

On the Form, Politics and Effects of Writing Revolution

J. DANIEL ELAM^a and CHRIS MOFFAT^b

^aDepartment of English and Drama, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada; ^bSchool of History, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

j.daniel.elam@gmail.com

c.moffat@qmul.ac.uk

‘Writing Revolution’ is concerned with the relationship between revolutionary politics and the act of writing in modern South Asia. The pages that follow feature a diverse cast of characters: rebel poets and anxious legislators, party theoreticians and industrious archivists, nostalgic novelists, enterprising journalists and more. We have challenged our contributors to interrogate the multiple forms and effects of revolutionary story-telling in politics and public life: to question the easy distinction between ‘words’ and ‘deeds’ and consider the distinct consequences of writing itself. While acknowledging that the promise, fervour or threat of revolution is never reducible to the written word, we are interested in how manifestos, lyrics, legal documents, hagiographies and other constellations of words and sentences articulate, contest, and enact revolutionary political practice in both colonial and postcolonial India. The potential for writing to incite, control or reorient politics is one that has informed legal cultures, fuelled literary innovations, and propelled the imaginaries of postcolonial politics in the subcontinent.

This volume is both a continuation and a reflexive assessment of an earlier special issue, ‘Reading Revolutionaries’, published in the journal *Postcolonial Studies* in 2013.¹ The object of this earlier collaboration was to explore new protocols of reading that might take seriously the dynamic assemblage of revolutionary thought characterising India’s late colonial period. This moment of intellectual activity has often been relegated to the margins for its association

¹ Kama Maclean and J. Daniel Elam (eds), ‘Reading Revolutionaries—Texts, Acts, and Afterlives of Political Action in Late Colonial South Asia’, Special Issue, *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (2013); subsequently published as Kama Maclean and J. Daniel Elam (eds), *Revolutionary Lives in South Asia: Acts and Afterlives of Anticolonial Political Action* (London: Routledge, 2014).

with revolutions that never came, or, alternatively, as a result of the difficulties in compiling an archive of its clandestine figures and fleeting movements.² Framed as a question – ‘who is a revolutionary?’ – the 2013 volume attempted to resuscitate an intellectual lineage of anticolonial revolution without reducing it to a single narrative, and without succumbing to the mechanical rubric of ‘success’ versus ‘failure’ so common in earlier histories of revolutionary action.³ The present volume builds on this conversation but departs from its predecessor’s particular concern with intellectual genealogies – identifying who *were* the revolutionaries, what was ‘revolutionary’ about their thought – to interrogate the nature of stories told *about* revolutionaries and revolutionary politics. We are concerned, first and foremost, with the political work accomplished by written accounts of revolutionary lives, actions, and programmes. We are also interested in the ethical and political dilemmas raised by narratives of revolutionary violence, and we approach this project eager to interrogate our own participation in a long history of interpreting revolutionary rhetoric and aesthetics.

The essays collected here traverse three constitutive moments of the category of ‘revolution’ as it has been written over the past century of Indian history. First, we identify ‘revolutionary writing’ as a form of writing that emerges from both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary processes, occupying a spectrum that runs from incitement to containment. Consequently, the naming of what is ‘revolutionary’ and the legitimacy of certain forms of violence is necessarily contested, producing multiple and often contradictory archives. Contributors to this volume underscore the importance of the literary and textual worlds inhabited and created by revolutionary political thinkers, as well as those of their opponents and interpreters. Collectively, we argue that the act of writing demands interrogation in its own right, as a process and labour with distinct effects and consequences and with specific advantages and limitations.

Second, some of us examine historical writing on anticolonial revolutionary action, a genre that traverses both the period of colonial rule and the career of the independent Indian nation-state. We interrogate the desire to celebrate and polemically wield revolutionary histories, especially where they interrupt or challenge accepted views of India’s nationalist movement

² On the obstacles to reconstructing revolutionary movements in India, see Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text* (New York: Oxford University Press and London: Hurst, 2015).

³ For an example of this calculus of results, see Bipan Chandra, ‘The Ideological Development of Revolutionary Terrorists in North India in the 1920s’, in his *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1979).

(Gandhian or otherwise). We consider in particular the impulse to establish an authoritative interpretation of certain events, reflecting on the narrative tropes and devices mobilised to this end.⁴ Our motivation is not to suggest there is one correct or even a ‘more authentic’ way to capture this history, but rather to demonstrate how these texts can be used as a mirror to map the changing political stakes through which revolutionary stories acquire meaning.

