

Early Contact of Indians with Soviet Russia and the Spread of Communist Ideas Among Indians

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Abstract

By the turn of the nineteenth century, several Indians devised plans for liberating their homeland through armed struggle. To bring their radical aspiration to fruition, such revolutionaries found it necessary to leave India. During the First World War (WW-I), they assembled in anti-British hubs such as Berlin and Istanbul. Later, many sought refuges in Afghanistan during and following the War, but substantial support for their cause proved elusive even there in Kabul. Finally, some of these revolutionaries managed to reach Russia after knowing that Soviet Russia had become a focal point for anti-imperialist movements after the Great October Revolution (1917). The first Indians went to Soviet Russia, intending to seek support from the Bolsheviks as early as February 1918. The Bolsheviks took these Indian revolutionaries under their wing and provided them with training and organization. It was in Tashkent that the first Communist Party of India was established in 1920. The Soviet-trained Indian Marxists returned to their home country in 1922, where they were apprehended and subsequently imprisoned by the British government and sentenced to imprisonment. After release from jail, they re-established the Communist Party of India on Indian soil.

Keywords: Indian Revolutionaries, Communists, Bolsheviks, Russian Revolution, Communist Party of India.

Introduction

This article discusses the initial Indian contacts with Soviet Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917. It also highlights the history of earlier Indian communists. The report covers the period from the Great Russian Revolution till the establishment of the Communist Party of India in 1925, with a brief history of Indo-Russian contacts through the ages.

The Russian communists established a Marxist party named the Russian Social Democratic Party (RSDLP) in exile at the end of the nineteenth century. The first congress of RSDLP was arranged at Minsk (now the capital of Belarus) in March 1898. However, the party faced a split over policy matters in the second congress held in 1903. One faction was called Menshevik (minoritarian), and the other was called Bolshevik (majoritarian). Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (V.I. Lenin) led the Bolshevik faction, successfully bringing a communist revolution into the Russian Empire. Following the 1917 Revolution, the RSDLP-Bolsheviks seized the political authority of Russia. The leadership of the revolutionary government believed that the accession to the political power in Russia marked the beginning of an international social revolution. Vladimir Ilych Lenin anticipated that the victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia would prove to be the 'prologue of the world socialist revolution'. Therefore, the party adopted a self-explanatory and assertive name, the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik). In the first phase, the party strived to impose its

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hegemony on all the Russian nationalities and then, in the second phase, to export the revolution to other nations of the world (Kolarz, 1955).

The Communist Revolution in Russia caused the introduction of Marxist ideology to the Indians as well. Several reasons can be cited for the first Indian contact with Russia's newly established revolutionary government. Soviet Russia's system was based on the philosophy of Marxism, which is inherently a global ideology. The famous concluding phrase of the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Workers of all the countries, unite', made it quite natural for Russian Marxists to export Marxism to other countries of the world as well. In this context, British India took precedence for two key reasons: firstly, it symbolized the epitome of British imperialism, and secondly, it was the nearest neighbor in the East.

The Great October Revolution of 1917 was exclusively a Russian revolution in its flavor, apart from the fact that it took place on Russian soil. Still, it was executed by ethnic Russians, too. In addition, the Communist Party of Russia (Bolshevik) was mainly a Russian political party; as a result, the leaders of Communist Russia continued to follow the policy of its predecessors. History tells that tsarist Russia pursued continental expansion, and the same procedure was adhered to by Soviet Russia as well.

For the first time in Russia's history, the renowned Russian tsar Peter-I (also known as Peter the Great r.1696-1725) designed a plan against India. Peter the Great, in his will, which is generally recognized as a parameter for the Russian foreign policy, advised the Russians for an expansion towards India and Constantinople. For this reason, the successor of Peter the Great contemplated some schemes of invading India in the nineteenth century (Krausse, 1973, pp. 148-153). Similarly, Soviet Russia, under the Communist leaders, pursued the same hegemonic goals inherited from the tsarist predecessors. The Communist Party of Russia (Bolshevik) employed the engineering of a 'Permanent Revolution', i.e., the export of socialist revolution to everywhere in the world, to attain the final goal of the World Revolution. V. I. Lenin and the Bolsheviks made considerable efforts to inspire and support immediate Marxist revolutions in other countries (Qureshi, 2015).

On the other hand, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Indian Sub-continent was under the tight grip of British Imperial rule. To liberate India from British rule, the Indians followed a range of tactics and strategies. It is worth noting that the fanciful idea of receiving foreign support in delivering India constantly dwelled in the minds of politically conscious Indians. Several Indian revolutionaries left India to orchestrate a rebellious movement outside India on the eve of the First Great War (Khan, 2000, p. 18). Before the start of the First World War, India, under British rule, was in a state of political uncertainty. The deployment of Indian troops at various war fronts and the Ottoman's involvement in the war stimulated the revolutionary movement against the British government in the Indian Sub-continent (Rahman, 2021).

The Marxist Russian Revolution soon led to an intense crusade against Great Britain—an imperialist and anti-communist capitalist power. The Bolsheviks aimed to provoke trouble for the anti-Soviet capitalist States, especially Britain; organized propaganda was launched to exploit the political discontent for this purpose. Britain was not ignorant of these Soviet schemes. In the spring of 1920, the British authorities claimed that Russian Communists 'were concentrating on India' (Baha, 1979).

