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A STUDY ON REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS IN INDIA THROUGH THE LENS OF MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This research article critically examines revolutionary movements in colonial India through the interpretive lens of Marxist historiography. It traces the historical trajectory of armed and organised revolutionary activity from the aftermath of the 1857 uprising through the Swadeshi period, the Ghadar movement, the Hindustan Republican Association and Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, the Kakori and Lahore conspiracy cases, the Chittagong Armoury Raid, the Meerut Conspiracy Case, and the peasant and working-class insurgencies of the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the Tebhaga and Telangana struggles. Employing a critical historiographical-historical method within a qualitative, comparative research design, the study analyses how Marxist historians such as Rajani Palme Dutt, A. R. Desai, Bipan Chandra, Sumit Sarkar, Irfan Habib, Suniti Kumar Ghosh and others have theorised revolutionary nationalism in terms of class contradiction, colonial economic exploitation, and the limitations of bourgeois-led nationalism. The study situates these interpretations against subaltern and postcolonial critiques and recent international historiography on transnational revolutionary networks. Drawing on primary revolutionary literature, trial records, speeches, and secondary historiographical texts, the article develops a comparative table of historiographical schools, a chronological timeline of revolutionary events, and case studies of the Kakori Conspiracy, the Lahore Conspiracy Case, the Chittagong Armoury Raid, and the Meerut Conspiracy Case. The findings indicate that Marxist historiography, despite internal disagreements over periodisation and class categorisation, has fundamentally reoriented the study of Indian revolutionary nationalism away from purely biographical and nationalist hagiography toward structural analysis of colonial capitalism, agrarian

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relations and working-class formation. The study concludes with recommendations for integrating Marxist, subaltern and transnational approaches into a more comprehensive historiographical framework for understanding revolutionary anti-colonialism in India.

Keywords: *Marxist historiography, Revolutionary Nationalism, Colonial India, Class Struggle, Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, Subaltern Studies, Anti-colonial Resistance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The historiography of revolutionary movements in colonial India has undergone repeated reinterpretation since the discipline of modern Indian history began to professionalise in the mid-twentieth century. Early nationalist historiography, dominant from the 1920s through the 1950s, tended to narrate revolutionary action either as youthful heroism subordinate to the larger Gandhian struggle or as a regrettable digression from constitutional and non-violent methods. From the 1940s onward, however, a distinct Marxist historiographical tradition emerged that read revolutionary movements not merely as episodes of individual heroism but as expressions of deeper class contradictions generated by colonial capitalism. Rajani Palme Dutt's India Today (1940) was among the earliest full-length attempts to place the Indian national movement, including its revolutionary wing, within a historical-materialist framework, arguing that the movement's character at each stage reflected the changing class composition and interests of Indian society under colonial rule.

This Marxist reading gained further elaboration through the work of A. R. Desai, whose Social Background of Indian Nationalism (1948) analysed the socio-economic basis of nationalist and revolutionary politics, and later through Bipan Chandra, Sumit Sarkar, Irfan Habib, Suniti Kumar Ghosh, K. N. Panikkar and Gautam Chattopadhyay, each of whom, despite important differences, examined revolutionary nationalism as an outcome of specific class formations produced by colonial economic exploitation. From the late 1970s, the emergence of Subaltern Studies under Ranajit Guha offered both an extension and a critique of the Marxist paradigm, arguing that orthodox Marxist historiography had underplayed the autonomous consciousness of peasants and subaltern revolutionaries. More recently, international historians such as Kama Maclean, Chris Moffat, Ali Raza, Maia Ramnath and Tim Harper have situated Indian revolutionary movements within transnational and global frameworks, examining figures such as Bhagat Singh, the Ghadar revolutionaries, and the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association as part of a wider interwar circulation of anti-imperial radicalism between India, Europe, the Soviet Union and North America.

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This article undertakes a critical historiographical-historical examination of these interpretive traditions. It does not attempt a fresh archival reconstruction of revolutionary events; rather, it analyses how those events have been narrated, periodised and theorised by Marxist and Marxist-influenced historians, and how these interpretations compare with nationalist, subalternist and transnational historiographies.

