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# M. P. T. Acharya, International Anarchism and Indian Independence

Ole Birk Laursen

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As we mark seventy years since Indian independence, Partition and the creation of Pakistan, much has been made of Mohandas K. Gandhi's Civil Disobedience movement and the power of non-violent resistance. Gandhi drew his tactics from Tolstoy's anarcho-pacifism after the two had corresponded in 1909 (Tolstoy's 'A Letter to a Hindoo' (1908) was originally written to Taraknath Das, but reprinted in Gandhi's paper *Indian Opinion* in 1909). However, despite relying on the anarcho-pacifist strand of Tolstoy's thinking, Gandhi cannot be credited with attempting to bring anarchism to India.

Taking another path than Gandhi, the Indian anarchist M. P. T. Acharya who was 'striving on his own in the whole sub-continent to establish a movement', as Albert Meltzer recalled, charted new territories as he straddled both anti-colonial, Communist and, most importantly, international anarchist circles in the first half of the twentieth century.

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After a decade of anti-colonial nationalist activity in India, Britain, France, Germany, Turkey and the United States, Acharya joined the Berlin-based Indian Independence Committee during the First World War. Following a few unsuccessful missions to the Middle East, he briefly ended up in Constantinople before relocating to Stockholm in May 1917, where he set up the Indian National Committee with Virendranath 'Chatto' Chattopadhyaya. At the third Zimmerwald conference in Stockholm (September 1917), Acharya and Chatto met the Russian Bolsheviks Angelica Balabanoff and Konstantin Troyanovsky, which led to new contacts with Russian revolutionaries and paved the way for the Communist turn after the dust of the Russian Revolution had settled.

The Russian Revolution ushered in new hope, as V. I. Lenin promised the rights of nations to self-determination, and nationalists from across the colonial world soon tied their freedom struggles to the Communist International. In May 1919, the Indian nationalist Mahendra Pratap led a group of Indians, including Acharya, to meet Lenin in Moscow. Now with formal assistance from the Russians, Acharya joined a mission to Afghanistan and, after falling out with Pratap, formed the Indian Revolutionary Association with Abdur Rabb in January 1920. At the Second Congress of the Communist International in July-August 1920, Acharya met M. N. Roy, who had recently arrived from Mexico. They soon formed the Provisional All-India Central Revolutionary Committee and, in October 1920, set up the Communist Party of India in Tashkent with Acharya as Chairman and Roy as Secretary.

Acharya and Roy, however, soon disagreed over the direction of the CPI, and in late January 1921 Acharya was expelled from the Party. He re-aligned himself with his old comrade Chatto, who had arrived in Moscow from Berlin, and returned to Berlin in December 1921. Falling out with Chatto as well, he moved back to Moscow in April 1922 and worked for the American Relief Administration. It was during this second sojourn that he met and married the Rus-

sian artist Magda Nachman, with whom he returned to Berlin in late 1922.

### **Acharya and the International Anarchist Movement**

In Berlin the disillusionment with the promises of the Russian Revolution had set in among the global radical left. Acharya soon joined the anarcho-syndicalist International Working Men's Association (IWMA) and set up an Indian committee with the aim to send anarchist literature to India. He soon wrote for Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Worker's Dreadnought* and the Berlin-based Russian anarcho-syndicalist paper *Rabochii Put*, and throughout 1925 corresponded with the well-known anarchists Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman and Hippolyte Havel, then in Berlin, and Thomas Keell, editor of *Freedom*, in London.

Writing for the Indian journals *The Mahratta* and *The People* as well as anarchist publications such as *Die Internationale*, *La Voix du Travail*, *Man!* and *The Road to Freedom*, Acharya criticised Bolshevism as being no different than capitalism; he wrote extensively on economics and the abolition of the wage system, but also became 'a logical pacifist', as he said. The Labour MP Fenner Brockway wrote about Acharya that, 'he appears to be a pacifist Anarchist, quite a harmless sort of person'.

While Acharya had great respect for Gandhi and his pacifist non-violence campaign, he was also critical and wrote that 'while [Gandhi] is violently opposed to violence in general, he is more opposed to the mass liberation from violence than to the violence of Governments'. He called himself 'an admirer of Gandhism as practised today in India' but not a follower of Gandhi. He later modified his position and, commenting on the Salt March, said of Gandhi that he 'acted like an Anarchist tactician of the first magnitude' and compared it to Makhnovism. When Gandhi was assassinated, Acharya wrote to the Belgian anarchist Hem Day that, 'pacifism is dead in India [...] there is no Gandhi in Gandhians'.

The Second World War interrupted Acharya's correspondence with the international anarchist movement, but after the war ended

he resumed writing for magazines such as *L'Unique*, *Tierra y Libertad*, *Les Nouvelles Pacifistes* and *Freedom*. Following Indian independence, he instantly criticised Nehru and the government for trying to introduce foreign capitalist investment, and instead argued that it was necessary to abandon the wage system. 'Without an anarchist movement', he wrote, 'this country will go Fascist and go to the dogs'. He criticised Sardar Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister of India, for going about 'like an Emperor and speaking like an Emperor'.

In 1948 Acharya fell ill, but he continued to write for international anarchist publications. His essays 'What is Anarchism?' (1948), 'How Long Can Capitalism Survive' (1951) and 'Confusion Between Communism and State Capitalism' (1951) hammered home the tireless message of anarchism to an Indian audience. His wife Magda passed away in 1951, and Acharya died on 20 March 1954. In a fitting testimony to him, Albert Meltzer wrote in his obituary that, 'it was impossible to comprehend the difficulty in standing out against the tide so completely as was necessary in a country like India. It was easy for former "nationalist revolutionaries" to assert their claims to the positions left vacant by the old "imperialist oppressors". This Acharya would not do. He remained an uncompromising rebel, and when age prevented him from speaking, he continued writing right up to the time of his death'.

Acharya's long career in the international anarchist movement, and his tireless efforts to bring anarchism to India, challenged the orthodox anarcho-pacifist tendencies embodied by Gandhi. Freedom for India did not equal freedom for mankind for Acharya. I write more about Acharya and anarchism in a forthcoming journal article and my book *The Indian Revolutionary Movement in Europe, 1905–1918*.