Several Indians migrated to neighboring Afghanistan as part of the Caliphate Movement in the winter of 1920. A considerable number of revolutionaries were 'hoping to seek military aid from abroad in order to liberate themselves from British rule as well as save the endangered Caliph in distant Istanbul'. The Indian refugees received praise from Amanullah Khan, Amir of Afghanistan from 1919 to 1929, who was also trying to trap British rulers of India in problems. However, the

refugees did not achieve their objectives, leading some to consider travelling to Soviet Central Asia. It was already evident to the refugees that the Bolsheviks were sympathetic to the oppressed Indians in their struggle against British imperialism. Upon their arrival in Soviet Central Asia, the Indian *muhajireen*⁴ were warmly received in Tashkent, where Soviet authorities generously provided them with Marxist ideological guidance (Qureshi, 2015).

Notably, before the Indian revolutionary émigrés successfully reached Soviet Russia, some Indian revolutionaries had already spent years engaged in struggles in Europe, the Americas and parts of Asia, searching for a solid force for out the despotic English rulers from India. The Indian revolutionaries had diverse views on means and methods to accomplish their aim of Indian liberation. However, their disillusioning experiences in Afghanistan and later in Muslim Central Asia, which fell short of their expectations, eroded their trust in pan-Islamism and compelled them to explore alternative ideologies to accomplish their goals. Indian revolutionaries who were able to reach Soviet Central Asia were a fraction, both ideologically as well as organizationally, of the Indian immigrant community (Ansari, 2015, p. 12).

Earlier Indian Contacts with Soviet Russia

This part of the article discusses the earlier Indian revolutionaries' contacts with communist Russia. The first Indian contacted Soviet Russia soon after the Great Russian Revolution. The aim behind approaching Soviet Russia was to get some support against the British government in India. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century and in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the British Empire was at its climax in Asia and Africa in general, and it was in its zenith in the Indian Sub-continent in particular. In such a high time of British imperialism, few national and international events flashed disgruntlement among Indians against British imperialism. Western education had already introduced democratic and liberal ideas to the educated Indian young people.

Moreover, the decision to partition Bengal in 1905 and the first Russian Revolution (1905-7) fueled discontent. They thus spurred the anti-colonial struggle and a meaningful movement for independence among the Westernly educated and well-off Indians. In order to get liberation and the right of self-government for the Indians, some political activists preferred legal means, while more radical opted for a revolutionary struggle. Eventually, the growth of the liberation struggle in the first decade of the twentieth century led to a break-up within the movement, separating the reformist and revolutionary factions. Numerous Indian national revolutionaries turned down the idea of conciliation with the British rulers, and they called for the removal of the English domination forcibly and ample national independence. Due to the fear of ruthless persecution by the British masters, the activists with revolutionary aspirations had to flee the danger by emigrating to different countries across Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

Even long before the start of the First World War, Indian emigrants had significantly intensified their radical efforts. They established revolutionary centers and created combative organizations in various countries worldwide. In their estimation, it was suitable to press for India's national liberation with the backing of the anti-Britain powers during an international crisis. Despite their

⁴*Muhajireen or Muhajirin refer to individuals who leave or emigrate from a land which is, or has become, governed by non-Muslims. These are people who undertake the act of Hijrat (migration, exodus). Muhajir is the singular form of Muhajireen.*

diverse religious backgrounds, these revolutionary emigrants were unified in their hostility to British rule in India.

Among the earlier prominent emigrants were the two famous Khairi brothers, Abdul Jabbar Khairi and Abdus Sattar Khairi. The Khairi brothers left India for Beirut in 1901, where they founded an Islamic college in competition with an American College. Another notable revolutionary was a highly educated Brahmin, Hardyal Singh⁵ who reached United States in 1913. Hardyal Singh established an Indian revolutionary organization named Ghadar (rebellion) Party in the same year. This revolutionary man was arrested by the United States authorities in 1914 due to his involvement in radical politics. Another, well-known figure, Maulana Barkat Ullah Bhopali⁶ also He arrived in the United States in 1906. Later, Maulana Bhopali moved to Tokyo (Japan), where he worked as an Urdu teacher at a university and used to publish an anti-British journal named *Islamic Fraternity*. The journal used to publish articles against British imperialism. However, this journal was suppressed by the government authorities after the editor visited Egypt, Türkiye and Russia in 1911. Raja Mahindra Pratap Singh (1886-1979) was another popular character among the radical revolutionaries. Raja Pratap Singh belonged to the Sikh aristocracy and was a master of several languages. He joined Hardyal Singh in Geneva.

After the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, a group of Indian nationalist revolutionaries assembled in Türkiye⁷ and Germany, as both empires, had enmity with Great Britain. The Indian national revolutionaries considered Germany as a significant beacon of hope. They gathered there expecting monetary and material assistance for an armed rebellion in British India. The British engagement at the various war fronts in the World War was perceived as an opportunity to compel it to liberate India.

Hardyal Singh reached Berlin, where he founded the Indian Revolutionary Society to organize a revolt in the Indian Sub-continent. Partap Singh and Maulana Barkatullah Bhopali joined this group of Indian national revolutionaries. Thus, the Ghadar Party in the United States and the Indian Revolutionary Committee in Berlin carried out propaganda campaigns to influence public opinion against the British imperial rule in India.