1.1. The Conceptual Framework

The study is anchored in the historical-materialist framework developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in which historical change is understood as arising from contradictions between the forces and relations of production, and from the resulting struggle between social classes. Applied to colonial India, this framework directs attention to the transformation of pre-colonial agrarian and artisanal economies by British commercial and administrative policy; the creation of new class formations, including a colonial landlord class (zamindars and taluqdars), a nascent industrial bourgeoisie, an industrial proletariat concentrated in centres such as Bombay, Calcutta and Kanpur, and an impoverished peasantry subject to rent, revenue and debt extraction; and the ways in which revolutionary nationalist organisations, from the Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar in Bengal to the Ghadar Party in Punjab and North America and the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) across northern India, articulated their politics in relation to these class formations. A second conceptual pillar is the Marxist theory of colonialism as a specific mode of surplus extraction, articulated influentially by Dutt (1940) through the concept of the 'drain of wealth' and by later economic historians through analyses of de-industrialisation and agrarian commercialisation. A third conceptual pillar is the concept of revolutionary consciousness, understood by later Marxist and Marxian-influenced historians (notably Bipan Chandra, and independently by Bhagat Singh himself in his prison writings) as evolving from individual terrorism toward organised socialist politics over the course of the 1920s.

1.2. The Statement of the Problem

Despite the substantial body of historical writing on Indian revolutionary movements, there remains no single synthetic historiographical account that critically compares how successive generations of Marxist historians have interpreted the class character, ideological evolution and historical significance of revolutionary organisations between approximately 1897 and 1951. Existing accounts are frequently organisation-specific (focused on a single group such as the HSRA or the Ghadar Party), biography-specific (focused on a single revolutionary such as Bhagat Singh or Surya Sen), or framed primarily as rebuttals within debates between nationalist, Marxist

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and subalternist schools rather than as a systematic comparative historiographical study. Moreover, recent international scholarship (2020-2026) situating Indian revolutionaries within transnational and global anti-imperial networks has not been adequately integrated with the older Marxist historiographical tradition rooted in Dutt, Desai, Chandra and Sarkar. The problem this study addresses, therefore, is the absence of a systematic, comparative, and critical historiographical account of how Marxist historians have periodised, classified and theorised revolutionary movements in colonial India, and how this tradition relates to nationalist, subaltern and transnational historiographies.

1.3. The Significance of the Study

The study is significant for several reasons. First, it consolidates a historiographical tradition that is otherwise scattered across monographs, journal articles and polemical exchanges, offering scholars and students a single comparative reference. Second, it clarifies analytical distinctions frequently blurred in popular discourse, particularly the distinction between 'revolutionary terrorism' as a tactic and 'revolutionary socialism' as an ideological project, a distinction central to Marxist accounts of the transformation of organisations such as the HRA into the HSRA after 1928. Third, it contributes to ongoing debates in Indian historiography concerning the relative explanatory power of class analysis, subaltern autonomy, and transnational networks, at a moment (2020-2026) when historians internationally have renewed interest in global histories of anti-colonial radicalism. Fourth, the study has pedagogical value for undergraduate and postgraduate history curricula in India, where Marxist historiography remains a prescribed component of modern Indian history papers, while also being subject to contemporary political contestation regarding the historiography of Indian nationalism.

1.4. Research Objectives

O1: To examine the historical development of revolutionary movements in India during the pre-independence period from a Marxist historiographical perspective.

O2: To analyze the interpretation of revolutionary movements by prominent Marxist historians, including their views on class struggle, colonial exploitation, and revolutionary nationalism.

O3: To investigate the socio-economic factors that contributed to the emergence and growth of revolutionary movements in colonial India.

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1.5. The Delimitations of the Study

The study is delimited in the following respects. Temporally, it concentrates on the period from 1897 (the Chapekar assassination in Poona) to 1951, encompassing the early revolutionary phase, the Ghadar movement, the Kakori and Lahore conspiracy cases, the Chittagong Armoury Raid, the Meerut Conspiracy Case, and the Tebhaga and Telangana peasant insurgencies, while making limited reference to the post-1967 Naxalbari movement only where relevant for historiographical continuity. Thematically, the study is confined to historiographical analysis rather than fresh archival or oral-historical reconstruction; it relies on published historical and historiographical literature, trial records available in secondary compilations, and published revolutionary writings and speeches. Geographically, while the study references the transnational dimensions of the Ghadar movement and Indian revolutionary activity in Europe and the Soviet Union, its primary focus remains developments within the Indian subcontinent, particularly Bengal, Punjab and the United Provinces, where organised revolutionary activity was most concentrated. The study does not attempt to adjudicate the political or philosophical validity of Marxism as such, but examines it strictly as a historiographical method applied to a specific historical problem.

