



Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text*

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THE UBIQUITY AND continued appeal in India of the portrait of a handsome, photogenic, and youthful Bhagat Singh with his habitual hat decades after he was hanged, prompts Kama Maclean to venture on an exploratory journey. This is a journey that takes her from the archives and historical sources—including the recently declassified Indian Political Intelligence files in the British Library, London; written records of “oral” testimonies commissioned by the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, and the Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge—into the bazaars of north

Indian towns replete with calendars, lithographs, posters, and other visuals, legends, stories, rhymes, rumors, and “un-archived” histories. The result is a remarkably rich, stimulatingly sensorial, textured account of the activities of Indian revolutionaries in general and the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA) in particular, and their intimate links with the Congress in the period between the two World Wars.

Her purpose in offering this combined aural, oral, visual, and written narrative, Maclean tells us, is twofold: an epistemological reconsideration of the impact of the revolutionaries on the nationalist struggle, and a methodological opening up of “history” and historical accounts by means of an effective integration of visual, oral, and un-archived materials in them (1). The book, divided into three parts, eight chapters and an introduction, a conclusion, and an epilogue, sets out to substantiate Maclean’s propositions. While Part I examines the interwar period (with primary focus on 1928–1931) from the perspective of the HSRA revolutionaries and their leaders Bhagat Singh and Chandrasekhar Azad, Part II explores the intense but clandestine interaction of revolutionary and Congress politics. Part III engages in a critical reflection of the challenge thrown by revolutionary violence to Gandhism, the colonial state, and the revolutionaries.

Standard histories of the Indian nationalist struggle, Maclean contends, give overwhelming predominance to Gandhi and his ideology of nonviolent agitation that not only displaces the significance of revolutionaries and their “violent” struggle, but also forecloses an examination of the interface and intersections of the violent and nonviolent strands of the struggle. This point, although valid, is not particularly original. It has been made in different ways in “standard” histories, ranging from Sumit SARKAR’s classic *Modern India* (1983) to BANERJEE-DUBE’S *A History of Modern India* (2015). Irfan HABIB’S *To Make the Deaf Hear* (2007) added a valuable analysis of Bhagat Singh’s thought and ideology, as well as his role in, and impact on, the nationalist struggle at the time Maclean began her work on the subject. Maclean seems to have been intrigued by the lack of fit between the numerous calendars and posters of Bhagat Singh she saw in the bazars of Amritsar, the success of the 2006 film *Rang de Basanti* that reiterated the nostalgia for and relevance of Bhagat Singh and the revolutionaries, and finally the relative lack of scholarship on Bhagat Singh and his comrades (vii). Even though she acknowledges that revolutionary pressure on Congress leadership is “frequently noted in passing” in important works (7), they amount to no more than a reluctant recognition of violence in the political spectrum on the part of Congress (8). This point about the lack of serious scholarship on the revolutionaries or the Congress-revolutionary interaction seems a bit overstated at times.

The real strength of the book lies not just in what is being said, but also in how it is being said. The unexpected focus on Bhagat Singh’s hat, for instance, and the suggestive insights that come out of it; the incisive comment on the irony of the clandestine, censored, secret, and proscribed activities of the revolutionaries versus their planned public display and circulation of studio portraits in the media on the eve of martyrdom and its lasting implications; the unearthing of the important role played by “marginal” yet crucial characters, such as Durga Devi Vohra; the considered comments on the discrepancies in memories of events recounted by revolutionaries; the deft demonstration of tactical and empathetic overlaps in purpose between important Congress leaders such as the senior and junior Nehru and the revolutionaries in the critical years of 1928–1931, and, most significantly, the urgency brought to Congress’s move towards

complete independence (Karachi Congress) by the literal “explosions” occasioned by the revolutionaries leave us with a lot upon which to reflect.

A Revolutionary History improves and enriches our understanding of the three-way interaction between the British Raj, the Congress under Gandhi, and the HSRA in the crucial and intermediate “interwar” years. It successfully “positions” the role of violence in the freedom struggle by highlighting the porosity of boundaries between nationalist institutions in the context of a broad anti-British sentiment; a porosity that allowed Congress leaders to work secretly with revolutionaries and brought back many of the surviving revolutionaries into the mainstream of Congress politics after the death of Singh and Azad.

Maclean deserves our praise for her skill in digging up clandestine and proscribed histories, secret and elusive collaboration, and comfort and discomfort inherent in the mutual imbrication of violent and nonviolent anti-imperialism, and in presenting them in a richly layered narrative. The most significant contribution of the work perhaps lies in its astute demonstration of the centrality of the “visual” in the “un-archived” material she analyzes, a centrality that transforms our understandings of the past and the present, history and politics, and enables the writing of histories from a “post-subaltern” perspective.

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