

The Itinerant Library of Lala Lajpat Rai

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Can radical libraries incite a radical politics? The possibility that they might is, at least, an organising premise for the Dwarka Das Library in the Indian city of Chandigarh..This institution, about to celebrate its centenary, was founded in 1920 as an annexe to the personal residence of the anti-colonial nationalist Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928). Its collection has been housed since 1966 in a purpose-designed building, the bright and spacious Lajpat Rai Bhawan in Chandigarh’s Sector 15. Rai, celebrated as Punjab Kesari (‘Lion of Punjab’), organized ‘extremist’ opposition to British rule in the early decades of the twentieth century, contesting ‘moderate’ forces within the Indian National Congress movement.¹ Herein lies the source of the Library’s claim to a revolutionary

¹ The terms ‘extremist’ and ‘moderate’ indicate factions consolidated in the 1907 split in the Indian National Congress during its Surat Conference. Lajpat Rai awaits a critical biographical treatment, though his writings have been compiled in the expansive *Collected Works of Lala Lajpat Rai*, edited by B.R. Nanda, 15 vols, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2003–10 (hereafter *CWLLR*). For the latest scholarship on Rai, emerging from her DPhil research at Oxford

inheritance: it was Rai's library, opened to Indian students and political workers after the First World War, that captured the imagination of a generation of anti-colonial activists, including the iconic revolutionary martyr Bhagat Singh (1907–31). A recent advertisement for the library describes how Bhagat Singh encountered in the Dwarka Das collection the statements of Auguste Vaillant, the French anarchist who in 1893 threw a homemade bomb into the Paris Chamber of Deputies. The Indian revolutionary cited Vaillant's words – 'it takes a loud voice to make the deaf hear' – to justify his own bombing of the colonial Legislative Assembly in New Delhi in 1929.² According to the Library, 'Bhagat Singh's emulation of the narrative inspires us even today'.³

Lajpat Rai did not, of course, live in Chandigarh, this Nehruvian city of the future, its master plan crafted in the 1950s by the American architect Albert Mayer and refined by the Swiss-French modernist Le Corbusier. Chandigarh was built after partition as a new capital for the Indian state of Punjab, its administration to occupy Le Corbusier's iconic Capitol Complex. Lahore, the historic centre of this region, had been allocated to Pakistan in the 1947 division of the subcontinent. It was in Lahore that Lajpat Rai lived and died, and so too Bhagat Singh, hanged by the colonial state for conspiracy in 1931, though in the partition of memory that followed civil war both have been accepted as Indian patriots and written out of Pakistan's carefully curated narrative of national becoming. The Dwarka Das Library, smuggled out of Lahore at the moment of independence, was stored for years in the Himalayan hill city of Shimla before arriving in Chandigarh: first at the new Panjab University library, and then finally in 1966 at the Sector 15 Bhawan. It is one among many examples of how this quintessentially modernist city, its streets and buildings so deeply affected by a faith in the promise of the new, remains tied through objects, institutions and people to the upheaval, displacements and violence of the past. The material inheritance stored on the shelves of Lajpat Rai Bhawan represents a disinheritance for Lahore – the complex of buildings that activists and political

University, see Vanya Bhargav, 'Lala Lajpat Rai's Ideas on Caste: Conservative or Radical?', *Studies in Indian Politics* 6: 1, 2018, pp. 15–26.

² 'To Make the Deaf Hear: HSRA Notice', 8 April 1929, in *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh*, ed. Shiv Varma, Kanpur, 1996, hereafter *SWSBS*.