Finally, several of the pieces in this collection engage the continued resonance of revolutionary storytelling in our twenty-first century present, and particularly the relationship between academic work, politics, and the public life of the past. This includes reflection on the manner in which our work as scholars collaborating in an international context is entangled in and charged by an equally complicated global conjuncture. We feel compelled to ask not just how our written work frames the significance and meaning of revolution in modern India, but also why we are drawn to this explosive and contested moment in South Asian history, especially at a time when an increasing number of scholars in the field are returning to questions of paths not taken, ideologies obfuscated, figures forgotten. These essays appear at a moment when novel historical interventions coincide with enduring debates around militancy, global politics and the nation-state form, as well as ongoing attempts by scholars and activists to think beyond liberalism and its horizons. Accordingly, the volume brings together new histories of political thought in India with evolving debates over the promise (and predicaments) of postcolonial politics, ethics, and aesthetics. We move beyond an interrogation of the early anti-colonial propagandist and colonial bureaucrat to examine our own words and the reverberations of recent interventions into the lives and afterlives of revolution.

I. Incitement and Containment

In 1918, the Government of India Home Department published one of the earliest ‘histories’ of India’s nascent revolutionary movement in the form of the 226-page Sedition Committee Report. Popularly referred to as the ‘Rowlatt Report’—after the Committee’s President and principal author, the British High Court judge Sidney Rowlatt—the document was the precursor to the extension of wartime emergency legislation in the repressive ‘Rowlatt Act’, the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919.

⁴ An important prompt for this analysis remains David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

The Committee was made up of Rowlatt and five officials from various parts of British India, who worked individually and collectively over forty-six meetings to produce the document.⁵ Over the course of twenty-seven partially interlinked chapters, the Committee identified a sprawling substratum of anarchy and agitation in the colony, stretching from the hearts of major Indian cities to the peripheries of imperial territory and even within enemy states. The narrative illustrates the spectre of violence and ‘outrage’ that had occupied the minds of colonial authorities since the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the disturbances in Punjab shortly thereafter. The possibility for mutiny identified in the report sets the terms for intelligence work in the wake of the First World War – a context characterised by the emergence of MK Gandhi’s mass politics and the shadowy threat posed by a new, internationalist Soviet state.⁶

The Rowlatt Report evidences the fervour with which colonial intelligence officials traced constellations of dissident activity from Punjab to Bengal, and indeed across a global terrain – from mutinous ashrams in San Francisco to shadowy guesthouses in London, from seditious newspapers in Constantinople to illicit printing presses in Burma. Offering ‘true’ accounts in lurid detail, the Report may be read as a work of Victorian literature in its own right.⁷ The carefully reconstructed narratives of revolutionary conspiracy—replete with secret society intrigue, assassination outrages, and taxi-cab dacoities—channel many of the literary styles of popular detective and imperialist romance novels at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, this government document might be placed in a genealogy with Philip Meadows Taylor’s 1839 bestseller *Confessions of a Thug*, loosely based on the true life of the

⁵ The other Members were: Sir Basil Scott, Chief Justice of Bombay; C.V. Kumarawami Sastri, Judge of the High Court of Madras; Sir Verney Lovett, Member of the Board of Revenue, United Provinces; Mr P.C. Mitter, Member of the Bengal Legislative Council; and as Secretary Mr J.D.V. Hodge, Indian Civil Service, Bengal. See *Sedition Committee 1918 Report* (Calcutta, 1918) [<https://archive.org/details/seditionreport00indirich>, accessed April 2016].

⁶ For two demonstrative accounts, see Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India, *Communism in India 1924-1927* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1927); and H.W. Hale, *Political Trouble in India 1917-1937* (Allahabad: Chugh Publications, [1937] 1973). The Rowlatt Report covers a similar terrain to James Ker’s *Political Trouble in India, 1907-1917* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1917): since Ker was himself an official in the Indian Civil Service and, from 1907-1913, Personal Assistant to the Director of Criminal Intelligence, similarities between the documents should not be surprising. We have singled out the Rowlatt Report here due to its distinct consequences and broad reception as a public document. The Report and subsequent Rowlatt Act, discussed below, would be an important reference point for the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1925, a signal moment in the colonial government’s attempt to define ‘terrorism’ as a legal concept. We are grateful to Joseph McQuade for discussion on this point.