In order to bring down the British rule in India, the Indian National Party was formed in Berlin, and radical plans were designed to liberate India. These Indian revolutionaries attempted to unite the German and Russian empires against the British. The Berlin group considered it should have

⁵Hardyal (from Delhi, 1887-1939) got early education at the American school in Lahore and higher education from Cambridge. Hardyal came back home in 1908. He established the Ghadar Party at San Francisco in 1912. In the same year, the party worked as the master mind of throwing bomb on Lord Harding (Viceroy of India) in Delhi. Hardyal issued a journal trilingual (English, Urdu and Gur Makhi) named Ghadar from Berlin. Ghadar Party established branches in many countries such as China, Myanmar, Canada, USA and the Philippines (Persits, 1983, p. 56) (see Mian Akbar Shah for detail, pp. 407-408).

⁶Maulana Barkatullah Bhopali (1854 – 1927) born in Bhopal in the family of ulama (religious scholars), he memorised the Quran i.e., Hafiz of Quran pl. huffāz, f. hāfīza), literally meaning 'guardian, memoriser,' the term Hafiz is used by Muslims for the person who has completely memorised the Qur'an). Maulana Bhopali met up with the renowned scholar Syed Jamal Uddin Afghani in 1883. He was much impressed by the views of Afghani. Maulana Bhopali decided to learn English and then moved to England for higher studies in 1890. This restless soul moved around the world. He reached San Francisco in order to work for the Ghadar Party. He went to Afghanistan and remained in Kabul from 1915 to 1919 (Ansari, 2015, pp. 20-1).

⁷At the outbreak of the First World War, the pan-Islamists settled in Constantinople, where they issued a radical journal and organised the 'Indian Muslim Committee' with German and Turkish assistance. They also met the members of Indian Revolutionary Committee at Berlin. During the German Kaiser tour to Türkiye in 1917, they appealed the Kaiser to provide material help for uprising against the British masters in India. However, their eyes turned to Communist Russia for support when their appeal to the Kaiser was turned down and the Germany's subsequent defeat in the War (Ansari, 2015, pp. 12-7).

representation in Kabul so that contacts with India could be quickly established. During the First World War, most of the Indian armed forces were engaged in conflicts across Asia, Europe and Africa. In such a time, some Indian revolutionaries might have crossed into Afghanistan to convince its ruler of an assault on India.

The Balkan wars (1912-13) before the First World War created sympathy for the Turks among the Indian Muslims. The concept of pan-Islamism had been gaining popularity among Indian Muslims even before the outbreak of World War I in 1914. When the Ottomans entered the War against the Allied forces in 1914, the Ottoman Sultan, acting as the caliph of all Muslims, issued a *fatwa* declaring a holy war, or Jihad.⁸ As a result a significant majority of Indian Muslims rallied behind the Ottomans in this religious war or *jihad*, against their British masters (Ansari, 2015, p. 14; Qureshi, 1972, p. 243).

Shiekh al-Hind Maulana Mahmud-ul-Hassan Deobandi (1851-1920), patron and professor at Darul Uloom-e-Deoband, was also actively examining the prospects of organizing rebellion against the Britishers in India and to help the Ottomans. In this regard, Maulana Mahmud-ul-Hassan declared British India as *Dar-ul-Harb* (house of war), and therefore, the declaration of jihad was justified. Consequently, some *ulama* (religious scholars) urged the Indian Muslims to leave India for Afghanistan and to organize for jihad from there (Ansari, 2015, pp. 12-7). One of the Maulana Mahmud-ul-Hassan's pupils Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi⁹ (1872-1944) migrated to the neighboring Afghanistan on the directives of his teacher in 1915. In June 1915, Haji Sahib Turangzai¹⁰, who was another disciple of Mahmud-ul-Hassan and a freedom fighter also moved the tribal areas near Afghanistan with the intent of launching a jihad against the Britishers. In the meantime, a group of fifteen students¹¹ hailing from Peshawar and Lahore arrived in Kabul in October 1915. These students worked under the patronage of Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi. The exposure of the Silk Letters Conspiracy¹² in August 1916 heightened British authorities' concerns about Indian activities in Afghanistan.

⁸Mahmud-ul-Hassan dispatched a fatwa (religious proclamation), of Jihad from Hijaz. This fatwa was issued by the Turkish military governor of Hijaz, Ghalib Pasha in April 1916. The document written in Persian is known as *Ghalibnama*, which asked all the Muslim of the world to proclaim jihad everywhere against the enemies of Islam on behalf of the Turkish Caliph. Copies of the letter were distributed among the freedom fighters and especially among the frontier tribesmen who had already waged war against the British. To counter the spirit of jihad, the British 'carried out propaganda that it was not lawful to make Jihad without an Amir' (Khan, 2004, pp. 44-46).

⁹Obaidullah Sindhi was born in a Hindu family; he accepted Islam at the young age and joined the famous theological seminary of Deoband (Shah, 2000, p. 24). He was one of the two authors of the 'silk letter'. Maulana Sindhi also founded a branch of Indian National Congress (INC) in Kabul. Due to his anti-British radical campaign, the British government of India complained to Afghan government and because of the British pressure, the government of Afghanistan interned Sindhi along with his companions (Qureshi I. H., 1972, pp. 243-50). For details see (Kelly, 2013). Sindhi stayed in Kabul for seven years, i.e. from October 1915 till October 1922, then he went to Soviet Russia and remained there for nine months, from Russia he went to Türkiye. Sindhi came back to India in 1939. (Hamid, 1967, pp. 113-7). For understanding his political and religious and ideologies in detail, please see (Rizwan, 2016) and for his mission to Afghanistan and Soviet Russia please see (Khan, 2004).

¹⁰Original name of the Haji Sahib was Fazal-e-Wahid.