³ 'From glorious past to promising future: Dwarka Das Library', Leaflet in author's collection; on display during March 2012 visit.

thinkers once occupied at the top of Lahore's Mall Road, close to Rai's residence on Court Street, was hollowed in 1947 and have long since been repurposed or simply abandoned.⁴

In this short essay, part of a special issue on 'Insurgency in the Archives', I explore this peculiar collection of books and documents and consider the questions it poses for historians interested in anti-colonial histories, post-colonial presents and the commemorative work, as well as enduring political questions, that bind them. I begin by describing the origins of the library in a New York apartment and its later role in a critical pedagogical project conceived by Lajpat Rai in Lahore, connecting his experiments to a global conversation around the emancipatory potential of new social scientific knowledge as well as Indian debates over the nature of a political education. I then reflect on the form and function of the Library today, raising two questions about its claim to be a site of radical heritage. The first question considers what the Polish architect Kuba Snopek describes as the challenge of 'preserving the generic' – by which I mean the difficulty in adapting conventional heritage arguments to an object or assemblage distinguished not by its status as 'unique' or 'singular' (the books in the Dwarka Das collection can be found elsewhere) but by the cultural, social and/or political histories that are attached to it.⁵ The second question is more fundamental, and this concerns the relationship between heritage – its logics of preservation and conservation – and the disruptive imperatives of a revolutionary politics. How can this poorly resourced and underfunded library resist becoming a static 'monument' to a struggle now passed? Can it channel the demands of a revolutionary inheritance into contemporary India, and if so, how? What repertoires of action might its holdings still generate?⁶

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⁴ The shuttered and disintegrating Bradlaugh Hall, an important site of assembly for anti-colonial activists in the early part of the twentieth century, is emblematic of this transformation. See Chris Moffat, 'Fill the Halls: Space and Possibility in Lahore, Pakistan', 25 July 2019, available online at <https://www.publicbooks.org/fill-the-halls-space-and-possibility-in-lahore-pakistan/>

⁵ Kuba Snopek, *Belyayev Forever*, Strelka Press, Moscow, 2013.

⁶ On the 'unfinished business' of anti-colonial struggle in India, see Chris Moffat, 'Politics and the Work of the Dead in Modern India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60: 1, 2018, pp. 178–211. See also Paul Basu and Ferdinand De Jong, 'Utopian Archives, Decolonial Affordances', *Social Anthropology* 24, 2016, pp. 5–19.

Lajpat Rai was born to a family of modest means in Dhudike, a village in Moga district, British Punjab, and moved to Lahore in 1880 to study law at Government College. Establishing himself over subsequent years as a lawyer and journalist, he was drawn into the politics of his day, active in the Indian National Congress as well as the Hindu reformist movement the Arya Samaj.⁷ Rai achieved notoriety in 1907 when he was briefly deported to Mandalay for his role in the Punjab agrarian disturbances of that year.⁸ Alongside B.G. Tilak in Bombay and B.C. Pal in Calcutta, he emerged as a figurehead for the 'extremist' wing of the Congress, their call to break colonial laws provoking a conflict with moderates and a split in the organization. Rai was a prolific writer, organizer, fundraiser and entrepreneur, whose activism ranged from leading street demonstrations to working to establish national banking and insurance industries. Where he has been considered by scholars, it is often as part of a nascent Hindu nationalist politics in colonial India: Rai helped found the Punjab Hindu Sabha in 1907 and was an early leader of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha in the 1920s. The fate of the Hindu community – especially in the context of what he called Punjab's 'triangular communalism', where politics was marked by a contest between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs over their respective rights – was an abiding concern for Rai.⁹ But the historian Vanya Bhargav has contested attempts by Christophe Jaffrelot, Chetan Bhatt and others to position Rai in an easy lineage towards the far right *Hindutva* politics popularized by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the 1920s, suggesting instead that his attitude towards Hindu majoritarianism fluctuated over the years. Bhargav has noted, for instance, how Rai's defense of the Hindu community could coexist with 'ideas of humanity, equality and social justice drawn from liberal democratic and socialist thought', rather than any blood-and-soil nationalism.¹⁰ This is particularly evident in Rai's critique of caste hierarchies, which aligned at points with the polemics of low-caste and Dalit intellectuals, even if his emphasis on egalitarianism and merit prevented him from supporting attempts to create separate electorates for 'untouchables'.¹¹

⁷ On the latter see Lajpat Rai, *The Arya Samaj*, Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1915.

