1922 and wrote extensively for IWMA-affiliated papers such as *Rabochii put*, *Die Internationale* and *La Voix du Travail*, his name rarely appears in official documents from the IWMA. Adding to this problem, most of the IWMA archives were lost when the Nazis came to power and banned the organization in 1933. In many other cases, it is difficult to assess Acharya's involvement in certain organizations – for instance, the War Resisters' International, the League Against Imperialism, the Indian Press Service, and the Indian Independence Union – and extensive research into the archives of these organizations has lead almost nowhere.

Upon his return to India in 1935, Acharya focused more on Indian politics, pacifism and the labour movement, and he lost touch with the international anarchist movement during the Second World War. Acharya's role in the Indian Institute of Sociology and its successor the Libertarian Socialist Institute during those years remains unclear, except from Victor Garcia's brief account of Acharya. It is, however, from this later period that the only pictures of Acharya have been found.

Tracing Acharya under such circumstances has required a historical methodology of reading between dominant narratives. His name occasionally crops up in correspondence between other prominent figures such as Alexander Berkman, Tom Keell, Augustin Souchy, Guy Aldred, E. Armand, Hem Day, James Dawson, and Nicolaas Steelink, as well as in a surprising letter to Leon Trotsky from 1931. Yet, Souchy, for instance, does not mention

Acharya in his autobiography *Beware! Anarchist!* (1977), and neither does Acharya appear in many other "official" papers.

Instead, I have relied greatly on help from Prof. Lina Bernstein, who is writing a biography of Acharya's wife, Magda Nachman Acharya, and numerous archivists across India, Britain, Europe, and North America, who have assisted in finding letters and correspondence for me. Furthermore, various grassroots organizations and historians have recently digitized anarchist periodicals, and I have benefitted greatly from that. What is more, I have relied on help from friends and colleagues to translate Acharya's essays from German, French, and Spanish into English. Indeed, finding Acharya when there is no single archive has demanded a practice of mutual aid, a collaborative effort, all in the spirit of bringing this Indian anarchist out of the archives and into the public eye.