⁷ Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

infamous dacoit Syeed Amir Ali.⁸ At the same time, the Rowlatt Report wrote revolution in a particularly modernist aesthetic. Although its record of agitation officially begins in 1906, the Report moves backwards and forwards in time – from the seventeenth century to the possible future of the 1920s; from the minor mutinies of the late nineteenth century to the large-scale dacoities in 1910s Bengal. The result is a circular history that prefigures the literary experiments of the Bloomsbury Group only a few years later. This governmental document is thus caught between two Anglophone literary movements: rooted, in the first instance, in Victorian detective novels; reflecting, in the second instance, an almost experimental concern with the proliferation of narratives, the circularity of time, and the ‘tense future’.⁹

In the space of a single paragraph, Rowlatt and his colleagues describe anticolonial agitation as the work of ‘revolutionaries’ and ‘dacoits’,¹⁰ a move that establishes equivalence between a form of political dissent and a familiar notion of criminality. This conflation is not new to the Committee’s work. It draws on a tradition of Criminal Intelligence reporting in the Empire, as when a June 1914 report from San Francisco declared the nascent Ghadar Party to be mere ‘*badmaash*’, hooligans, who had allegedly swayed leftist American hearts and minds with their calls for democracy and freedom.¹¹ Just as Bhagat Singh would, fifteen years later, contest his identification as a ‘terrorist’ – first by the colonial state but also by members of the nationalist press¹² – so, too, have revolutionary figures throughout the twentieth century sought to separate popular perceptions of criminality and selfish vendetta from militant philosophies of violence and its transformative potential.¹³ But the Rowlatt Report is much more than condescending dismissal: in the assertion of a vast, decentralised conspiracy of rebellion and subversion, channelled through secret bases in Punjab, Bengal, the United

⁸ Philip Meadows Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug* (London: Richard Bentley, 1839). The book helped introduce the Hindi word *thug* into English. Ali (and his fictional counterpart, Ameer Ali) was almost a revolutionary but not quite, blurring the boundaries between criminality, hooliganism, and imperial threat. This messy assemblage would congeal after the rebellion in 1857, and the boundaries between thugs and agitators would remain blurred well into the twentieth century. See C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁹ Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ *Sedition Committee 1918 Report*, p. 23.

¹¹ Home-Political A, June 1914, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI).

¹² As, for instance, in Bhagat Singh and BK Dutt, ‘Statement in the [Delhi] Sessions Court’ (6 June 1929) in Shiv Varma (ed.), *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Kanpur: Samajwadi Sahitya Sadan, 1996) (hereafter *SW SBS*). The revolutionaries’ critique was itself circulated in the press: see *Times of India* 7 June 1929.

¹³ See Bhagat Singh, ‘To Young Political Workers’ (2 February 1931) in *SW SBS*. Two central texts in twentieth century debates over the political potential of violence are Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, translated by TE Hulme and J Roth (New York: Dover, [1908] 2004) and Frantz Fanon (Richard Philcox, trans.), *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, [1963] 2004).

Provinces and Madras, the Commission elevates and gives legitimacy to this ‘hooliganism’ in its many forms, categorising a sequence of disparate events as a ‘widespread but essentially single movement’, part of an existential threat to the stability of British rule in the subcontinent.¹⁴

The Rowlatt Report presaged the Rowlatt Act, passed in March 1919 by the Imperial Legislative Council. The Act allowed for preventive indefinite detention as well as imprisonment without trial for those suspected of committing, or conspiring to commit, revolutionary crimes. Together, the Report and the Act demonstrate a tension at the heart of debates to define ‘terrorism’ as a legal category – the necessity of reconciling juridical norms with the uncertain spectre of action, wherein the threat of the militant group or revolutionary cell demands speculative work on the part of the law.¹⁵ Indeed, among the conclusions of the Rowlatt Committee is that it is impossible to connect the various crimes empirically but that one must connect them *imaginatively* for ‘punitive’ and ‘preventative’ reasons.¹⁶ Like the great crime and spy novels of the age – from Joseph Conrad’s 1907 *The Secret Agent* to GK Chesterton’s 1908 *The Man Who Was Thursday* – the Report compiles seemingly discrete events that later cohere, due, in some cases, more to paranoid narration rather than events themselves. There are red herrings and authorial MacGuffins that set the plot of the Sedition Report into action. The extension of repressive war-time legislation across India following the 1918 armistice – widely condemned as an insult to India’s participation in World War I – would famously prompt Gandhi’s first mass agitation against British rule in India, the ‘Rowlatt *satyagraha*’. But the Report also attracted an unexpected readership: in particular, the lively reception of the Committee’s carefully constructed narrative among aspiring Indian revolutionaries themselves.

The Rowlatt Report, contrary to its intended use, was enthusiastically circulated by dissident anticolonial organisations as a recruiting tool, especially in North India, as later conspiracy

¹⁴ *Sedition Committee 1918 Report*, p.25.