⁸ N. Gerald Barrier, 'The Punjab Disturbances of 1907', *Modern Asian Studies* 1: 4, 1967, pp. 353–83.

⁹ *CWLLR* vol. 12, p. 331.

¹⁰ Bhargav, 'Lala Lajpat Rai's Ideas on Caste', p. 24.

¹¹ Bhargav, 'Lala Lajpat Rai's Ideas on Caste', p. 23.

This essay focuses on a period of Rai's career shaped by his association with labour and socialist circles outside of India, exploring in particular the educational experiment inspired by his travels – the creation of a new type of school in interwar Lahore. To acknowledge the success of this experiment does not exculpate Rai from his entanglement with 'communal' (religious) politics; indeed, my understanding of the 'success' of the emancipatory educational system is connected to its ability to produce students critical of their own teachers, and even of the founder himself, as will be made clear. The potential for radical anti-colonial politics to fold easily into a communal chauvinism is something that has been noted by other scholars, and which requires continued vigilance today.¹²

The Dwarka Das Library was established in 1920 as part of Lajpat Rai's efforts as an educator. 'This library', Rai announced at its opening, 'will be the first political library in the country in which the students of economics and politics will be able to satisfy their appetite.'¹³ The shelves were filled with Rai's extensive personal collections – worth in his estimation about twenty or twenty-five thousand rupees at the time – as well as some donations from friends. The library was named after the educationist Dwarka Das (d.1912), a member of the Arya Samaj and a close colleague of Rai from his time at the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College in Lahore. But if the scholarly imperative of the Arya Samaj emphasized study of classical Sanskrit, the Vedas, and the 'moral and spiritual truths' to be found in vernacular languages and literature,¹⁴ the worlds opened by Lajpat Rai's collection were significantly broader. Its books charted a vast geography of affinities, a multiplicity of struggles animating a convulsing global terrain. In his 1917 monograph on Indian nationalism, Rai exhorted his compatriots to engage 'the world-forces', demonstrating how Indian dissidents have looked simultaneously to Washington and Mazzini, Parnell and Kossuth,

¹² Shruti Kapila's writing on the Indian political, especially with regard to the Ghadar movement and also Vinayak Savarkar, is essential here: see her *Violent Fraternity: Global Political Thought in the Indian Age*, Princeton University Press, forthcoming). Lajpat Rai's associate Bhai Parmanand demonstrates explicitly the ease of movement between Ghadar radicalism and Hindu nationalism: see the discussion in Chris Moffat, *India's Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019, pp. 45, 57.

¹³ 'Political Education in Punjab', in *CWLLR* vol. 9, pp. 248–50.

¹⁴ Rai, *Arya Samaj*, pp. 182, 186. This was part of the College's effort to inculcate a 'national spirit' in its students, even if it did still provide opportunities to study English literature and 'sciences both theoretical and applied'.

Tipu Sultan and the Rani of Jhansi.¹⁵ The library was to be a vector for such forces in the urban fabric of Lahore.

Lajpat Rai's books, as well as the pedagogical project with which the library was associated (of which more below), reflect the influence of 'New World' politics and culture on the Lahori's thought – the result of five years spent in the United States of America during the First World War. Rai arrived in the US in November 1914, intending to write a book on the young country, but wartime travel restrictions meant that he was unable to return to India until the end of 1919.¹⁶ Though he travelled frequently within the US, he was based for the most part in New York City, and here he was witness to a period of great ferment concerning the role of American universities in public life, with intellectuals debating how the radical potential of new social scientific thought was to be exploited or controlled.¹⁷

