

An Uncompromising Rebel: M. P. T. Acharya and Indian Anarchism

Transcribed and Introduced by

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Abstract: *Reflecting on the Indian anarchist M. P. T. Acharya's trajectory from revolutionary anti-colonial nationalist to international anarchist pacifist in the first half of the twentieth century, the four essays presented here* – transcribed and edited by the author – introduce this unique figure to a wider audience. It charts his life in exile among prominent Indian freedom fighters such as Shyamaji Krishnavarma, Madame Bhikaiji Cama, V. V. S. Aiyar, and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, and his role in the formation of the exiled Communist Party of India (CPI) in Tashkent in October 1920, to his collaboration with well-known anarchist such as Alexander Berkman, Augustin Souchy, Rudolf Rocker, Thomas Keell, and E. Armand. From the early 1920s, Acharya articulated his own perspectives on anarchism from an Indian point of view, often denouncing Bolshevism and the Comintern, commenting on the Indian independence struggle, particularly the INC and Gandhi, as well as developing an economic critique of State capitalism. He fiercely attacked former comrades such as M. N. Roy and Shapurji Saklatwala, warning against the dangers of Bolshevism in India, and agitated instead for trade unions of a revolutionary syndicalist character in India. Acharya's essays in this 'Critical Edition' focus on issues of colonialism, capitalism, decentralization, communism, poverty, and unemployment in the immediate post-independence years, opening a window onto the global reach of anarchism during that era.*

Keywords: Anarchism; anti-colonialism; communism; capitalism; decentralization

Born in Madras in 1887, the Indian anticolonial revolutionary Mandayam Prativadi Bhayankaram 'M. P. T.' Acharya turned to anarchism in the wake of the Russian Revolution. Leaving India in 1908, Acharya went to Europe, the Middle East, and the United States, where he worked alongside Shyamaji Krishnavarma, Madame Bhikaiji Cama, V. V. S. Aiyar, and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, among others, to overthrow the British Empire from afar. When the First World War broke out in 1914, he joined the Indian Independence Committee in Berlin, led missions to Egypt and Persia, and

eventually set up the Indian National Committee with Chattopadhyaya in Stockholm in May 1917 to agitate for India's freedom among the European socialists gathered in the city for a peace conference. Without any luck, Acharya and Chattopadhyaya instead made contact with some of the Russian delegates also there, paving the way for the turn to communism.

As it happened, Acharya was among the first group of Indians to meet Lenin in Moscow in May 1919, and he spent the next three years in Russia, setting up the exiled Communist Party of India in Tashkent, alongside Abdur Rabb, M. N. Roy and Abani Mukherjee, in October 1920. Acharya disagreed with Roy and Mukherjee over the direction of the CPI, refusing to submit the struggle for Indian independence to the Bolshevik Comintern.

Expelled from the party in January 1921, Acharya went to Moscow where he made contact with numerous well-known anarchists such as Alexander Berkman, Rudolf Rocker, Augustin Souchy, and Abba Gordin, and he attended Peter Kropotkin's funeral in Moscow in February 1921. Acharya and his wife, the Russian artist Magda Nachman, returned to Berlin in December 1922, where he and a group of Indians attended the founding meeting of the anarcho-syndicalist International Working Men's Association (IWMA) in late December that year. Acharya soon associated with many of the most well known anarchists across the world, including Berkman, Rocker, Armando Borghi, Diego Abad de Santillan, Alexander Schapiro, Yamaga Taiji, Thomas Keell, and E. Armand, and he started writing for anarchist journals such as *Die Internationale* (Germany), *The Road to Freedom* (US), *L'en dehors* (France), and *La Voix du Travail* (France), as well as for Indian papers *The People*, *The Mahratta*, and *The Hindu*.

Anarchist Principles, Philosophies, and Activism

Acharya soon articulated his own perspectives on anarchism from an Indian point of view, often denouncing Bolshevism and the Comintern, commenting on the Indian independence struggle, particularly the INC and Gandhi, as well as developing an economic critique of State capitalism. He fiercely attacked former comrades such as M. N. Roy and Shapurji Saklatvala, warning against the dangers of Bolshevism in India, and agitating instead for trade unions of a revolutionary syndicalist character in India.