¹⁵ This tension is not, of course, restricted to India, nor to the early twentieth century. For discussions of contemporary ‘terrorism’ and its political and cultural implications, see Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morten (eds), *Terror and the Postcolonial* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010); Bruce Robbins, *Perpetual War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ *Sedition Committee 1918 Report*, p. 192.

case investigations would reveal.¹⁷ The report was not difficult to acquire: it was distributed through 43 government printing presses, from Madras to Calcutta to Peshawar, and sold to the public for one rupee a copy. In Lahore, for instance, the report was published by both Rama Krishna & Sons and the Mufid-i-Am Press, and its contents were quickly integrated into the curriculum of the dissident National College of Lahore, an upstart educational institution established in 1920 by the nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai. Professor Jaichandra Vidyalankar, an associate of the very *Ghadaris* described in the Report, recited passages in his classes on Indian History.¹⁸ As one of Vidyalankar's students, Yashpal, later recalled, passages from the Rowlatt Report allowed the College's young radicals to learn 'something about the ways and means of revolution'.¹⁹

Like many of his peers in the National College, Yashpal's time as a student segued into a period of active political involvement and, indeed, enlistment with a clandestine revolutionary organization – the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), famous for its association with celebrated anticolonial martyr Bhagat Singh and inspired, as its name indicates, by stories of Irish rebels and recent Bolshevik success. Yashpal's memoirs of this time, like those of many other anticolonial revolutionaries and sympathizers, echo the dynamic of secret society drama that we find in the report, replete with police chases, mass conspiracy, and daring escapes.²⁰ Yashpal would become one of the most celebrated Hindi novelists of the twentieth century. Many of his novels reflect on the everyday life of revolutionary struggle: the joy of comradeship and the fear of betrayal in *Dada Kamred* (1941) and *Deshdrohi* (1943), or the role of violence in political transformation, as in *Jhootha Sach* (1958 and 1960).²¹ Writing in a different literary mode, his comrade in the HSRA, Sacchidanand Vatsyayan – publishing under the pseudonym 'Agyeya' ('Unknown') – focused on his own experience of the colonial prison, questions of sexual freedom as well as

¹⁷ See, for instance, the testimony of Hans Raj Vohra, Approver, in *Proceedings in the Lahore Conspiracy Case 1930*, Private Papers, p. 170, NAI.

¹⁸ See the reflections of Chhabil Das – Vidyalankar's colleague at the College - in his Oral History Transcript, Acc. No 163 (1973, pp. 38-9, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (hereafter NMML).

¹⁹ Yashpal (Corrine Friend, trans.), *Yashpal Looks Back: Selections from an Autobiography* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1981), p. 21. Years later, written notes on the Seditious Report were found in a police raid on an HSRA safe house in Delhi, in the wake of an attack orchestrated by Yashpal on the Viceregal train entering the capital. See the statement of HSRA member Kailashpatti to police in Home-Pol File No. 11/15/1931, NAI.

²⁰ Yashpal, *Simhavalokan* (Lucknow: Viplava Karyalaya, 1951). For a popular account of revolutionary activity written for American audiences, see Dhan Gopal Mukerji, *My Brother's Face* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1924).

²¹ First editions of all three books were published by Viplava Karyalaya in Lucknow, an outlet established by Yashpal himself in 1941. See Harish Trivedi's 'Introduction' to the English translation of *Jhootha Sach*, published as Yashpal (Anand, trans.), *This is Not That Dawn*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010).

the struggle with writing revolutionary form. In his essay in this collection, Snehal Shingavi explores these themes in greater detail, placing the revolutionary Agyeya in a tradition of Indian writers who challenged the narrative demands of autobiographical form.

The ‘revolutionary’ was neither a mere colonial construction nor a pure and bold act of self-definition; it was forged, rather, in the collision between these competing modes of assertion and understanding.²² The courtroom provided a critical stage for this agonistic collaboration, as Sukeshi Kamra’s essay in this volume demonstrates.²³ The same holds true for the space of the prison, as Alex Wolfers explicates in his reading of Aurobindo Ghose’s *Karakahani* (1909), wherein the jail cell becomes both an ashram and site of pilgrimage. From the late 1910s onward, the figure of Gandhi would appear to disrupt the vocabulary shared between the colonial state and its enemies, from liberal constitutionalists to violent revolutionaries.²⁴ Gandhi sought to ‘baffle’ the colonial government with his actions, while contesting the revolutionary’s singular claim to a language of sacrifice.²⁵ His attempts to unsettle the revolutionary’s faith in violence were often pursued through direct dialogue, as Durba Ghosh traces in her contribution to this collection.