¹¹The group of these college students from Peshawar, Lahore and Kohat decided to joined the Ottoman army. On their way to Türkiye via Afghanistan they first arrived at the tribal belt in the spring of 1915. There they joined the already established camp of Mujahideen. At Afghanistan, they were put in prison by the government authorities. They were, however, set after Sindhi's arrival to Kabul. Later on, Maulana Sindhi disseminated them in towards Persia, Türkiye, China and Japan. Some of these students perished as a destitute wanderers, some faced execution at the hand of Allied forces as they were labelled, however, those who managed to reach their home and had powerful connections were pardoned (Qureshi I. H., 1972, pp. 243-50), (Hamid, 1967, pp. 113-7). For details see (Shah, 2000, pp. 16-7).

¹²In July 1916, letter scribed on a yellow handkerchief were dispatched towards Maulana Mahmud-ul-Hassan (at that time he was in Hejaz). The letters contained proposals for obtaining the Ottoman cooperation for the plan of

Gradually Kabul evolved into a hub of Indian *Muhajireen* and due to this reason Turks, Germans and Indian revolutionaries, who had joined hands at the onset of the First World War, decided to send a military mission to Kabul. Led by Von Hentig, the 'Turkish-German Mission' reached Kabul in October 1915, with the intention of securing Amir Habibullah Khan's (r. 1905-1919) support in the quest against the Great Britain. Nonetheless, the Mission was failed in getting a secure passage to India through Afghanistan.

Exploring alternative courses of action, the Indian members of the Turkish-German Mission organized a Provincial government of India in exile. The Provisional government based in Kabul was set up in December 1915. Mahendra Pratap served as its president, Maulana Barkatullah Bhopali assumed the role of the prime minister while Maulana Sindhi was given the portfolio of home minister. The entire cabinet consisted of representatives from the Berlin Committee, the Ghadar Party, extreme Left-wing members of the Indian National Congress and prominent figures from the Muslim movement (Persits, 1983, pp. 21-2). The primary aim of this provisional government was to create alliances with various governments against the British Empire and with the support of such anti-British governments a war for the Indian independence will be launched. The provisional government issued a 'general proclamation to the Indian Army', encouraging Indian soldiers in the British Army to mutiny. The tsar of Russia, in particular, was invited to terminate Russian alliance with Great Britain and 'assist in the overthrow of British rule in India'. Additionally, envoys were dispatched to China, Japan and Türkiye for the same purpose.¹³

Interactions between India and Russia

Russia and India have had historical interactions spanning centuries, albeit infrequent. Since ancient times, Russians considered India as a symbol of wisdom and wealth (Nadvi, 1929, p. 60; Appaduria, 1993, p. 114). In earlier times, Cultural exchanges between the two nations were mainly initiated by Indians who carried the torch of their rich heritage to Russia. Russian travelers first became acquainted with India in the 16th century. In the seventeenth century, a significant number of Indian traders settled in the Russian city of Astrakhan. Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725) showed keen interest in improving Russia's trade relations with Indian Sub-continent. In his will¹⁴, he directed the Russians to pursue advancement towards India. Later in 19th century, Russian scholars keenly studied the Indian civilization, especially during the era of the Great Game¹⁵, when the Russian empire was involved in an intense power struggle with British empire for the control of Central Asia. Russia extended its sympathies to the Indian freedom fighters during war of Indian people in 1857 against the rule of the British East India Company (Dude, 1997; Sharma, 1999, p. 9). Ivan Pavlovich Minaev, a Russian scholar, attended the first session of INC held in Bombay in

organising Hizbullah (the Army of God). The headquarters of Hizbullah were supposed to be founded at Madina. The letter further explained that other local centres of this army would be established at various Muslim countries (it's worth noting that by that time, i.e. June 1916, the Sharif of Makkah had already initiated a revolt against the Ottomans and Maulana Mahmud-ul-Hassan himself was imprisoned). The entire organisation was designed to operate under the leadership of Mahmud-ul-Hassan. Maulana Sindhi was supposed to lead the centre located in Kabul. The purpose of this army was to launch an offensive the North-West frontier with the aim to oust British authorities by force.

¹³Two delegations of Provisional Government were dispatched to seek the support of tsarist Russia in 1916 and then in June 1917 they contacted the Turkistan Committee of Russian Provisional Government, the missions proved unsuccessful. First mission reached Tashkent and returned safely to Kabul while the members of the second mission were arrested by the Russians and handed over to British Councilor General. The members of the mission to Türkiye were arrested by tsarist authorities in Persia and turned over to British authorities. Head of the delegation was hanged, and other members were awarded the punishment of lifetime imprisonment.

¹⁴Will of the Peter the Great (1772-1825), is widely accepted as a guideline for the foreign policy of Russia.

¹⁵The Great Game ended with the Anglo-Russian agreements in 1907.

1885. The last tzar of Russian empire, Nicholas II, as tsarevich embarked on a journey to India in 1890-91 with a stay in Lahore during his visit (Appadioria, 1993, p. 114).

The foundation for the strong relationship between Soviet Russia and Indian revolutionaries was established due to the Communist Revolution in Russia and the anti-colonial stance of the Soviet government. Lenin's collected works contain several references to India. Lenin admired the Indian struggle for freedom and self-rule (Dube, 1997). In June 1918, Soviet Russia published a document known as the Blue Book, which made assertions about British India a comprehensive peace is unattainable unless India achieves freedom and independence. India, being a focal point of Western influence in the East, will serve as the primary stronghold for the Eastern Continental Revolution. The Russian revolutionaries and international socialists, consider it their responsibility to not only celebrate the prospect of an Indian revolution but also to provide our full support to this cause through both direct and indirect methods, utilizing all the available resources.

The Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, were of the opinion that the Russian Revolution would trigger a sequence of socialist revolutions¹⁶ across different countries. Due to this reason, the Russian communists viewed their revolution as a part of the global socialist movement. Consequently, Soviet Russia turned to be an attractive place to all the revolutionaries and thus the revolutionaries from around the world converged on Russia as they gathered into Berlin previously. As early as May 1918, a federation for the international communist was established in Moscow with the aim for coordinating propaganda among the Asian working people and to organize them within Soviet Russia (Persits, 1983, p. 99).

A worldwide organization of the socialist parties of other countries, also known as Third International, was founded in 1919¹⁷. The Third International, also known as Communist International (Comintern), called upon the international proletariat class to wage a determined struggle for the establishment of world communism. The Comintern was used as a tool to pressurize the anti-Soviet capitalist world, as well as it sought to encourage fraternal communist parties of various countries to throw the government of their own country. Paradoxically, the Russian ministry of foreign affairs tried to maintained normal relations with the foreign countries. However, the imperial powers viewed this dual conduct of Soviet Russia unacceptable. Soviet Russia and Marxist ideology were seen as adversaries of British imperialism and the Indian gentry elite. Naturally, British empire and Indian aristocrats were concerned about the Russian menace (Dube, 1997; Lieten, 1977).

Initial Indians' Contacts with Soviet Russia

Prior to their arrival in Soviet Russia, the Indian revolutionary émigrés had undergone years of struggle in various countries. They had diverse and unique ideas for the liberation of India. The Russian Revolutions brought a glimmer of hope for these Indian revolutionaries as the Bolshevik government quickly ended their Wartime alliance with Allied forces. Soviet Russia also started a

¹⁶Earlier, Karl Marx and Frederich Engels estimated in the preface of the *Communist Manifesto* that the Russian Revolution could become 'the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West' (Russian Edition, Jan, 1882)

(Karl Marx, 2012). After Lenin's death in January 1924, one of the prominent Russian communist leaders Leon Trotsky remained an advocated of socialism throughout the world while another powerful member of the party, Joseph Stalin insisted that "a nation with Russia's size and resources could go it alone" (Wren, 1968, p. 541).

¹⁷The first congress of Comintern (March 1919) was attended by delegates from nineteen countries while it's second congress (July 1920) was attended by the delegates representing 35 countries. The Comintern was formally disbanded in 1943, but its functions had already been transferred to the Central Committee of the CPSU (Medish, 1981, pp. 308-9).

policy of encouraging potential revolutionaries who could promote communist ideologies in their respective homelands.

In search of strategies to bring an end to British colonial rule in India, hundreds of Indians made their way to Soviet Russia, primarily they congregated into Soviet Central Asia. The Indian revolutionaries who arrived in the Soviet Russia were a fraction of the total immigrant community. There was diversity of ideological and organizational background among those who reached Russia. Some of the emigrants were affiliated with the Caliphate movement,¹⁸ while other represented the radical Left-wing of the national liberation movement.

Some individuals among this group were either already influenced by Marxist principles or were in the process of embracing them. As previously mentioned, that the Indians sought to get the support of Britain's adversaries, particularly Germany during the World War I. However, during the Khilafat Movement (1919-24)¹⁹, their focus gradually shifted towards the newly established Soviet Russia.

The first-hand experience of these Caliphatists, first at Kabul²⁰ and later in Muslim Central Asia, as they attempted to reach Türkiye, eroded their faith in the ideas of pan-Islamism and drew them closer to Soviet Russia. The Bolsheviks, known for their anti-Western stance, were supportive of the oppressed Muslims of the East. The Muslim émigré also identified commonalities between the doctrine of Marxism and principles of Islam (Ansari, 2015, pp. 12-17).

In the group of expatriates, the famous Khairi brothers²¹ arrived in Moscow in November 1918 after leaving Istanbul/Constantinople. Their purpose was to seek support from Soviet Russia in their struggle against the British colonial rule in India. Mahendra Pratap, even before turning up of Khairi brothers in Moscow, had already reached Soviet Russia in February 1918. Pratap received official reception from the Bolshevik representatives at Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg). He had the opportunity to present his book titled '*The Religion of Love*' to V.I. Lenin. Even several more Indians were received by Lenin in the last months of 1918. Maulana Barkatullah Bhopali²² visited Moscow in March 1919, as 'ambassador extraordinary' of Amir Amanullah Khan. Barkatullah was received by V. I. Lenin himself and he signed a bilateral treaty with the Soviet government. According to Ansari (2015), the bilateral treaty proved instrumental in helping the Indian *muhajireen* based in Kabul in securing financial, monetary and material support from the Bolsheviks (from June 1919 to summer of 1920). Abdur Rab Peshawari, an enthusiastic

¹⁸"Many, of them did not know what Socialism or Communism meant at all, arrived Russia for they had learned that Russia is a friend of Türkiye and the people of India" (Persits, 1983, p. 67). However, the Arab revolt against the Ottoman governor, imprisonment of Maulana Mahmud-ul-Hassan at the hands of Arabs faded the pan-Islamic dreams of the revolutionaries.

¹⁹A verdict of exodus (*Hejrat*) was issued by some renowned Indian religious-cum-political leaders and as a consequence the exodus of Caliphatists from India started. These Indian refugees resettled into other Muslim countries, mainly Afghanistan. The exodus, including Hindus, involved about thirty-six thousand people.