Recognized as a leading figure in the Indian anti-colonial movement, Lajpat Rai gained entry to several progressive circles in urban America. He was introduced to the Columbia University economist Edwin A. Seligman by Sidney Webb, the prominent British Fabian, who had met Lajpat Rai in 1912 during a visit to Lahore.¹⁸ Seligman, in turn, introduced Rai to members of the University and other figures around New York; he also invited him to observe the annual meetings of the American Sociological, Economic and Statistical Associations in Princeton in December 1914.¹⁹ In New York the Lahori wrote articles for Walter Lippman, journalist and founding editor of *New Republic* magazine. His research into the 'Negro Problem' in America – which he endeavoured to compare to hierarchies of caste in India – brought him in contact with civil rights activists W.E.B. Dubois in Washington DC and Booker T. Washington in Tuskegee, and he met with Mary Ovington, suffragist and co-founder of the National Association

¹⁵ Lajpat Rai, *Young India*, B. W. Huebsch, New York, 1917, pp. 221, 224.

¹⁶ For an overview of this period, see Harish K. Puri, 'Lajpat Rai in USA 1914–1919: Life and Work of a Political Exile', in *Lajpat Rai in Retrospect*, ed. J. S. Grewal and Indu Banga, Panjab University Publications Bureau, Chandigarh, 2000, pp. 5–80.

¹⁷ On this moment see Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States*, Baltimore, 1993. Lajpat Rai articulated some of his impressions concerning the role of American academics in political life in his article 'American Economists, Statisticians and Sociologists', reproduced in *CWLLR* vol. 5, pp. 68–74.

¹⁸ On his meeting Seligman through Webb, see Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America – a Hindu's Impression and a Study*, Calcutta, 1916, p. iv.

¹⁹ Rai, 'American Economists, Statisticians and Sociologists', p. 68.

for the Advancement of Coloured People.²⁰ Throughout his travels he remained immersed in Indian diasporic networks, establishing the India Home Rule League and editing the journal *Young India* from New York between 1918 and 1919.²¹ M.N. Roy, one of the central figures in early Indian communism, recalls visiting Lajpat Rai in New York in 1916. He noted the Lahori's frustration with exile, but also his tremendous political appetite. Rai had purchased the collected works of Marx and other socialist classics, bringing Roy along to the meetings of socialist groups in New York as part of his attempts to understand the American left.²²

Lajpat Rai's interest in education brought him to the Rand School of Social Science in New York, an institution linked to the progressive circles mentioned above. The Rand School was established in 1906 by members of the American Socialist Party to serve as an 'educational auxiliary' to labour movements in the United States, aiming to instruct and train individuals 'as may render them more efficient workers in and for the Socialist Party, Trade Unions and the Co-Operatives'.²³ It expanded rapidly and by 1917 had moved from an adapted family house on East 19th St to the much grander 'People's House' headquarters at 7 East 15th Street. Its curriculum was based on economic, political and social-historical subjects, as well as public speaking and organization methods, all taught in a 'modern and non-dogmatic' style.²⁴

The Rand School reflects the democratic impulse which characterized much early social science in the United States, attached to the belief that new disciplines promised, in Thomas Bender's words, to 'free knowledge and, by implication, social power from class power'.²⁵ Established in defiance of the more conservative Columbia University, the Rand School was modelled closely on an English counterpart, the famous Ruskin College, an institution for workers

²⁰ See Rai, *The United States of America*, pp. iv–v.

²¹ 'The Constitution of the India Home Rule League of America', 22 October 1917, in *CWLLR* vol. 7, pp. 85–6. For Lajpat Rai's general impressions on the diaspora and especially the Indian student abroad, see the chapter 'India in America' in his *The United States of America*.

²² M.N. Roy, *MN Roy's Memoirs* (1964), Delhi, 1984, pp. 27–8.

²³ *The American Labor Year Book 1919–1920*, ed. Alexander Trachtenberg, New York, 1920, p. 207.

²⁴ Trachtenberg, *American Labor Year Book* p.207.