Abandoning the militancy of anticolonial nationalism, Acharya became an avowed pacifist and associated with organizations such as the War Resisters International (WRI) and the radical International Anti-Militarist Bureau against War and Reaction (IAMB), but he remained ambivalent about Gandhi. On the one hand, he praised Gandhi for practising the principles of civil disobedience and nonviolence, acting like an anarchist, but, on the other hand, he also criticised Gandhi for not distinguishing between the mass liberation from violence and the violence of governments. Moreover, Acharya was critical of the elevation of Gandhi to saint-like status, with anarchists and anti-

imperialists alike fawning over him, but also appreciated that Gandhi had exposed the hypocrisy of the British Empire.

At the same time, Acharya developed an anarchist economic critique of capitalism, the state, and Bolshevism, three strands that mutually enforced each other to oppress and exploit workers and peasants across the world. Rooted in anarchist principles of non-domination and mutual aid, he advocated the abolition of wages, laws, prisons, police, and military, to instead establish autonomous communes where all members would be equal, represent himself, and not be subject to representative democracy. Collaboration, self-help and decentralised village communities, he argued, was the only way forward for India.

Anarchism in India, 1935-1954

When Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany in 1933, Acharya and his wife fled to Switzerland and moved briefly to Paris in 1934, before he managed to return to Bombay in 1935. Back in India, Acharya kept writing for both Indian and international anarchist journals, before the Second World War severed his ties with the international community. After the War, he soon resumed contact with former comrades across Europe, North America, and South America, but also became involved with the Indian Institute of Sociology (IIS), set up by Ranchoddas Bhavan Lotvala in 1933, and its successor, the Libertarian Socialist Institute (LSI). Under the auspices of the IIS and the LSI, Acharya set up a library and published anarchist material in India. However, under Lotvala's direction, the LSI veered more towards libertarian individualism and Acharya seems to have abandoned the project in the late 1940s.

Instead, while also writing for more mainstream magazines such as *Thought* and *The Economic Weekly*, Acharya became a regular contributor to *Harijan*, a journal founded by Gandhi in 1932, in the early 1950s. In fact, between 1951 and 1954, he published more than thirty essays in the journal, many of them dealing with the legacies of colonialism, independence, communism, the food problem, unemployment, and capitalism.

After Acharya's wife Magda died in February 1951, his essays for *Harijan* became his primary source of income, but they also influenced the editor K. G. Mashruwala and other contributors such as Vinoba Bhave. After Mashruwala died in 1952, the incoming editor Maganbhai P. Desai continued to commission Acharya's essays for the publication. The four essays reprinted below, in many ways, crystallise Acharya's thoughts and anarchist philosophy, and they open a window onto the global reach of anarchism during that era. What is more, at a time when capitalist and nationalist forces continue to haunt Indian politics, his essays remain evermore relevant.

Conditions for Economic Equality

M. P. T. Acharya

I have read the aims and objects of the Arthik Samata Mandal. While I agree that inequality of incomes is one of the causes of conflict among members of society and therefore of its disintegration, so long as individual ownership and responsibility remains, there will be inequality of incomes. The very idea of 'incomes' implies some kind of money incomes and trade. If individual ownership remains or is wanted – whether in land or instruments – there must be and will be trade and inequality of incomes. Wide or narrow disparity of incomes will create the same problems and conflicts, for Nature is not alike with individuals or things to make their incomes equal. Individual responsibility and ownership produces or generates the idea that oneself is not justly rewarded while another gets more than his just reward. Of course, individuals want private ownership but they must be told that there cannot be equality of incomes and justice; and if they want equality of incomes, it can only be through the society or collectivity, where all put their knowledge and work for the benefit of living from birth to death. Then individual incomes, trade and money will be abolished. That people do not want it, does not mean we should not tell it, but tell them what they want even if it is impossible of achievement on their terms. We would then be telling an untruth to please them. At least we would be giving them a wrong advice.