Writers in the colonial period often wrestled with the meaning of ‘revolution’ in terms of the present and possible futures. The Urdu *inquilab* was charged with variant meanings, departing from its Arabic origins as a word for ‘coup d’état’ to encapsulate a broader vision of societal transformation, propelled in the twentieth century by what Lajpat Rai described as the ‘world forces’: those shocks of global upheaval animated in Indian newspaper columns, the pages of smuggled books, transnational lyceum tours and the personal accounts of those Indians who were able to travel and experience some of the conjuncture’s fissures and conflicts first-hand.²⁶ The twentieth-century Indian iteration of ‘revolution’ also confronted

²² For discussions of colonial definitions of ‘terrorism’ and ‘revolution’ see Richard J. Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire 1904-1924* (London: Frank Cass & Co, 1995); and Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Terrorism: A Colonial Construct* (Delhi: Satya Samad, 2009). On revolutionary self-definition, see Kama Maclean, ‘The Portrait’s Journey: The Image, Social Communication and Martyr-Making in India’, in *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 70, no. 4 (2011), pp. 1051-82.

²³ On the dialectical constitution of communism in India, see Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah, ‘Meerut and a Hanging: “Young India”, Popular Socialism and the Dynamics of Imperialism’, in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2013), p. 361..

²⁴ Shruti Kapila, ‘Gandhi before Mahatma: The Foundations of Political Truth’, in *Public Culture*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2011), pp. 431-48.

²⁵ Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (London: Hurst, 2012); Chris Moffat, ‘Experiments in Political Truth’, in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2013), pp. 185-201.

²⁶ Lala Lajpat Rai, *Young India: An Interpretation and a History of the Nationalist Movement from Within* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1917), pp. 221-4.

the philosophical and political promise of earlier French and American revolutions. In this sense, ‘writing revolution’ could describe the practice of writing a philosophy conducive to proper revolutionary action, and in an imagined lineage with a long history of revolt, encompassing ‘Guru Gobind Singh and Shivaji, Kamal Pasha and Reza Khan, Washington and Garibaldi, Lafayette and Lenin’.²⁷ By naming their own acts ‘revolutionary’ in English, anticolonial writers like those in the HSRA not only justified their actions in terms of a growing world movement, but in so doing claimed participation in an egalitarian tradition over which Europe had previously held a monopoly. The Indian iteration of ‘revolution’ sought to go beyond prior upheavals, in some cases in line with the ‘new age’ signalled, for many, by Lenin’s Russia. The logic of the future perfect tense (‘we will have seen a new world’) created a grammatical form of revolution. In her article in this collection, Roanne Kantor describes this fragile glimpse of futurity in writing through a discussion of Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s itinerary across the revolutions and counter-revolutions of the twentieth century.

Following independence in 1947 and the creation of nation-states in India and Pakistan, these anticolonial philosophies and aesthetics of revolution transformed with the changing demands and factional schisms of the postcolonial left. Party theorists and intellectuals sought to correct the political oversights of the past, revising previous blind spots around questions of gender, caste, and language – indeed, the nature and form of a ‘true’ or ‘complete’ *azaadi* (freedom) remains contested today. At the same time, postcolonial movements which drew symbolic authority from an anticolonial legacy began to repress the more violent aspects of the *inquilabis* they gestured towards, especially as Communist parties laboured to acquire legitimacy as a parliamentary, electoral force. Histories of vigilante action and armed escalation flash up with the arrival of Maoist politics in the late 1960s, taking another form in the sacrificial politics of Khalistani separatists and the muscular assertions of Hindutva volunteers in the 1980s and 1990s. Just as the revolutionaries of the 1920s and 1930s consciously shaped their political ambitions around the heroic stories of radical predecessors – the HSRA in the wake of Ghadar, Ghadar in the wake of the 1857 rebels – so, too, would the longing for a radical reconfiguration of the present be consumed with questions of the past. In South India, as Dilip Menon explores in this volume, a revolutionary tradition was consolidated around the figure of the *raktasakshi* (martyr or ‘blood witness’), allowing

²⁷ Bhagat Singh and BK Dutt, ‘Statement in the [Delhi] Sessions Court’ (6 June 1929) in *SWPBS*; also in *Times of India*, 7 June 1929.

Communist formations in Kerala to establish a continuity between anticolonial and postcolonial exhortations towards a justice that sits outside the realm of law.