²⁵ Bender, *Intellect and Public Life*, pp. 67–8. Bender demonstrates how institutions like Columbia and Chicago, the centres of early social science, sought to control or at least channel this impulse in non-threatening directions.

started in Oxford in 1899 to provide ‘the knowledge essential to intelligent citizenship’.²⁶ Lajpat Rai was impressed by the Rand School, observing that the institution was run ‘more or less on the lines of self-help’. The Lahori noted a splendid building, a well-equipped library, a lecture hall and restaurant. He expressed admiration for the school’s commitment to imparting instruction to ‘lower class people’ whose circumstances ‘did not permit of their using the regular universities and colleges’.²⁷ This feature may have reminded him of the Arya Samaj’s own objective to educate the dispossessed, though here it was paired with the new and radical potential of social science to prepare political workers for struggle. In November and December 1918, Lajpat Rai delivered a series of six lectures at the School on ‘Asia in World Politics’.²⁸

Within the expansive debate concerning the possible form of a ‘national’ education in colonial India, the role of Western curricula and traditions of knowledge was much contested. For many of Rai’s interlocutors, reliance on Western methods threatened to ‘denationalize’ Indian students.²⁹ Rai’s contemporary and *Ghadar* [‘Mutiny’] Party intellectual Har Dayal (1884–1939) insisted that British educational policy was turning Indians into ‘apt and docile pupils’, taught to regard ‘their Christian rulers as their guides and Gurus’.³⁰ A national education, in contrast, should impart ‘a love for ... national manners and customs’, with vernacular instruction in Hindu history and Sanskrit literature advocated as means toward this end. Beyond the transmission of knowledge, schools must also cultivate a feeling of social solidarity: ‘Not by science alone does a nation live and thrive’.³¹ In this, Har Dayal echoes other early twentieth-century critiques of British schools: consider Rabindranath Tagore’s experiments with outdoor learning and dialogic methods in Santiniketan, or M.K.

²⁶ Joint Committee Report, *Oxford and Working Class Education*, Oxford, 1908, p. 8. The History Workshop movement and its push for the democratisation of historical knowledge, of which this Journal is part, itself emerged from Ruskin College, where founding editor Raphael Samuel taught for several decades.

²⁷ ‘Servants of the People Society and Tilak School of Politics’, March 1927, in *CWLLR* vol. 13, pp. 331–2.

²⁸ Advertised in *Young India*, New York, November 1918: the course cost \$1.25.

²⁹ Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: the Western Education of Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2007. Seth notes on page 168 that few nationalists called seriously for a ‘return’ to some indigenous education system; they sought instead to redirect or synthesize western knowledge in different ways.

³⁰ Har Dayal, *Our Educational Problem*, Madras, 1922, p. 29.

³¹ Har Dayal, *Our Educational Problem*, 9–10.

Gandhi's warning that accepting education from the colonial government while desiring that government to perish 'is like trying to cut off the branch on which one is sitting'.³²

For Lajpat Rai, the critical assimilation of Western developments in education was of central importance: despite all its 'abominations, contradictions and cruelties', he wrote, the West had made 'great advance in the theory and methods of education'.³³ To discourage the study of European languages, literatures and sciences in India would be 'folly and madness'.³⁴ The Rand School provided him with a model that was at the forefront of new approaches to learning and which was also critical of power and authority, striving to produce students who would disrupt structures of domination and exploitation. At the end of 1919, Lajpat Rai was given permission to return to India, and he reached Bombay on 20 February 1920. 'Within a year of my landing', he later recalled, 'I began to form my plans for establishing a School of Politics somewhat on the lines of the Rand School in New York.'³⁵

The death in August 1920 of Lajpat Rai's friend, the fellow 'extremist' B.G. Tilak gave the school its name, as well as clear connotations of its political direction: Tilak had been described by Lenin as the 'revolutionary figurehead of India' and his commitment to action foreshadowed the priorities of many of those who would teach in the school.³⁶ The naming of the school demonstrates the prioritization of an open future, combining Tilak's celebration of radical rupture with a vision of the emancipatory potential of social science. Lajpat Rai's response to the question of national education is constituted by this convergence: the Tilak School would aim to forge the national subject as political worker, equipped to negotiate a transitional moment in Indian history. The

³² *Navajivan*, 31 October 1920, in vol. 18, p. 399, of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [XC Volumes (Ahmedabad, 1958–1984)]. For Tagore's writings on education, see *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* vol. 3, ed. Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, 2006.