Of course, inequality of incomes will be abolished only in a decentralized society. But decentralized society does not mean that there should be no co-ordination of economics on a countrywide scale on countrywide agreement. If there is no agreement, there would be conflict. Hence, we should bring a countrywide agreement.

Inequality of income can be abolished only as in a family where all things are for the benefit of all – without any price, without any wages and without any money and any exchange. We should put the country on one family basis, the country as one family. All will be taken care of from birth to death in return for the services and knowledge placed by them at the disposal of the society. If that is impossible, inequality of income will remain. Is it necessary to tell it from housetops?

The Bolshevik way is to make the Bolshevik party the proprietor of all things and the patriarch of all society. That is parasitism of the Bolshevik party, which can only be centralist. We want democracy at all places without any patriarch – all as common owners.

The Arthik Samata Mandal seems to have taken for granted that in the truthful and non-violent society there will be Government (from a Centre), law-making, elections to distant parliaments, army, police, prisons, magistrates and supreme courts responsible to a Centre. Trade, currency, wages and prices, and interests, rents, profits, taxes – all as now here or as in Russia or China. If these exist, we will be encouraging parasitism, even with equality of income on a par with producers who have to maintain them. For an equalitarian society, we must abolish all unnecessary work, even unnecessary writing and record keeping. We must have goods economy – not money and market economy. Record keeping is necessary only for a thieves' society. When a man works, he must know he is working not only for others but for himself also. If his work is bad or evil for others, it will be bad and evil for himself. He cannot get anything before others also get it. That is the only equality we can have without conflict. We want only technical work.

For this purpose, we cannot have divided ownership in which each has to purchase from others what is needed for production. All available things must be available for production without purchasing or hiring. Otherwise production will have to wait till the purchase can be made. All works today have to wait because there is no money (means) to purchase necessary ingredients.

Money is the most centralized and scarce thing, being kept restricted. All works can be started only when money can be got. Nobody will accept decentralized currency.

Those who talk of decentralism and money are blowing hot and cold air in the same breath.

There can be no equitable exchange. Every exchange requires paying more than the cost price – so that to pay one more than the cost him, one must get more from another and he must also get more than that from someone else. Thus a whole chain of parasitism is established. That is done through exchange. If I receive only my cost price, I cannot purchase anything and cannot eat or purchase anything more than what I produce.

With the economic set-up or paraphernalia we know, there can be no equality of incomes nor truthful or non-violent society. Unless we tell the people plainly what is the truth, we cannot organize them with the present set-up.

It is no use to appeal to Government, whose interests are opposed to non-violent, non-exploitative society. It is the people who will have to take possession of all things by Satyagraha and run it themselves.

Many more things can be said about the problem, but these are essential.

***Harijan* (27 September 1952), 270.**

Capitalism and Trade Unionism

M. P. T. Acharya

Shri Khandubhai Desai writes in the *A.I.C.C. Economic Review* asking workers not to become co-partners of capitalists in looting. But the fact that they are engaged and employed as wage earners makes them co-partners with those who employ them, whether they are private capitalists or the State. Otherwise they cannot get jobs, cannot be engaged and cannot earn wages and therefore cannot live even badly. It is therefore useless – meaningless to tell them that they should not help the capitalists unless it is also told that the employment system is also a looting system. We must lay axe at the root!

Trade unions in all countries are not there to abolish the employing system. They are adjuncts of that system. Whatever form of wage struggle they may carry on if trade unions have to abolish looting they must work for the overthrow of the employing system. But that is the object only of revolutionary anarchist-syndicalist unions. They want to take over the works and run the industries themselves for the benefit of society, instead of allowing the private owners or the State to run production and distribution to suit themselves, i.e. to loot others. But that is not the object that Shri Khandubhai or any other trade unionist in India wants. Otherwise they must stand for the abolition of the employing and wage system and to *take over all works and run them for the benefit of society*.