*II. Telling Revolutionary Stories*²⁸

Our interest in the act of writing – and more particularly in practices of story-telling and narrative – is informed by a strong tradition of historiographical reflection in modern South Asian studies. Especially in the wake of the Subaltern Studies intervention, the archive itself and the demands scholars make of it remain critical objects of interrogation. ‘Writing Revolution’ responds to and builds upon Kama Maclean’s recent meditation on the question of what an archive for a ‘revolutionary history’ might look like. Drawing on sources previously thought to be empirically ‘suspicious’ – namely, oral histories and visual culture – Maclean challenges the hermetic seal that postcolonial historians have tended to place around the HRSA, reframing the narrative by which these young revolutionaries and their influence can be understood. By challenging the conventional reliance on official archives, Maclean questions the category of ‘revolutionary’ as being isolated from or solely in opposition to the mainstream Indian National Congress movement towards Indian independence. Indeed, Maclean’s work reveals a more intimate relationship between Congress nationalists and dissident revolutionary youth. In her essay for this volume, she returns to this problem-space, reflecting on the conditions in which revolutionary histories become ‘sayable’ and the obstacles that continue to structure historical work today.²⁹

Maclean’s project goes beyond a call for the expansion of documentary sources. A ‘revolutionary history’ must extend beyond oral and visual sources to take seriously the implications of rumours, secrets, and missing documents; it should also, in the Indian context, demonstrate sensitivity to the spiritual charge of political-theological and mythic figurations of thought and deed.³⁰ Following Maclean’s methodological provocation, we understand our own project to be ‘necessarily messy at times because the legacies of secrecy are such that

²⁸ Our debt to Clare Hemmings, ‘Telling Feminist Stories’, in *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2005), pp. 115-139, will be obvious. Also see Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁹ Maclean’s emphasis on the visual and the ‘sayable’ builds on the important work of Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004), and Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

³⁰ On this latter point and for discussion on mythic lineages of revolution in India, we are grateful to Alex Wolfers.

not all of the questions raised' by this revolutionary conjuncture can be easily answered.³¹ Indeed, what the collection on 'Reading Revolutionaries' revealed was that, although our attempts to 'write revolution' necessarily relied on historical empirical work, ultimately empiricism was 'no longer sufficient to the world that it has brought into view', to borrow Leela Gandhi's analysis from a similar context.³² The compulsion among writers of and on revolution to ask, 'What might have happened?' 'What could have happened?' is a central concern here. This is in concord with the HSRA's own question, posed with manifesto bravado in 1930, following an unsuccessful attempt to kill Viceroy Lord Irwin: 'WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED?'³³ Following the HSRA's challenge, some of us ask, following Leela Gandhi: 'Is corroboration the only meaningful academic response to such intimations?'³⁴ Other contributors wrestle with a position similar to that identified by Shahid Amin, who, in attempting to furnish an account of the 1922 burning of a *thana* (police station) in Chauri Chaura, found that he had 'all the relevant facts' and yet 'not evidence enough for a telling of the full story'.³⁵ Writing revolution tempts – as in the analyses of the Central Intelligence Department – rumination, speculation, and imaginative leaps. It is precisely this condition that requires us to be critical of the narratives we use to conjure some sense of closure or coherence – a challenge that goes beyond Ranajit Guha's famous call to 'read against the grain' of the colonial archive, interrogating how that process of reading and subsequent writing is conditioned by our own investments as researchers and academics.³⁶

Our interest in writing, story-telling and narrative contrasts starkly with the majority of existing historical work on revolutionary politics, wherein the compulsion is overwhelmingly to get the story 'right' – to wrest an identifiable revolutionary trajectory from the scattered activities of anticolonial agitation. Demystification has, indeed, been the principal imperative for many activists, scholars and educators working in India – and compellingly so, as they

³¹ Maclean, *A Revolutionary History*, p. 21.

³² Leela Gandhi, 'Mission Statement Responses', in *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2013), p. 156.

³³ See the HSRA's 'Philosophy of the Bomb' (1930) in *SWSBS*, pp. 157-165. The essay was written in response to Gandhi's 'Cult of the Bomb', *Young India* (2 January 1930), in which Gandhi criticized Yashpal's 'rogue' HSRA action – the bomb attack on the Viceroy's train outside Delhi, 23 December 1929. Maclean, *A Revolutionary History*, Chapter 6.

³⁴ Leela Gandhi, 'Mission Statement Responses', p. 156.

³⁵ Shahid Amin, *Event Metaphor Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 193.

³⁶ The 'strategies' necessarily informing this reading practice of the Subaltern Studies Collective were signaled by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', her introduction to Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

seek to counter the distortions and appropriations constituting history's tumultuous public life in the country, where arguments over the past regularly inflect religious conflict, electoral contests and the dynamics of caste politics.³⁷ This polemical engagement with the past and its political implications for the present is a central concern in this collection, and we approach it not critically but sympathetically, in order to understand the distinct life and meaning of history in these overlapping contexts. Tracing the multifarious afterlives of Bhagat Singh in postcolonial India, Chris Moffat's essay considers how the struggle to reanimate an 'unfinished' revolution is both informed and interrupted by the revolutionary's spectacular act of self-sacrifice in March 1931. Faridah Zaman traces postcolonial attempts to narrate Deoband anticolonial agitation as a critical part of Indian national history. Advocating a critical relation to the ways in which early Indian revolutionary movements have been recounted, remapped and reanimated, this collection moves forward by acknowledging the high stakes that 'writing revolution' continues to have for a politics in the present.