²⁰Soviet Russia was the first country to recognise the independence of Afghanistan in 1920

(Khan, 2004, p. 6), (Aitchison, 1909), In February 1921, the Bolsheviks also signed a treaty of friendship with the Afghan government based at Kabul. However, Afghanistan also signed a treaty with the British in November 1921, after which it was becoming difficult for the Amir Aman Ullah Khan to maintain his anti-British stance which he used to exhibit in the initial two years of his rule. As a consequence of this agreement, the activities of Provisional Government was stopped at Kabul. Therefore, the Indian national revolutionaries found Government of Afghanistan useless and irrelevant (Khan, 2004, pp. 125-6).

²¹They belonged to the Left-wing of All India Muslim League.

²²Being a staunch Muslim, (a member of All India Muslim League and Indian National Congress simultaneously) throughout his life he urged the Muslims of the world to 'understand the noble principles of Russian socialism and to embrace it seriously'.

revolutionary with sympathies for the Bolsheviks, accompanied Barkatullah on his diplomatic mission to Moscow (Qureshi, 2015; Hussain, 2009). Pratap and Barkatullah jointly met with V.I. Lenin in May 1919. This two-member delegation of Indian revolutionaries proved to be the first representative deputation of Indians to establish contact with Bolsheviks. Pratap, while leading a small delegation, arrived in Moscow again in July 1919. He was accompanied by Prativadi Acharya and Maulvi Abdur Rabb Barq. The delegation was welcomed by Maulvi Barkatullah and received by V.I. Lenin²³ (Dube, 1997; Persits, 1983, pp. 38-40; Khan, 2004, p. 149).

Maulana Ubaid Ullah Sindhi dispatched his own nephews Khushi Muhammad and Aziz Ahmad to Soviet Russia in the beginning of 1920. The aim of the delegation was to explore avenues for establishing political contacts with Soviets (Hamid, 1967, pp. 113-7). A twenty-eight-member contingent of the Indian Revolutionary Association²⁴ made their way from Kabul to Tashkent –the Central Asian city in July 1920. Furthermore, a special mission of Indian Government in exile, comprising assistant minister for the interior (Muhammad Ali), and secretary of the same ministry (Muhammad Shafiq) reached Tashkent on 31st March 1920. This mission was later joined by Abdul Majid and Ibrahim. This group, under the leadership of Barkatullah was collectively referred to as the Provisional Government Group.

Tashkent was converted into the center of attraction for the Indian national revolutionaries. Tashkent occupied a prominent place for the Indian freedom fighters, which was initially Berlin and later Kabul. In 1920, at Tashkent, the Bolsheviks founded the Eastern University for the Asiatic Toilers of the East²⁵. Here the nationalist revolutionaries were provided training. Manabendra Nath Roy²⁶ (1887-1954) headed the Indian department at this university. The Eastern University, however, functioned more as a propaganda center than a conventional university. Moreover, M. N. Roy established the *Induskii Kurs* (an Indian Military School) at Tashkent in 1920. The military school attracted about one hundred Indian *muhajireen*.²⁷ The purpose of this school was to provide financial support and weaponry to mujahideen fighting the British armies along the North-West frontier of India. However, the Afghan government, declined to allow the Indian emigrants to pass through its territory and access the freedom fighters engaged in war against the British India on the North West frontier of India (Ansari, 2015, pp. 25-31). In April 1920, a faction of revolutionaries broke away from the Provisional Government of India in exile. The group, while remaining in Tashkent, constituted the Indian section of the Council for

²³Maulvi Abdur Rabb Barq was a trader and a South Indian Hindu Acharya remained in Moscow for nine months where they had developed a strong liking for the communist system introduced by Bolsheviks in Soviet Russia.

²⁴The Association was created by Maulana Abdur Rabb Barq and a South Indian Hindu Prativadi Acharya in Kabul in winter of 1919-20. It had 150 members during Kabul period. The Association availed the hospitality of the Soviet Govt. when the Amir of Afghanistan deprived it of the right of asylum in May 1920. All members of the Association, except Acharya were Muslims, and many of them illiterate.

²⁵Some sources mention the year of establishment of this university as 1921. Please see footnote No. 32.

²⁶The Bengali Brahmin and a political dacoit Mr. Manabendra Nath Roy popularly known as M. N. Roy (born Narendra Nath Bhattacharya) earlier in 1915 left India for Americas (Khan, 2004, pp. 32,3). Roy – a member of the Central Asiatic Bureau of the Communist International is considered to be the first Indian Communist, arrived Moscow as 'a State guest' (Roy, 1964, p. 336) in May 1920 from Mexico as a delegate of Mexican Communist Party at the time of second congress of the Communist International, and was received by Lenin several times to discuss a wide range of problems of the national and social liberation of Eastern countries. He created All India Revolutionary Committee in 1920. After the failure of his arms supply program from Tashkent, he started political training to more than 100 *muhajireen* at the Indian Military School, Tashkent. He was compelled to leave Tashkent for Moscow after the Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement (March 1921), (Anwar, 2008), (Persits, 1983, p. 87). For details see (Roy, 1964).

²⁷The *muhajireen* were more interested in military training than the political skills. The school was however, closed down after eight months due to the pressure of British government.

International Propaganda, known as *Sovinterprop* in Russian (Persits, 1983, pp. 114-7). Furthermore, another organisation was also formed in Tashkent, known as the ‘the Indian Revolutionary Organisation in Turkistan’²⁸. In September 1920, this organisation submitted a petition to the First Congress of the Peoples of the East held at Baku, which seeking assistance for the oppressed people of India (Anwar, 2008).