2. THE REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

(a) International Scenario

Raza (2020), in a study of communist internationalism in colonial India, situates the transition of Ghadar and Punjabi revolutionaries from conspiratorial anti-colonial violence toward organised communism within a transnational framework linking Punjab, the Soviet Union and interwar international communist networks. The work argues that revolutionary politics in interwar Punjab cannot be adequately understood as a purely national phenomenon, since the ideological and organisational transformation of former Ghadarites into communists depended on the circulation of people, texts and funding across an international communist infrastructure centred on Moscow and Tashkent.

Cháirez-Garza (2024), examining the historiographical treatment of lesser-known revolutionaries such as Pandurang Khankhoje, argues that biographical historiography of Indian revolutionaries has often been shaped by an 'anxiety to be remembered', in which surviving revolutionaries, families and later historians actively constructed commemorative narratives that selectively emphasised certain class or ideological affiliations over others. This article is significant for the present study because it draws attention to the constructed and retrospective character of much

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revolutionary historiography, a caution equally relevant to Marxist accounts that sometimes read later communist commitments back into earlier, more ideologically ambiguous phases of an individual's activity.

Maclean (2024), in an analysis of revolutionaries and coercive colonial institutions during the interwar period, revisits the historiographical paradigm, dominant among earlier historians, that treated interwar revolutionary politics as a story of strategic 'failure' because it did not immediately dislodge colonial rule. Maclean's article, building on her earlier monograph A Revolutionary History of Interwar India (2015), argues instead for attention to the ways revolutionary actors negotiated, collaborated with and were shaped by colonial coercive institutions such as courts, prisons and intelligence agencies, thereby complicating any simple binary between revolutionary agency and colonial repression.

(b) National Scenario

Deb (2022), writing from an Indian institutional base and published in a Sage journal, traces the political-historical narrative of the origins of the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), showing how national revolutionaries detained in the early 1930s came into contact with Marxist literature in prison and subsequently abandoned individual terrorism in favour of organised Marxist-Leninist politics, eventually giving rise to the Revolutionary Socialist Party and, later, the SUCI in 1948. This article provides an important case study of the ideological transition from revolutionary nationalism to organised Marxism internal to the movement itself, rather than as an external historiographical interpretation.

Atwal (2024), in a special volume on India and transnational networks, situates the Indian national movement, including its revolutionary strand, within global currents linked to the two World Wars and the Russian Revolution of 1917, examining events such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the execution of individual revolutionaries as nodes within a broader transnational history of anti-imperial resistance, including Indo-Irish revolutionary connections. The study is notable for arguing that, notwithstanding such transnational connections, nationalism rather than socialism remained the principal driving ideology for the majority of participants in the movement, a claim that qualifies more strongly Marxist readings of the period.

2.1. The Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates three notable gaps that this study seeks to address. First, while recent international scholarship (Raza, 2020; Cháirez-Garza, 2024; Maclean, 2024) has

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enriched understanding of the transnational and constructed dimensions of revolutionary historiography, it has not been systematically read alongside the foundational Marxist historiographical corpus produced within India by Dutt, Desai, Chandra, Sarkar and Habib. Second, India-based scholarship (Deb, 2022; Atwal, 2024) tends to examine specific organisations or transnational linkages without offering a comprehensive comparative framework distinguishing the successive historiographical positions within Indian Marxism itself, namely the 'orthodox' class-reductionist position associated with early Dutt-influenced writing, the 'revisionist' position associated with Sumit Sarkar and later Bipan Chandra, and the subalternist critique associated with Ranajit Guha. Third, no reviewed source integrates detailed case-study analysis of specific revolutionary events, such as the Kakori Conspiracy Case, the Lahore Conspiracy Case, the Chittagong Armoury Raid and the Meerut Conspiracy Case, with a structured historiographical comparison of how these events have been narrated across nationalist, Marxist, subalternist and transnational historiographical traditions. This study addresses these gaps by combining historiographical comparison with detailed case-study analysis grounded in primary revolutionary speeches, trial records and secondary historical literature.

3. THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Research Method

This study employs the Critical Historiographical-Historical Method, which combines historical investigation with critical historiographical analysis to examine how Marxist historians have interpreted revolutionary movements in colonial India. Rather than merely reconstructing the sequence of revolutionary events, this method treats historical narratives themselves as objects of analysis, examining the ideological frameworks, class categories, and socio-economic interpretations that different historians bring to bear on the same body of evidence. The method proceeds in three analytical moments: first, the identification of the primary historical events and organisations under discussion (for example, the Kakori Conspiracy Case of 1925 or the Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930); second, the comparative analysis of how nationalist, Marxist, subalternist and transnational historians have narrated and explained these events; and third, a critical evaluation of the strengths and limitations of each interpretive position, with particular attention to the internal diversity within Marxist historiography itself, ranging from the orthodox class-reductionism of early Comintern-influenced writing to the more nuanced socio-economic analyses of later scholars such as Bipan Chandra and Sumit Sarkar.

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Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and comparative research design. It investigates revolutionary movements in colonial India through Marxist historiography by examining historical events alongside the evolution of Marxist historical writing. This design facilitates the analysis of class relations, colonial exploitation, revolutionary ideology, and historiographical debates through systematic comparison of historical texts and interpretations. The design is qualitative insofar as it does not rely on statistical or quantitative measures of revolutionary activity, but instead on the close reading and comparative analysis of primary revolutionary literature (speeches, manifestos, prison writings, and trial statements) and secondary historiographical texts (monographs, journal articles, and edited volumes). It is interpretative insofar as it treats historical texts as constructed narratives shaped by the ideological commitments of their authors, requiring the researcher to make explicit interpretative judgements about the meaning and significance of competing accounts. It is comparative insofar as its central analytical operation is the juxtaposition of multiple historiographical accounts of the same historical events, organised through comparative tables and structured case studies.

Data Collection Sources

Data for this study were drawn from four categories of sources. The first category comprises primary revolutionary literature, including published prison writings and statements of revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh (notably his co-authored 1930 statement in the Assembly Bomb Case and his prison essay 'Why I Am an Atheist', 1931), the manifesto and constitution of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (1928), and published extracts from trial proceedings in the Kakori Conspiracy Case (1925), the Lahore Conspiracy Case (1929-1931), and the Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929-1933), as compiled in standard documentary collections. The second category comprises foundational Marxist historiographical monographs, including Dutt's India Today (1940), Desai's Social Background of Indian Nationalism (1948), Chandra's Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India (1979), and Sarkar's Modern India, 1885-1947 (1983) and The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1973). The third category comprises subaltern and revisionist historiography, principally Guha's foundational essay 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India' (1982). The fourth category comprises recent (2020-2026) international and Indian journal articles and monographs identified through systematic literature search, as presented in Section 2 of this article. Secondary compilations, university course materials (including the Indira Gandhi National Open University historiography units), and peer-reviewed journal databases (including Sage Journals, Oxford Academic, and the Economic and

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Political Weekly archive) were used to supplement and cross-verify the primary and foundational sources.

4. THE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This section analyses revolutionary movements in colonial India through comparative tables of historiographical interpretation and four detailed case studies. Each case study juxtaposes the historical sequence of events, drawn from trial records and standard historical compilations, with the interpretive treatment of Marxist and other historians.

4.1. Chronological Timeline of Revolutionary Movements (1897-1951)

Table 4.1 presents a chronological timeline of major revolutionary events referenced throughout this study, establishing the factual sequence against which historiographical interpretations are subsequently compared.

Year	Event	Organisation / Actors
1897	Assassination of Plague Commissioner Rand in Poona	Chapekar brothers
1905-1908	Swadeshi Movement and Anushilan Samiti activity in Bengal	Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar
1908	Alipore Bomb Case following the Muzaffarpur bombing attempt	Khudiram Bose, Prafulla Chaki, Aurobindo Ghosh
1913-1917	Ghadar Movement organised among Indian emigrants in North America	Ghadar Party, Lala Har Dayal, Kartar Singh Sarabha
1915	Failed Ghadar uprising and subsequent Lahore Conspiracy trials	Ghadar Party
1917	Champaran Satyagraha, an early peasant mobilisation later read by Marxist historians as a class movement	Bihar peasantry, M. K. Gandhi
1924	Formation of the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA)	Ram Prasad Bismil, Sachindra Nath Sanyal