³³ See Lajpat Rai's 'Introduction' to Har Dayal, *Our Educational Problem*, p. xi.

³⁴ Lajpat Rai, *The Problem of National Education in India*, London, 1920 p. 84.

³⁵ 'Servants of the People Society and Tilak School of Politics', March 1927, in *CWLLR* vol. 13, p. 332.

³⁶ On Tilak as 'the arch-theorist of the political' in modern India, see Shruti Kapila, 'A History of Violence', *Modern Intellectual History* 7: 2, 2010, pp. 437–57. Tilak had helped fund Lajpat Rai's publishing efforts in New York, noted in Lajpat Rai's 'My Farewell', *Young India*, New York, December 1919.

School's aims and objectives were outlined in Lajpat Rai's newspaper *Bande Mataram* in November 1920:

- A) To impart political education in Lahore and to teach economics and other subjects like sociology, social psychology, journalism, etc;
- B) To educate and train people for political work;
- C) To give opportunities for research so as to produce experts in politics and economics;
- D) To have a fine, modern political library.³⁷

Training in politics – a ‘taboo’ subject in the halls of Punjab University – and other social sciences would be combined with opportunities for students to ‘put to test the theories they borrowed from books’.³⁸ For Rai, critical pedagogy should facilitate a move towards praxis: ‘Stuffing the minds of students merely with political theories would make them pedantic without enabling them to form an intelligent and practical opinion on political questions.’³⁹

Money for the Tilak School was raised by Lajpat Rai through ticketed public lectures and appeals at meetings of the Indian National Congress. Arrangements were made to sublet rooms from other Lahore colleges, and many of the School's lecturers were friends and fellow travellers volunteering their time and expertise. The School's library, as I have noted, was formed from the founder's personal collection. Opening in December 1920, it was in no small way due to timing that the School could take off so swiftly. It was established amidst the upheaval and energy of Gandhi's first Non-Co-operation movement, a non-violent mass mobilization against the colonial government and its implementation of repressive ‘emergency’ legislation in the aftermath of the First World War. Lajpat Rai acknowledged that ‘Mr. Gandhi's propaganda’ – which included the boycott of British educational institutions – had afforded him the opportunity of ‘testing the effects of this education’.⁴⁰

³⁷ ‘Political Education in Punjab’, in *Bande Mataram*, 20 Nov 1920, in *CWLLR* vol. IX, p. 249.

³⁸ ‘Servants of the People Society and Tilak School of Politics’, March 1927, in *CWLLR* vol. 13, p. 333. For the lengths to which Punjab University's constituent colleges went to dissuade students from engaging with politics, see Moffat, *India's Revolutionary Inheritance*, pp. 30–1.

³⁹ From a November 1920 lecture reproduced in *CWLLR* vol. 9, pp. 252–3.

⁴⁰ Lajpat Rai's ‘Introduction’ to Har Dayal, *Our Educational Problem*, p. ix.