III. *Writing the Present*

Our sensitivity to the many rationales for a reinterrogation or recharacterisation of an anticolonial past necessarily directs us to the context of our own acts of writing, as well as the ground on which we, as scholars, seek to ask new questions of this charged and often violent history. One of the central issues that emerged in conversations around and after 'Reading Revolutionaries' concerned the current conjuncture. Why, in our contemporary moment, has there been a sudden interest, especially by academics outside of India, to return to this contested late-colonial scene?³⁸ Our own interest in bomb-throwers and martyred militants is concurrent with a broader 'turn' in the field towards political thinkers and practitioners once thought to be peripheral – from BR Ambedkar to VD Savarkar.³⁹ Notably, this tendency has not been informed by a desire to 'fill gaps' in an existing historiography, but actually to question the form this historiography has taken: to cast a sideways glance, to open new

³⁷ See, for instance, Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Predicaments of Secular Histories', in *Public Culture*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2008), pp. 57-73; Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Public Life of History: An Argument out of India', in *Public Culture*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2008), pp. 143-168; and Michael Gottlob, *History and Politics in Post-Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁸ We are especially grateful to Simona Sawhney for raising this question at the 2012 Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 11-13 October 2012.

³⁹ For a recent summary of developments in the field, see Vinayak Chaturvedi, 'Writing History in the Borderlands', in *Social History*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2014), pp. 307-322. See also the Pathfinders book series published by Routledge India and edited by Dilip Menon, especially Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma: Sanskrit, Sociology and Anti-Imperialism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014).

avenues for inquiry.⁴⁰ Accordingly, we have encouraged contributors to this volume to be reflexive about their own academic practice of ‘writing revolution’ from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, and to consider what the significant interest in the early twentieth century says about our own present political moment.

It is tempting, in a conjuncture shaken by global financial crisis, to draw a connection between our moment and the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, there are surprising parallels: economic precarity, austerity measures, and ‘a new gilded age’.⁴¹ But at the same time as resonance, we find a distinct divergence: the collapse, in our post-Cold War present, of the great modernist utopias, and their replacement by ecological imperatives of order and ‘balance’, where ideas of forward progress have been displaced by states of melancholic repetition.⁴² It is this, perhaps, that propels a renewed interest in militant philosophies: a desire to comprehend – at times for our own politics, at other times voyeuristically – the *absolute* commitment of the early twentieth century, the radically ‘promiscuous alliances’ of that era,⁴³ and the romance of a politics premised on a break from the given order of things. But we are also compelled by other forms of violence in our time. In an essay on Bhagat Singh that inspired some of our early conversations, Simona Sawhney noted this problem of echoes and divergence, specifically in terms of the young man’s enduring, ‘smouldering, inarticulate fascination with death’.⁴⁴ Economies of sacrifice continue to charge global politics today, just as the law continues its speculative work to define (and detain) any possible enemy.⁴⁵

How should one write (and continue to read) revolutionaries? One answer to this question would place these figures within a lineage of thought that also includes ‘postcolonial theory’, as practiced in US and UK literature departments since the 1980s. As Robert Young and

⁴⁰ Parallels to this project from outside South Asian studies may be found in David Scott’s return to CLR James, or Clare Hemmings’ contemplation of Emma Goldman, for and of the present. See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*; Clare Hemmings, ‘Considering Emma’, in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2013), pp. 334-346.

⁴¹ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

⁴² This condition is described evocatively in David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Also see Jacques Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, translated by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010).

⁴³ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 177.

⁴⁴ Simona Sawhney, ‘Bhagat Singh: A Politics of Death and Hope’ in Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir (eds), *Punjab Reconsidered* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 377-408.

⁴⁵ Faisal Devji, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). See also Alex Houen, ‘Sacrificial Militancy and the Wars around Terror’, in Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton (eds.), *Terror and the Postcolonial* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 113-140.

others have argued, contemporary postcolonial theory needs to excavate its debts to early twentieth century anticolonial thought to more fully understand the continuities between the present moment and the moment of high empire.⁴⁶ Such a project is equally important for postcolonial theory's challenge to the broader body of political and literary theory, which tends to provide an insular body of 'democratic' criticism that is artificially separated from the imperial (and anti-imperial) projects that were its historical contemporaries. To locate anticolonial revolutionaries in this canon is to reveal the 'global provenance of democracy',⁴⁷ in a way that provincialises European political and ethical theory. As Daniel Elam argues in his essay for this collection, we must read Bhagat Singh's jail notebook as articulating one possible theory of democracy as a relationship between readers and reading communities.