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Year	Event	Organisation / Actors
1925	Kakori Conspiracy Case: train robbery to fund revolutionary activity	HRA members
1925	Formation of the Communist Party of India at Kanpur	M. N. Roy, S. A. Dange and others
1928	Reorganisation of HRA into the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA)	Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhar Azad, Sukhdev, Bhagwati Charan Vohra
1928	Killing of J. P. Saunders in Lahore, in reprisal for the assault on Lala Lajpat Rai	HSRA
1929	Meerut Conspiracy Case initiated against communist and trade union leaders	Colonial government vs. CPI/trade unionists
1929	Bomb thrown in the Central Legislative Assembly, Delhi	Bhagat Singh, Batukeshwar Dutt
1929-1931	Lahore Conspiracy Case trial	Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev and others
1930	Chittagong Armoury Raid	Surya Sen (Masterda), Indian Republican Army (Chittagong branch)
1931	Execution of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev in Lahore	Colonial government
1933	Conclusion of the Meerut Conspiracy Case	Colonial judiciary
1946-1947	Tebhaga peasant movement in Bengal	Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha, CPI
1946-1951	Telangana armed peasant struggle	Communist Party of India, Andhra Mahasabha

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4.2. Comparative Table of Historiographical Schools

Table 4.2 compares four major historiographical traditions in their treatment of Indian revolutionary movements: nationalist historiography, Marxist historiography, subaltern historiography, and recent transnational historiography.

School	Representative Historians	Core Interpretive Claim	Principal Limitation Identified by Critics
Nationalist	R. C. Majumdar; early Congress-aligned writers	Revolutionary action is read primarily as heroic sacrifice in service of a unified national struggle for independence, subordinate to the Congress-led mainstream.	Understates class differentiation among revolutionaries and tends toward hagiography rather than structural analysis.
Marxist (orthodox)	R. P. Dutt; early CPI-aligned commentators	Revolutionary nationalism reflects the political immaturity of a nascent petty-bourgeois intelligentsia unable to link with organised working-class and peasant struggle; colonial 'drain of wealth' is the structural cause of unrest.	Criticised by later Marxist historians (Sarkar, Chandra) for reducing complex political phenomena to rigid class categories.
Marxist (revisionist)	Bipan Chandra; Sumit Sarkar; A. R. Desai	Revolutionary terrorism evolved through identifiable phases, from individual heroic action to organised socialist politics, shaped by specific regional socio-economic conditions and colonial repression.	Retains class categories as primary explanatory variable, which subaltern historians regard as insufficiently attentive to autonomous peasant consciousness.

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School	Representative Historians	Core Interpretive Claim	Principal Limitation Identified by Critics
Subaltern	Ranajit Guha; early Subaltern Studies collective	Peasant and popular revolt possesses an autonomous political consciousness and grammar that neither nationalist nor orthodox Marxist historiography adequately captures.	Critics argue subalternist method can underplay the organisational role of Marxist parties in later peasant movements such as Tebhaga and Telangana.
Transnational (2020-2026)	Ali Raza; Kama Maclean; Jesus F. Cháirez-Garza	Revolutionary politics in Punjab, Bengal and among Indian emigrants is embedded within global circuits of anti-imperial radicalism, Comintern networks, and transnational commemorative practice.	Risks decentring the specifically Indian socio-economic conditions that Marxist historians treat as the primary causal factor.

4.3. Key Marxist Historians and Their Interpretive Contributions

Historian	Key Work(s)	Interpretive Focus
Rajani Palme Dutt	India Today (1940)	Colonial 'drain of wealth'; periodisation of the national movement by class leadership.
A. R. Desai	Social Background of Indian Nationalism (1948)	Socio-economic basis of nationalist and revolutionary politics in colonial class formation.
Bipan Chandra	Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India (1979)	Continuity and change in early nationalist and revolutionary activity; critique of instrumentalist bourgeois-nationalist labelling.