By the end of 1920, a segment of the Indian *muhajireen* had embraced communist principles. They reciprocated Bolshevik support by volunteering to assist the Red Army in its efforts to combat the anti-revolutionary Basmachis in Central Asia²⁹. Nonetheless, Indian revolutionaries were divided into two main factions: a minority ‘communist trend’ and a ‘nationalist majority’. Amidst these internal disputes, the Communist Party of India (CPI) was formed at Tashkent under the leadership of M. N. Roy, who mindfully excluded his political adversaries from this newly established party (Ansari, 2015, pp. 35-37).

Formation of Communist Party of India in Tashkent

Following the setback of an immediate revolution in Europe, the Soviet leaders redirected their focus towards the revolutionary elements in Asia. V. I. Lenin in his theses for the second world congress of Communist International (Comintern) –*on the National and Colonial Question*– proposed that the colonies could either skip the capitalist phase and transition directly from feudalism to socialism or the Eastern revolutionaries could temporarily collaborate with the native bourgeois nationalist political parties against imperialist forces. In contrast, M. N. Roy argued for the possibility of communists independently leading an anti-imperialist struggle. After a debate, the Comintern recommended temporary collaboration with nationalist political parties while maintaining an independent proletarian movement. They also decided to allocate resources to India under M. N. Roy's supervision. In contrast to the theses of Lenin, M. N. Roy argued for the possibility of communists waging anti-imperialist struggle independently (Persits, 1983, pp. 139-45). After a debate on the issue, the Comintern recommended provisional collaboration with the nationalist political parties, but concurrently, the proletariat movement while maintaining its independent existence as well. They also decided to allocate resources to India under M. N. Roy's supervision (Pipes, 1954, pp. 199-200), (Ansari, 2015, p. 68).

The official announcement of the formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI) was made during a meeting at Tashkent in October 1920³⁰. This meeting of the Indian communists was convened by M. N. Roy. The resolution presented at the meeting mentioned that the party “adopts the principles proclaimed by the Third International and undertakes to work out a programme adapted to the Indian conditions”. In 1921, the party gained recognition from the Comintern, which initially recognized the Communist Party of India only as a group. When the Tashkent School³¹ ceased its operations in April 1921, the Indian *muhajireen* had already split into two groups. One was led by Abdur Rab, who was a revolutionary but not a communist, and the other was led by Roy, who was a committed communist (Qureshi, 2015).

²⁸To promote colonial revolution, Moscow convened in Baku in September 1920 a ‘Congress of the Peoples of the East’ attended by 2,000 Communist and pro-communist delegates from Soviet Asia and foreign Asian countries (Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, 1995, pp. 199-200).

²⁹80 or 90 emigrants left Afghanistan for Türkiye via Russia. The band was attacked by the Basmachis and taken as prisoners. Later the caravan was released by the Russian soldiers. 35 of them reached Baku in order to reach Türkiye in November 1920, while the second group headed for Tashkent where the members of the group were greeted by Roy. The Baku group returned to Kabul through Tashkent (Khan, 2004, pp. 177-8).

³⁰The Communist Party of India was formed on October 17, 1920 (*The Farmers’ Revolt in India*, 2021).

³¹Eastern university was shifted to Moscow from Tashkent (Khan, 2004, p. 175).

Soviet Russia's Support to Indian Revolutionaries

The Bolshevik authorities aspired to promote communist ideas in India and they desired for a successful dissemination of communism in Indian Sub-continent. Moscow emerged as epicenter of the international communist movement. Although not entirely monolithic, this movement claimed to represent one of the most formidable common political causes in human history.³²

In pursuit of this goal, the Communist University of Toiler People of the East (KUTV) was founded in April 1921³³. A unique fusion of ideas – ‘allying Islam, nationalism and Marxism’ – was preached with emphasis for the advance training at the university. By early 1924, the university had an enrollment of 1,015 students with nearly one-third of them being revolutionaries from the countries such as China, Persia, Türkiye, India, and Korea etc. (Persits, 1983, pp. 36-37; Qureshi, 2015). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Bolsheviks did not provide support to any liberation movement unless they sought to implement a communist programme in that particular country³⁴. On the other hand, the policies and strategies of the Comintern towards British government and Indian National Congress underwent frequent changes (Khan, 2004, p. 201; Mukerjee, 1993, p. 4; Grover, 1993).

Communist Ideology and Indians

The Indians emigrants who made their way to Russia came from diverse backgrounds and different denominations. Their difference of affiliation often led to political disagreements. Initially, most of the Indians arriving in Soviet Russia shared a common goal, i.e., seeking for military assistance to execute a radical liberation movement in British India. Some of the revolutionaries had come to the Soviet Russia in hopes for getting support for the Ottoman caliphate. However, by the mid-1920s, more Indian national revolutionaries of different groups³⁵ began to arrive in Russia. Some of them were already in the process of embracing Marxist-Leninist principles.

The Indian émigrés stayed in the Russia for varying duration, and some even acquired Soviet citizenship. They held a wide range of ideas, which led to significant ideological disagreements among them. Approximately half of them aimed to reach Türkiye, however, there was not only a continuous evacuation of Indians from Tashkent to Türkiye but also in the opposite direction—to Afghanistan. A number of Indian revolutionaries had to return without ever reaching Türkiye due to the Turkish authorities' refusal to admit them (Persits, 1983).