In Russia, trade unions are organized by the State to help looting by the State their officials are only nominally elected, for only those who are approved by the Government are allowed to stand as candidates for office. And anyone who votes must vote for them. Not to vote for them would be considered as treason to the State, will land even the non-voter in trouble, or entail refusal of job. The trade union officials are there only to enforce discipline and hard work upon the employees and are watchdogs and informers against workers. Of course, there is no right to strike in the workers' fatherland – as that would be considered treason even if the right to strike may be claimed to be 'guaranteed' on paper and constitution.

Shri Desai says that Western economic thought is utterly out of date and 'we have to think of our own contribution in the making of New India'. He does not tell what is the difference between Western economic fundamentals and our own. We also have the same employment, wage and looting system as in the West. Colonialism and Imperialism, which we condemn, are only extensions of the looting system of the successful looters. If we have to conduct

the looting system at home, we will have to loot other countries also if there is any chance. That we are not allowed to do it or it is too late for us to start on that career does not mean that we have given up looting at home. In fact, all economic system up to date, including the Russian and Chinese, are fundamentally the same – from China to Peru. We are no exception so long as we want to maintain the employing and wage system. If we want to abolish looting, we must abolish all systems, which make looting necessary and therefore inevitable.

***Harijan* (13 June 1953), 117.**

How to Abolish Poverty

M. P. T. Acharya

The Indian National Congress Movement, sponsored by Shris Dadabhai Naoroji, D. E. Wacha, Sir William Digby, Sir William Wedderburn and A. O. Home, complained against increasing poverty of India under British rule and gradually came to the conclusion that unless British (foreign) rule disappeared, the drain to England could be stopped. The object of the Congress was to abolish poverty. The argument was if the British quitted, the wealth that remained in the country would enrich the people. The Congress said they knew how to abolish poverty and would abolish it if they came to office or power.

It is not remembered that the Romans complained that India was draining away their gold by supplying luxury goods. We were also doing it though not ruling Rome but just by trade.

During the Civil Disobedience days, Shri Vithalbhai Patel told in a public meeting that 'we become poor so that the poor may become rich'.

Instead after all that, after independence the drain, which was going away to England, is now going upwards to some people and Governments in the country. If tomorrow people earned more, they will be taxed more and will continue to remain poor.

The Government wants to expand economics *on the narrow basis*. That is exactly what cannot be done. The Government can have no control or influence on the economic set-up on which it is based. The economy will run as it is set up and the Government will have to adapt itself to its running.

No constitutions, no elections, no parliamentary debates can make narrow economy work for a broader basis: It can only get narrower.

Economics is not a matter that can be run according to legislation. It is time that people were told not to attach any importance to all these talks in Delhi or other capitals and prepare themselves to feed themselves. The Government cannot do it even if we had a Bolshevik Government. Either the people organize themselves to feed themselves or they must be prepared to go without food. It is waste of time to read and hear what luxurious people are trying to do. We must concentrate attention only on the economic problem with special reference to food. Self-help is the best help. We must produce food and distribute it with or even without money. Otherwise it is shilly-shallying with the food question.

Food production – all production is a technological matter only. It cannot be produced if certain conditions are attached to it. Government cannot do so. There can be no legislation in advance of time, i.e. according to foresight. Legislations are seals on accomplished facts only. One cannot, for example, abolish landlordism by legislation. That is why the Government must ask tenants to secure compensation and after the compensation is paid, the tenants must pay taxes to the Government and become tenants to the Government, which becomes the landlord. That is the way of legislation. Even distribution of land is no solution. It is only when all food is at the disposal of people who contribute labour in productive and useful purposes, can the food problem be solved. All should be taken care of out of common production. There should be no question of employed and owners. The Government takes for granted that there must be a class of people who must remain employment-seekers and must live for wages. It is the most degrading thing. The Republic of Greece and Rome were built upon slaves who were not members. That is the kind of republic with employers and owners. That exists also in Russia today. We must abolish employment-seekers looking for wages. Slaves cannot collaborate. Fear of being starved is the worst method of seeking collaboration. Slave collaboration is unwilling collaboration and cannot be of any use.