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Historian	Key Work(s)	Interpretive Focus
Sumit Sarkar	The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908 (1973); Modern India, 1885-1947 (1983)	Critical revision of simplistic class-approach; regional social history of the Swadeshi and revolutionary terrorist phase.
Suniti Kumar Ghosh	The Indian Big Bourgeoisie (1985) and related essays	Analysis of the relationship between the Indian bourgeoisie and both constitutional and revolutionary nationalist politics.
Ranajit Guha	'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India' (1982)	Subalternist critique of elite (including orthodox Marxist) historiography; autonomous peasant consciousness.

4.4. Case Study I: The Kakori Conspiracy Case (1925)

On 9 August 1925, members of the newly formed Hindustan Republican Association, including Ram Prasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan, Rajendra Nath Lahiri and Chandrashekhar Azad, stopped a train carrying government treasury funds near Kakori, a village outside Lucknow, and removed the cash to finance the purchase of arms for revolutionary activity. The subsequent trial resulted in the execution of Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan, Lahiri and Roshan Singh in December 1927, and long prison sentences for other members. Nationalist historiography has generally narrated Kakori as an act of individual heroism and sacrifice, emphasising the personal courage of the accused during trial and execution. Marxist historians, by contrast, have situated the Kakori action within the broader trajectory of the HRA's transformation from a loosely organised group of individual revolutionaries into the more ideologically coherent Hindustan Socialist Republican Association after 1928, arguing that the necessity of funding revolutionary activity through direct action against state resources reflected the organisation's structural inability, at this early stage, to draw on organised working-class or peasant financial and logistical support. Bismil's own prison memoir and last testament reveal an evolving political consciousness that, while still rooted in a broadly nationalist idiom, anticipated the socialist turn that would follow among his younger comrades, including Azad and Bhagat Singh, in the years after 1925.

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4.5. Case Study II: The Assembly Bomb Case and the Lahore Conspiracy Case (1929-1931)

On 8 April 1929, Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw two low-intensity bombs into the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi during a debate on repressive legislation, deliberately avoiding casualties and courting arrest in order to use the ensuing trial as a public platform. In their joint statement read in court, the two revolutionaries explained that the bombs were thrown with the deliberate intention, in a phrase from their own statement, "to make the deaf hear," language that has since become closely associated with the HSRA's strategy of propaganda by symbolic action rather than indiscriminate violence. Bhagat Singh was subsequently tried, together with Rajguru and Sukhdev, in the Lahore Conspiracy Case for the earlier killing of Assistant Superintendent of Police J. P. Saunders, and was executed on 23 March 1931 at the age of twenty-three. Marxist historians, notably Bipan Chandra, have emphasised that by this period Bhagat Singh had moved decisively from revolutionary nationalism toward an explicitly Marxist and socialist political position, as evidenced in his prison writings, including the 1931 essay 'Why I Am an Atheist' and his correspondence advocating the study of socialist theory among young revolutionaries. Recent international historiography (Moffat, 2019; Maclean, 2024) has shifted attention toward the afterlives and commemorative politics surrounding Bhagat Singh, examining how his image and legacy have been claimed by a wide range of subsequent political movements, a development that Marxist historians read as evidence of the ideological indeterminacy that can result when a revolutionary's specifically socialist commitments are subordinated to nationalist martyrology in popular memory.

4.6. Case Study III: The Chittagong Armoury Raid (1930)

On the night of 18 April 1930, a group of young revolutionaries led by the schoolteacher Surya Sen, popularly known as Masterda, raided the police armoury and auxiliary force armoury in Chittagong, eastern Bengal, declaring the establishment of a provisional revolutionary government before withdrawing to the surrounding hills, where several participants, including women members of the group such as Pritilata Waddedar, engaged colonial forces in subsequent armed encounters over the following years. Surya Sen was eventually captured and executed in January 1934. Nationalist historiography has traditionally read the raid as an exceptional act of collective revolutionary heroism in a region otherwise associated with Gandhian constitutional politics. Marxist historians have emphasised instead the raid's organisational sophistication, noting that the Chittagong group, unlike many earlier individual-terrorist actions, planned a coordinated seizure of state coercive infrastructure (armouries, telegraph and rail communication) intended to demonstrate the vulnerability of colonial power rather than to achieve a purely symbolic act of

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protest, and that several participants moved toward organised communist politics in the following decade, paralleling the broader historiographical pattern, documented by Deb (2022), of former revolutionary terrorists gravitating toward Marxist party organisation after prolonged imprisonment.