In November 1922, Ubaidullah Sindhi, accompanied by eight associates, went to Moscow and remained there as a guest of the Bolshevik government. Sindhi stayed at Moscow for nine months.³⁶ During his stay in Moscow, Sindhi held discussions with a number Soviet officials, including the Russian foreign minister, with the aim of formulating a plan to support the liberation movement in India. He succeeded in securing a commitment of financial and munition assistance from the Soviet government. In July 1923, Maulana Sindhi departed from Moscow and headed to Türkiye for concretizing his programme³⁷ (Khan, 2004, pp. 166-210).

³²Russian Communists believed that because the USSR is so strong that communism will prevail all over the world by peaceful means without a global war.

³³According to some sources, the University was established in 1920. Please see footnote No. 22.

³⁴The First Congress of the Comintern, laid down that it “will support the exploited peoples of the colonies in their struggle against imperialism”. With reference to India Comintern declared “without a revolution in India, the proletarian world revolution cannot be victorious” (Persits, 1983, pp. 160-63).

³⁵About 75 of such Indians belonged to Indian Revolutionary Association, (Persits, 1983, p. 7).

³⁶Sindhi reached Moscow on 10th Nov. 1922; expenses of the journey were paid by the Soviet Government.

³⁷However, the struggle for power in Soviet Union after the death of Lenin in 1924 halted the agreed program.

Indian Communists' Journey Back Home

The Bolsheviks' approach towards the liberation of India underwent a shift after the third world congress of the Comintern in August 1921. Their approach shifted from advocating armed rebellion to supporting the bourgeois nationalist parties in British India. This policy was formally adopted after the third world congress of Comintern. In the last months of 1921³⁸, the revolutionaries began returning to India, after received necessary training, with the mission of spreading communist doctrines among the Indians" (Qureshi, 2015).

At India, the British government had implemented stringent laws to curb Marxist propaganda. By the end of 1922, all Bolshevik-trained revolutionary communists were apprehended upon their arrival and were put on trial in India. They were charged with conspiracy and were awarded prison sentences ranging from one to three years. These trails of communists are known as the First Peshawar Conspiracy Case, Second Peshawar Conspiracy Case and Moscow Conspiracy Case. Thus, the Indian communists were not able to assert any significant contribution to the communist movement in India in the first phase. However, they started their political activities when some of them were released in 1924. Yet again, the Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy case of 1924 against the communists proved to be a severe blow against the communist movement. The accused were charged with attempting to deprive the 'king Emperor of his sovereignty of British India, by complete separation of India from Imperialistic Britain by a violent revolution'. Though the Indian communists fell short of achieving their immediate objectives, nonetheless, they later assumed leadership roles in the socialist movements within British India. Soon afterwards, small communist groups begun to emerge in various cities, including Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Lahore including cities of the United Provinces.

Formation of the Communist Party of India

After the release of the communists who had been convicted in Peshawar and Kanpur Trials in 1924-25, they launched fresh efforts to establish a communist party in India. A communist conference convened in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, formally gave birth to the Communist Party of India (CPI) in December 1925. The party's headquarters were established in Mumbai. A thirty-member Central Executive Committee was formed with notable figures like Maulana Hasrat Mohani³⁹, Muzaffar Ahmad and Maulana Azad Subhani (Ansari, 2015, pp. 76-80).

Sooner its formation, CPI gained recognitions from the Comintern. The Comintern also directed the British communists to extend their helping hands in establishing Marxist organizations in India. Consequently, prominent British communists arrived India in the following year. The British communist organized workers' and peasants' associations (Ansari, 2015, pp. 81-6).

Conclusion

The first Indian contacts with Soviet Russia were made by the Indian revolutionaries who had already left their homeland in pursuit of the liberation of India. Those who went to Soviet Russia were neither communists nor they were necessarily influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx. They reached out to the Bolsheviks seeking international support for India's liberation. As Soviet Russia was against the British Empire, the Indian revolutionaries found it appropriate to seek their support. However, when they reached Soviet Russia, most of them were impressed by the new Russian government under the Bolsheviks. A number of the Indian revolutionaries embraced the

³⁸Few muhajireen decided to stay in Soviet Union or to settle in Europe, from where they assisted M. N. Roy

³⁹The actual name of the prominent political activist, freedom fighter and notable poet was Syed Fazal-ul-Hasan, who is popularly known by his pen-name Hasrat Mohani.

ideology of communism and wanted to implement the same in India as well. M. N. Roy was perhaps the only Indian who was already member of the Communist Party of Mexico and had a comprehensive understanding of Marxism. The first Indian communists came from diverse backgrounds, religions and ethnicities. Before embracing communism, they were united by a common idea of liberating India through an armed struggle.

A significant number of the early Indian communists were Muslims. Several factors can be attributed to this fact. Muslims had the experience of significant disruptions under British rule, they participated in the Hijrat movement in a large number, and above all it was quite natural for a Muslim to embrace the ideas of communism as Islam and communism both emphasize equality. The Bolshevik support to the Indians was not solely driven by the desire to liberate India, but they also aimed to weaken British imperialism and to disseminate the communist ideals to India – a significant Asian country. The Bolsheviks supported, organized and financed the Indians at a time when their own position was precarious, marked by a civil war in Russia and continued interference in the internal affairs of Russia by anti-revolution nations like Britain and the USA. Moreover, the Russian economic position was far from robust during that period. Though the Indian communists did not play a prominent role in Indian politics during the 1920s, their organisation skills, dedications to the Marxist ideology, and support they received from the Bolsheviks are revered in the political history of British India.

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