The Roman Emperor Diocletian tried by decree to fix wages and prices. The result was the wages went down and the prices went up. He got disgusted and went to cultivate cabbages. The Chinese Emperor Wangchang Nai introduced State ownership of all things, but it broke down after a while. Since then, all these two thousand years, they are trying the same thing everywhere, as if history has no lesson to teach. They are all vain attempts and Government will break against economics. Leave the Government alone. If people want to organize themselves to feed themselves, they will have enough sanctions to do so. No Government can stand against them in all villages. Villages can starve Governments if necessary. They must not seek aid of Government. Local solidarity is the best answer to outside interference and tyranny.

***Harijan* (11 July 1953), 152.**

Capital and Unemployment

M. P. T. Acharya

I

Some unemployment creates more unemployment. One link lost in a chain becomes danger to other links. Not only because the unemployed who cannot earn money fall out of the line of consumers, but also because the reduction of production dislocates other productive activities, which necessitates throwing others out of unemployment. It is not easy to revive lost links afterwards.

Every productive unit keeps other productive units busy. So that if one unit fails and falls off, the other units have to reduce production or completely shut down their business and throw out their employees. There will be no further orders from other firms, unless new firms start and speculate. All business is hence speculation, gambling; for none knows what each one will do or will be able to do. It is all a chance if firms keep afloat. Even the oldest firms cannot guarantee their future. In fact, most of the biggest firms are based upon largest orders and run greater danger of losing them. They generally reduce the staff in order to save themselves from sinking. But that is also reduction of consumption and therefore of the markets.

II

Since all business is based on the credit of labour to firms – if the firms have no use for the credit of labour, they automatically cut the ground from under themselves. After dismissing employees, they will have to dismiss themselves. But today is more important to them than tomorrow, because their economic are so narrow that they cannot do anything to keep the employees.

Firms think labour is enabled by capital to live. But in business both sink together; after labour sinks, the fate of labour is also the fate of the employers, although the latter may hold out for a time by ‘eating their own fat’. Today, there is no more class-struggle or class-warfare, which is *capitalist concomitant*, possible or left.

Only when there are no more employees and no more employers possible that both can save themselves. Not before that.

III

All civilization is being run on the credit of labour given to capital. Even in Russia the labourer or employee is compelled to accept a certain fixed sum per week or per month and asked to deliver the goods to the employers. It is not that capital advances money to the labourers and employees, but it is labour, which is given that is advanced to capital; for the labourer or employee is paid only at the end of the week or month. If the latter is advance of money by capital, it is because capital sells goods later and cannot sell earlier. But without labour capital cannot get any goods.

While the labourer's or employee's wages are fixed, the prices of goods delivered are not fixed. Labour has no voice in the fixation of prices. The employers can fix any price convenient to them. Naturally the difference between what is paid for labour and what is taken for the goods accumulated capital, which is again used for further exploitation and profits. Whether that is done by private individuals or States makes no difference.

The State must necessarily be a non-producing organization. Its interests are necessarily with exploitation and profits. Even in Russia, it only *plans and enables* the organization of exploitation of State capital for profits, by hiring labour to produce goods and serve its own interests. As Gandhiji said, 'the State is a soulless machine'. Just as private capitalists cry about the horrors of communism, the Bolshevik partisans cry about the horrors of private capitalism. Both are right, but both conduct capitalism in the name of freedom or communism and democracy. The fact is that capitalism can only be abolished by the people taking over all things for their common benefit. If they do not want to take any responsibility for their own welfare, but want others to attend to them, others 'who are experts' will only further enslave them. Too much dependence on experts will enslave all. We must simplify (decentralize) matters to make dependence on expert and managerialist unnecessary.

***Harijan* (15 January 1955), 371.**

Acknowledgment

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