Founded at the height of a mass political movement, the Tilak School would hardly find controlled circumstances for Rai's 'test'. The surge of students as a result of Non-Co-operation meant that much was ad hoc and unrehearsed, while money was continually scarce. Instead of being a place for the careful grooming of national missionaries, it was a space in which students encountered the radical urgency of a political moment, approaching their education as one arm of a larger struggle taking place across the country, at all levels of society. Yashpal – the Hindi novelist and an early comrade of Bhagat Singh – reflects this in his memoirs, where he describes his attraction to the Tilak School as part of a mindset in which he is 'drawn towards armed revolution'.⁴¹

The Dwarka Das Library was at the centre of this dynamic environment, drawn on by students in their studies of 'Irish' methods of rebellion (from bomb-throwing to cultural initiatives) and the drive in Russia to create class-consciousness,⁴² as well as introducing them to a wide variety of dissidents and 'free thinkers', from Sidney and Beatrice Webb on trade unionism and prison reform to Charles Bradlaugh on atheism, W.E.B. DuBois on slavery to John Dewey on ethics and Upton Sinclair on co-operative living. These resources would work in tandem with Lajpat Rai's exhortations to reflexive critique: 'Assume nothing, analyse every idea, examine every scheme in the light of the day, in the searchlight of scientific truth. Let our schemes be tested by the most critical tests of the times.'⁴³ Bhagat Singh, who joined the Tilak School in 1921, recalled his experiences in a later essay: 'It was there that I began to think liberally and discuss and criticize all the religious problems, even about God.'⁴⁴ The library was a critical transactive terrain: the librarian Raja Ram, who joined the School a few years after its founding, reflects sentimentally on the visits of Bhagat Singh and his comrades. 'We discussed revolution, Socialism and so forth. Many a time, our discussions got so lengthy that they lasted up to one or two a.m.'⁴⁵

⁴¹ Yashpal, *Yashpal Looks Back: Selections from an Autobiography*, transl. Corinne Friend, New Delhi, 1981, p. 3. The Tilak School would also be known as the Punjab National College following a 1921 cash injection from the Indian National Congress.

⁴² See the reflections of Chhabil Das in his Oral History Transcript at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Acc. No. 163 (1973), pp. 38–9.

⁴³ Lajpat Rai, *The Problem of National Education in India*, p. 75.

⁴⁴ 'Why I am an Atheist', 1931, in *SWSBS*, p.122.

⁴⁵ Raja Ram, 'A Jolly Good Revolutionary' in *Bhagat Singh: Making of a Revolutionary – Contemporaries' Portrayals*, ed. K. C. Yadav and Babar Singh, Gurgaon, 2006, p. 183.

The Tilak School was not a place for deference or hierarchy between student and teacher, but rather a space of self-discovery, debate and transgressive acts. This latter is epitomized in the break of several students from the emancipatory education system itself: that is, the willingness of Bhagat Singh and his comrades in the *Naujawan Bharat Sabha* (a youth organization founded by Tilak School students and teachers in 1924) to turn on the man who laid the foundation for their unique political education. In August 1926, in the middle of a decade that saw a surge of communal violence in colonial India, Lajpat Rai resigned from Motilal Nehru's Swaraj Party on the basis that its policy and prescribed boycotts were 'distinctly harmful' to Hindus.⁴⁶ He then joined Madan Mohan Malaviya in forming the 'Independent Congress Party', supported by the Indian industrialist G.D. Birla and formulating an agenda to defend Hindu interests. The Sabha identified the Independent Congress Party as pro-communal and pro-capitalist and launched a scathing attack on Lajpat Rai through a variety of media. A pamphlet authored by Kedar Nath Sehgal on behalf of the organization, *An Appeal to Young Punjab*, labelled the founder of the Tilak School a traitor.⁴⁷ Representatives from the Sabha visited a public meeting of the new Party, handing out copies of a Robert Browning poem entitled 'The Lost Leader' and giving a copy each to Lajpat Rai and Malaviya directly.⁴⁸

The Sabha represents a radical possibility of this pedagogical space *actualised*. The prioritization of criticism as practice is captured in a later manifesto, authored by Tilak School graduate B.C. Vohra:

Let then young men think independently, calmly, serenely and patiently. ... Let them stand on their own feet. They must organise themselves free from any influence and refuse to be exploited any more by the hypocrites and insincere people who have nothing in common with them and who always desert the cause at the critical juncture.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See Lajpat Rai's letter to Motilal Nehru, 24 Aug. 1926, in *CWLLR* vol. 12, pp. 4–7.