It is also necessary to insist on the literary qualities of political writing. Like contemporaneous modernist movements in England and Europe, much anticolonial writing refused to subordinate aesthetics to ethics or politics.⁴⁸ The 'manifesto', for example, was a genre that spanned literary and political worlds. Anticolonial writers demanded not only that we change the world, but that we change the way we see, represent, talk about, and understand this new world. To read anticolonial writing as an integral part of this conversation on 'global modernism', we must interrogate how anticolonial writers articulated the ways in which aesthetic innovation would bring new political forms into being, just as political innovation could bring new aesthetic forms into being, though without merely imbibing the aesthetic imperatives of North Atlantic literary experimentation.⁴⁹ We might return to this 'bibliomigrant' world⁵⁰ as a way to recuperate an alternative history of transnational reading communities, aesthetics, and global politics.

⁴⁶ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 2001).

⁴⁷ Leela Gandhi, *Common Cause* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 2.

⁴⁸ For a clear statement on this, see Har Dayal, 'The Indian Peasant', no. 314, *South Asians in North America Collection*, University of California-Berkeley; or, as an example, see Bhagat Singh's 'Introduction to Dreamland' in *SWSBS*.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of these issues, see J. Daniel Elam, 'Echoes of Ghadr', in *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2014); Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge Press, 3rd Edn. 2015); as well as Snehal Shingavi's essay in this collection.

⁵⁰ B. Venkat Mani, 'Bibliomigrancy: Book-Series and the Making of World Literature', in Theo D'haen David Damrosch, Djelal Kadir (eds) *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 283-296; B. Venkat Mani and Caroline Levine, 'What Counts as World Literature?', in *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (2013), pp. 141-150.

Developments in literary studies run parallel to shifts in an Indian historiography invigorated by calls to consider ‘the transformative capacity of ideas’,⁵¹ a move which has unsettled familiar narratives of nation and empire and opened a conversation about the contours of South Asian thought in a global context. A particular interest in the history of political thought has propelled new methodological experiments, reassessments of familiar actors, and a re-reading of canonical texts, from the *Bhagavad Gita* to *Hind Swaraj*.⁵² The historian’s focus on intellectual production is complemented by sensitivity to questions of annotation, translation and reception. Indeed, the unique promise of an ‘intellectual history for India’ lies in its incorporation of critical archival methods finely tuned in a historiography shaped by questions of difference, context and the philosophy of history – from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s meditations on historicist time to Christopher Pinney’s work on the visual and popular.⁵³ As Shruti Kapila attests, South Asian political thought compels attention not merely as a site to study the assimilation or transformation of European ideas, but as an opportunity to push for the renewal of intellectual history itself, forcing scholars to ‘take cognizance of a wider range of methods, texts and actors than any established canon of Western political thought would permit’.⁵⁴

These projects in history and literary studies require us to locate South Asia not simply as ‘connected’ to the modern world but as informing and constituting it. This is a pivotal characteristic of our present and the context of our writing: an eagerness to understand the significance of a place like India to a ‘global’ modernity, a reality difficult to deny. The revolutionary remains an unstable figure within this story – caught between localities, nations and worlds – which is in part an explanation of our enduring interest, our fascination in the ways they are defined *against* or made legible *to* the given order of things. Writing revolution is, we argue, fundamentally a practice of world-making. To write revolution is a practice that both inflects and confronts the shape and form of global modernity, creating particular

⁵¹ See Shruti Kapila, ‘Preface’ in Shruti Kapila (ed), *An Intellectual History for India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. v.

⁵² Faisal Devji and Ritu Birla (eds), ‘Itineraries of Self-Rule: Essays on the Centenary of Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*’, Special Issue, *Public Culture*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2011); Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji (eds), *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Also see C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁵³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [2000] 2008); Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*.

⁵⁴ Kapila, ‘Preface’, p. vii. Also see Shruti Kapila, ‘Global Intellectual History and the Indian Political’, in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (eds), *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 253-74.

aesthetic and political worlds. The essays collected here explore the contours and stakes of such conjured worlds at the beginning of the twentieth century and their reverberations into the twenty-first.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Kama Maclean, Dilip Menon, Simona Sawhney, Alex Wolfers and Faridah Zaman for feedback on early versions of this introduction; thanks are also due to the volume's contributors for animating our thoughts, and to Vivien Seyler for her support.