4.7. Case Study IV: The Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929-1933)

In March 1929, the colonial government arrested thirty-one labour and communist leaders, including three British communists (Philip Spratt, Benjamin Bradley and Lester Hutchinson) and Indian trade unionists and communists such as S. A. Dange, Muzaffar Ahmad and Shaukat Usmani, charging them with conspiracy to deprive the King-Emperor of sovereignty over British India. Unlike the Kakori and Lahore cases, the Meerut defendants were associated not with individual revolutionary action but with organised trade union and communist party activity among industrial workers in Bombay, Calcutta and other centres. The trial, which concluded in 1933, is treated in Marxist historiography as a pivotal moment demonstrating the colonial state's perception of organised working-class Marxist politics as a greater long-term threat than isolated revolutionary violence, precisely because it threatened to link the industrial proletariat with an internationally coordinated communist movement. The defendants used the courtroom, as Bhagat Singh and his HSRA comrades had done at the Assembly Bomb trial, as a platform for political statements analysing colonial capitalism and the condition of the Indian working class, contributing to what several Marxist historians describe as the ideological maturation of Indian communism during the late colonial period. The Meerut case is thus read by Marxist historiography as a bridge between the earlier phase of individualist revolutionary terrorism and the subsequent phase of organised mass communist and peasant politics that would culminate in the Tebhaga and Telangana movements of the 1940s.

4.8. Synthesis: Class, Colonial Exploitation and Revolutionary Nationalism

Read together, these case studies support the Marxist historiographical claim that revolutionary nationalism in colonial India underwent a discernible evolution: from the individualist, conspiratorial violence of the Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar and the early HRA (1905-1925), through the ideologically transitional phase represented by the HSRA and the Chittagong group (1928-1934), toward the organised mass politics of communism and peasant insurgency represented by the Meerut defendants and, later, the Tebhaga and Telangana movements (1929-1951). Marxist historians attribute this evolution to the deepening structural crisis of colonial capitalism, in which agrarian commercialisation, recurrent famine, industrial recession, and the limited absorption of

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educated youth into colonial administration produced successive generations of politically radicalised individuals whose organisational choices were shaped by, but not reducible to, the availability of Marxist theory and international communist networks from the mid-1920s onward. At the same time, the internal historiographical debate among Marxist historians themselves, together with the subalternist and transnational critiques reviewed in Section 2, cautions against treating this evolutionary narrative as a uniform or teleological process; regional variation, individual agency, and the constructed character of commemorative memory (Cháirez-Garza, 2024) all complicate any single overarching class-based narrative.

5. THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. Revolutionary movements in colonial India developed through three broadly identifiable phases: an early phase of individualist conspiratorial violence associated with the Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar, and the Ghadar Party (1897-1924); a transitional phase associated with the Hindustan Republican Association and its successor the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, marked by growing but incomplete ideological commitment to socialism (1924-1931); and a mature phase of organised Marxist party politics and mass peasant insurgency, exemplified by the Meerut Conspiracy Case defendants and the Tebhaga and Telangana movements (1929-1951).

2. Marxist historians display significant internal disagreement rather than a single unified interpretation. Early Dutt-influenced orthodox Marxism emphasised rigid class categorisation and colonial economic 'drain,' while later historians such as Bipan Chandra and Sumit Sarkar developed more nuanced, regionally specific accounts that explicitly criticised the earlier paradigm's reductionism, even while retaining class analysis as a central explanatory tool.

3. Socio-economic factors identified across the literature as central to the emergence of revolutionary movements include colonial de-industrialisation and agrarian commercialisation, recurrent famine and rural indebtedness, limited employment absorption of educated youth into colonial administration and the professions, and repressive legislation (such as the Rowlatt Act of 1919) that radicalised segments of the urban intelligentsia.

4. The transition of individual revolutionaries and revolutionary organisations toward organised Marxism was substantially catalysed by exposure to Marxist literature during imprisonment, as documented in the cases of the RSP's antecedents and the Socialist Unity Centre of India (Deb, 2022), indicating that colonial prisons functioned, paradoxically, as sites of ideological

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transformation rather than solely of repression.

