



Book Review

The Extraordinary Life of M.P.T. Acharya

Ole Birk Laursen. (2023). *Anarchy or Chaos: M.P.T. Acharya and the Indian Struggle for Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 352. Price: € 54.99. ISBN: 9780177752159. Hardcover.

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In June of 1945, the Berlin-based journalist A.C.N. Nambiar who was at the time running the Free India Centre set up by Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, was arrested by allied forces in the Austrian town of Bad Gastein along with several others. They were transported to a prison camp in Herford. While Nambiar deflected the question regarding his initials, his fellow prisoner had no such compunctions and instead confounded the registration officer with his full traditional name: Prativadi Bhayankara Thiru Venkatesayya Pantulu. Often used jokingly to indicate the tongue-twisting ineffability of south Indian appellations, the name in fact had great heft. The Medieval-period Vaishnava saint Annagacharya, composer of the popular devotional Sanskrit hymn *Venkatesha Suprabhatam*, the militant nationalist Venkatacharya, and the well-known singer, musician and poet P.B.S., all bore the lofty name Prativadi Bhayankara, which means formidable or awe-inspiring. Also holding this same honour was a one-time Berlin resident known to Nambiar, M.P.T. Acharya, who was an extraordinary Indian revolutionary, anti-colonial agitator, anarchist, and political theorist. This review discusses the same M.P.T. Acharya, the subject of a timely biography by the research scholar and writer Ole Birk Laursen.

The book *Anarchy or Chaos* explores Acharya's itinerant life as a revolutionary nationalist in Berlin who fled India in December 1908 in search of a safe haven, the company of like-minded associates, and stable employment. Travelling first to France, Acharya would very soon shift to the alleged 'hotbed of sedition'—the North London students hostel 'India House' founded by Shyamji Krishna Varma. At the time, the charismatic V.D. Savarkar had been directing the affairs of the revolutionary group stationed at the house in Highgate, which was not only closely monitored by British authorities but also infiltrated by its agents. It was here that Acharya would fraternize with several fellow Indians. The revolutionaries were greatly motivated by militant rhetoric and fiercely advocated violent acts against the British, which included carrying out political assassinations. The group included another charismatic figure, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya or Chatto, with whom Acharya would be associated for a long time, as his itinerant political journey unfolded. Unlike other members of India House, Acharya had not travelled to London to study for the Bar or the civil services. Quite uniquely, he had enrolled at the London County Council School to study Lithography and Photo-Engraving, whilst working as a cook at India House. He also assisted Savarkar in the editing of the latter's revisionist work, *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*, which provided ideological fodder to the other residents of India House.

The militant group very rapidly dispersed following the assassination of Curzon-Wyllie, the aide-de-camp to the Secretary of State for India, carried out on 1st July 1909 by Madan Lal Dhingra. This was a landmark event in the revolutionary phase of Indian nationalism, given its wider implications. India House shut down very soon thereafter, with several members shifting their base to Paris. As Laursen reveals, Acharya and his comrade Sukh Sagar Dutt decided

quite incredibly to travel to Morocco with the intention of joining the Riffs or Riffians in their struggle against the Spanish, and to learn the techniques of guerrilla warfare from them. This proved to be both impractical and foolhardy. In October 1909, Acharya moved to Paris to join the Indian revolutionary group there, led by Madame Bhikaji Cama and S.R. Rana. This period of intense anti-colonial activities that included forging solidarities with fellow revolutionaries of other nationalities exiled in Paris and across Europe, would only intensify Acharya's involvement and fervour, despite his life that was at the time, beset with instability and financial insecurity. At this point, Acharya adopted a conceit, *nom-de-guerre*, putting his name down at a Brussels conference of Egyptian nationalists as 'Mr Bhayankaram'. War was brewing, and the political calculus for the itinerant group of exiled Indian revolutionaries began to alter.

