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A revolutionary history of interwar India: violence, image, voice and text

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A revolutionary history of interwar India: violence, image, voice and text, by Kama Maclean, London, Hurst & Company, 2015, 256 pp., £18.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-849-04332-8

A Revolutionary History of Interwar India examines the place of violence in the anti-colonial struggle in India during the interwar period. 'When the independent nation state set about crafting the history of the freedom struggle', Kama Maclean writes, 'it was the Gandhian narrative that took center stage' (9). Pressured in part by popular perceptions of nationalist revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh (1907–31), the Indian government did begin to incorporate revolutionary movements in its history-writing projects from the mid-1960s onwards. But little is known about the extent to which revolutionaries interacted with the All-India Congress. Even less is known about the degree to which their praxis modulated the anti-colonial nationalist movement. Certainly, the book has much to contribute to the history and historiography of Indian nationalism.

Overlapping discursive arrangements and organizational structures served to link non-violent agitation with the violence of revolutionary anti-colonial nationalism, the author demonstrates. Then, 'bringing the two into alignment throws up the challenging prospect that nonviolence is, at least in some contexts, much more compelling when attended by its disruptive opposite', Maclean writes (221). Contrast this to normative histories of the anti-colonial struggle that construe revolutionary acts of non-violence and militant acts of revolutionary violence as opposing forms of political action. The account of Indian nationalism that the book presents thus forges a sharp departure from more conventional understandings of interwar nationalism as a fundamentally non-violent movement that was interrupted occasionally by dispersed acts on part of extremist groups such as the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army formed by Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad (1906–31). Maclean reengages the interwar period to reconsider the impact of revolutionary struggles on the nationalist movement as a whole.

The Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, or the HSRA, and its charismatic leader Bhagat Singh are central to the history that Maclean narrates. In order to evade the surveillance of the colonial government, secrecy, the author notes, was an intrinsic mode of operation for revolutionaries. In effect, this delimits the extent to which traces of revolutionary activities can be recovered from the colonial archive. Moreover, even as revolutionaries, especially Bhagat Singh, find continued presence in popular oral and visual cultures, their tracts have been largely relegated to the margins of history. Therefore, to excavate a revolutionary history of the interwar period, the author brings together several archival resources including recently declassified Indian Political Intelligence files at the British Library, London, and oral interviews commissioned by the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi and the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge.

While archival documents amassed by the colonial government provide a certain perspective on the intensity and extent of the HSRA's activity, oral testimonies from those who took part in the movement that Maclean describes presents a richer, indeed more nuanced, understanding of revolutionary praxis. At certain points in the oral testimonies, discrepancies surface between fact, memory, and its narration. Rather than discounting the testimonies as fictive, Maclean deftly draws out the nuances of such inconsistencies, not only to productively illuminate the very terms of interwar revolutionary activities but also to re-inscribe multiple actors into a narrative of the HSRA that now centres largely on the figure of Bhagat Singh.

How can we explain his [Bhagat Singh's] prominence over that of his fellow martyrs, or over important members of the HSRA, such as Chandrashekhar Azad? Bhagat Singh's hat portrait, and the extraordinary campaign around it, holds some of the answers to these enduring questions. (51)

Along with the utilization of aural archives, the author also works with photographs and popular representations of the revolutionaries that circulated, and continue to circulate, in the *bazaars* of Indian cities. Maclean's approach to the image is systematic. The author produces a textured history of the crucial role visual representation played in otherwise clandestine operations. Tracking the production and circulation of specific photographs and image types allows the author to also delineate the creation of particular iconographies of martyrdom. Throughout the book, Maclean persistently queries the image and consistently brings to bear upon the visual evidences gathered from other sources. In doing so, the author significantly contributes to recent scholarship on the intertwined trajectories of political struggle and the technique of mechanical reproduction in twentieth-century India.

Indeed, this procedural manoeuvre is exemplary of the methodological stakes of the project and the author's remarkable engagement with a wide variety of archives. Drawing on visual histories, oral testimonies, and the written record, Maclean, then, one could contend, provides a multi-sensorial history of interwar India – a history that incorporates image, sound, and text in dialogic ways. This approach is both refreshing and innovative. At the same time, the continued visceral charisma of Bhagat Singh as a popular icon – think of the furore that ensued when the Indian National Congress leader Shashi Tharoor compared the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union president Kanhaiya Kumar arrested on charges of sedition to Bhagat Singh during a speech delivered on 20 March 2016 – demands an intellectual reengagement with interwar revolutionary anticolonial politics. Kama Maclean provides that indispensable account of a history that has been vilified, glorified, and equally frequently ignored.

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