5. Subaltern historiography's critique of Marxist class-reductionism, while analytically valuable in restoring attention to autonomous peasant consciousness, does not fully displace the explanatory power of class analysis for organisationally structured movements such as the HSRA, the CPI, and the Telangana insurgency, where documentary evidence of explicit socialist ideological commitment is extensive.

6. Recent (2020-2026) international historiography demonstrates that Indian revolutionary movements, particularly the Ghadar Party and the network around Bhagat Singh, were substantially embedded within transnational circuits of anti-imperial radicalism linking India, Europe, the Soviet Union and North America, a dimension that classical Marxist historiography (writing primarily in the 1940s-1980s) had not fully explored using contemporary global-historical methods.

7. Case-study analysis of the Kakori Conspiracy Case, the Assembly Bomb and Lahore Conspiracy cases, the Chittagong Armoury Raid, and the Meerut Conspiracy Case confirms a discernible ideological trajectory from individual heroic action toward organised class politics, though this trajectory was neither uniform across regions nor free of the retrospective commemorative reconstruction identified by Cháirez-Garza (2024).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

First, historiography curricula in Indian universities should present Marxist interpretations of revolutionary movements alongside nationalist, subalternist and transnational perspectives in an explicitly comparative format, rather than as a single canonical account, so that students develop the capacity to critically evaluate competing interpretive frameworks rather than treating any one school as definitive.

Second, future research should undertake systematic archival investigation of regional variation in the transition from individual revolutionary terrorism to organised Marxist politics, extending the case-study method used in the present article (Kakori, Lahore/Assembly Bomb, Chittagong, Meerut) to comparatively under-studied regions and organisations, including revolutionary activity in Maharashtra, the United Provinces beyond Kakori, and among Indian revolutionaries in Europe.

Third, historians should integrate the transnational and commemorative-historiographical insights

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of recent international scholarship (Raza, 2020; Maclean, 2024; Cháirez-Garza, 2024) with the socio-economic class analysis developed by Indian Marxist historians, producing synthetic accounts that neither subordinate global networks to a purely national frame nor lose sight of the specific structural conditions of colonial capitalism within India.

Fourth, digitisation and public access to trial records, prison correspondence, and regional-language revolutionary literature (particularly Bengali- and Punjabi-language sources) should be expanded, since much of the primary documentary basis for historiographical debate remains difficult to access outside specialist archives, limiting the ability of researchers to test competing interpretive claims against the fullest possible evidentiary base.

Fifth, given the ongoing public contestation over the historiography of Indian nationalism noted in recent (2025) polemical literature, academic historians should continue to subject Marxist, nationalist and revisionist claims alike to rigorous source-based scrutiny, treating historiographical disagreement as a normal and productive feature of historical scholarship rather than as a basis for delegitimising any single school outright.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has examined revolutionary movements in colonial India through the interpretive lens of Marxist historiography, tracing their historical development from the early conspiratorial violence of the Anushilan Samiti and Ghadar Party through the transitional politics of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association to the organised mass communism of the Meerut defendants and the Tebhaga and Telangana insurgencies. Through a critical historiographical-historical method and a qualitative comparative research design, the study has shown that Marxist historians, from Rajani Palme Dutt to Bipan Chandra, Sumit Sarkar and Suniti Kumar Ghosh, have provided an indispensable, if internally contested, framework for understanding revolutionary nationalism as a product of specific class formations generated by colonial economic exploitation, even as subalternist and transnational historiographies have productively challenged and extended this framework. The four case studies examined in this article, the Kakori Conspiracy Case, the Assembly Bomb and Lahore Conspiracy cases, the Chittagong Armoury Raid, and the Meerut Conspiracy Case, together illustrate a historically traceable, if uneven, evolution of revolutionary politics from individual heroism toward organised class-based struggle. Ultimately, no single historiographical school, whether nationalist, Marxist, subalternist or transnational, offers a complete account of Indian revolutionary movements in isolation; rather, a mature historiographical understanding requires the kind of comparative, critical synthesis

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attempted in this study, in which class analysis, colonial economic structure, subaltern agency, and transnational political networks are held together as complementary rather than mutually exclusive explanatory frameworks. As India's revolutionary past continues to be invoked and contested in contemporary political discourse, the discipline of history bears a particular responsibility to ensure that such invocations remain answerable to careful, source-based, and historiographically self-aware scholarship.

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