With great detail and factual fidelity, Laursen painstakingly maps Acharya's increasingly complicated and often vexed attempts to forge anti-British alliances with the Young Turks in Constantinople, his flight to New York in June 1912, his subsequent involvement in the Ghadar Party, his return to Europe and move to Berlin, and his and Chatto's attempts to solicit the support of European socialists in Stockholm during the last phase of World War I. Thereafter, Laursen reveals a fascinating phase in Acharya's life—his involvement with the Moscow based Communist International (Comintern), and the setting up of the Indian Communist Party in Tashkent with M.N. Roy and other revolutionaries. Plagued by numerous conflicts amongst the many stakeholders, the intrigues and political manoeuvrings of this period remain a most interesting historical niche. In uncovering the goings-on of this phase, Laursen provides a critically important perspective in the role played by Acharya, to his detriment, due to his failure to gain the support of the Comintern establishment, his discomfort with Bolshevik totalitarianism, and his gravitation towards anarchism.

Laursen importantly points out that the lives of exiled anticolonial activists were greatly tumultuous, plagued by uncertainties and upheavals. Indeed, the anticolonialism of the exiled activist was also shaped by the vicissitudes of affective considerations that were not exclusively the result of political exigencies and ideological compulsions. As he writes (p. 49):

Marked by uncertainty, frustration, and poverty, the constant movement was both in response to intelligence surveillance, geopolitical rivalries, and imperial ambitions of European powers but also the ultimate expression of anticolonial praxis—that is, forging anticolonial alliances with other nationalists in exile, producing nationalist literature and propaganda, and an allegiance to militancy and armed struggle.

Acharya was under no illusions about the life of a revolutionary and its chimerical, idealistic outcome. Thoughts of 'what it will be all worth' did not however diminish his commitment to grappling with intellectual ideas of freedom. The peripatetic and newlywed Acharya would shift to Weimar Germany during the 1920s, as he progressively began to embrace anarchism and sought to introduce Indian radicals to it. His intellectual engagements during this period would further mould him, as elements of anti-militarism, pacifism, and Gandhism began to influence his thinking. There was a vibrant, if fractious, community of Indian anticolonial exiles in Berlin at this point and the book unpacks the complex contestations and intrigues that animated the anticolonial space of Weimar Germany's Berlin. Following the establishment of Nazi rule in 1933, Acharya escaped Germany and returned to India with his artist wife Magda Nachman. Over time, Acharya would fade away into obscurity.

In recent times, there has been quite some scholarship on Indian anticolonialism from the turn of the century and over the interwar years. Extensive declassification of records, especially secret intelligence records have substantially aided these efforts. As Laursen also indicates,

recent scholarship in this broad area has been shaped by the intellectual frames of transnationalism, theories of entanglement, and an increasing attention to 'affective archives', which have brought fresh perspectives to global histories and to the study of individuals, mobilities, and movements alike. This has untethered the critical study of anticolonialism from the fetters of nationalist discourse by examining the global connectivity of ideas and praxis. Activists such as Acharya, who were living abroad and sought to liberate India from afar, were drawing from a multiplicity of political and personal influences. This matrix of global interconnectivity found its way back to India through letters, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and also by returning activists and their proxies through the underground networks of anticolonialism. From key figures like Chatto and M.N. Roy who dominated the Indian anticolonial space of exiles in Europe and numerous others such as Madame Cama, Shyamji Krishnavarma, V.D. Savarkar, A.C.N. Nambiar, Suhasini Chattopadhyaya, and Agnes Smedley amongst others; to critical organisational efforts including the India House, Ghadar Party, Indian Independence Committee, and League Against Imperialism to name but a few; the efforts of Indian exiles (and their patrons and collaborators) abroad to shape the destiny of India is a complex and rich area of study.

Laursen's work is a valuable addition to the study of Indian anticolonialism. He, very successfully, recovers Acharya's life, intellectualism, and legacy from the margins of history. The work is also a study of the British Intelligence surveillance networks in its detailing of colonial efforts to thwart anticolonialism abroad. Finally, it is the biography of an anarchist, indeed, of "India's most important anarchist theoretician and proponent" (p. 22). Laursen rightly claims that Acharya's writings, and his life, offer us with "new ways of thinking about emancipatory politics from below" (p. 246) in his articulation of an "entirely different understanding of freedom from all forms of oppression" (p. 6) given the putative revolutionary, communist, nationalist, and ultra-nationalist operative modes of the Indian anti-colonial struggle. Crafted with diligence and meticulous archival research, *Anarchy or Chaos* does a great service to the field of anticolonial studies by illuminating new pathways for future research, for fellow scholars. To the lay reader, it reveals the extraordinary story of a mostly forgotten Indian freedom fighter whose itinerant and tragic life is truly awe-inspiring in many ways.