⁴⁷ National Archives of India, Home-Political Files F. No 130 and KW/1930, p. 36.

⁴⁸ Ram Chandra, *History of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha*, Chandigarh, 2007, p. 26. The poem was originally written as an attack on William Wordsworth, who Browning considered had deserted the liberal cause.

⁴⁹ 'Manifesto of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha', 4 June 1928, in *SWSBS*, p. 153.

This combination of personal responsibility and open potentiality would also propel the revolutionary politics for which Bhagat Singh became an iconic anti-colonial figure. The urge to break from custom and reflect critically on received knowledge, facilitated in part by an education in the social sciences, was positioned as necessary for creating a new world. 'The people generally get accustomed to the established order of things and begin to tremble at the very idea of change', Bhagat Singh wrote in 1929. 'It is this lethargical spirit that needs to be replaced by the revolutionary spirit.'⁵⁰ In 1928, Bhagat Singh and his Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) would again be associated with Lajpat Rai, after their 'lost leader' was beaten by police during a protest procession and succumbed to his injuries a few weeks later. The HSRA assassinated a police officer in Lahore in retaliation, nominating the Englishman as representative of an institution 'so cruel, lowly and so base that it must be abolished'.⁵¹

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It is due to Bhagat Singh's enduring popularity as a youthful, rebel hero in an independent India that the Dwarka Das library can lay claim to a historic role of 'fuelling revolution'. The Tilak School's impact on Punjab politics was intense but short-lived: the institution closed in 1927 due to dwindling enthusiasm from students and funders. And yet the library remained embedded in Lahore's intellectual life up to Partition. Bhagat Singh, arrested after bombing the Legislative Assembly in Delhi in 1929, continued to draw from the collection from his jail cell, sending lists of books to comrades as he awaited execution for conspiracy.⁵² His feverish study is evidenced in a notebook kept in prison, in which he records important concepts or quotes from his extensive reading.⁵³ With these letters and notebook citations to hand, one can identify in the Dwarka

⁵⁰ 'On the Slogan of Long Live Revolution', 1929, in *SWSBS*, p. 15.

⁵¹ 'Beware, Ye Bureaucracy: HSRA Notice', (18 Dec. 1928, in *SWSBS*, p. 62.

⁵² See Bhagat Singh's 'Letter to Jaidev Gupta', 24 July 1930, reproduced in *SWSBS*, p. 103. In this letter he requests a range of books from *Militarism* by Karl Liebknecht to *Mutual Aid* by Prince Kropotkin, *Why Men Fight* by Bertrand Russell to *The Civil War in France* by Karl Marx. 'This work is a must. Please keep this in mind', he writes.

⁵³ On the notebook's radical potential, see J. Daniel Elam, 'Commonplace Anti-Colonialism', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39: 3, 2016, pp. 592–607.

Das collection the texts consulted by the famous martyr, noting suggestive date stamps on inside covers and pondering the provenance of annotations scrawled in the margins. But as the Library's twenty-first century promotional materials attest, the collection is more than a place for genuflection to past heroes: it is 'not only a touchstone of the pre-1947 revolutionary movement but also offer [sic] inspiration for future'.⁵⁴

During my visits to Lajpat Rai Bhawan in recent years, the library has always been busy, with desks occupied by students from the nearby Panjab University and the front table crowded with older visitors enjoying the selection of magazines and daily newspapers. The institution's claim to a politicized genealogy is apparent in framed pictures on its walls and shelves – from Lajpat Rai himself to portraits of Madan Lal Dhingra, who assassinated a British colonial official in London in 1909, and the famous Ghadar Party martyr Kartar Singh Sarbaha, executed for sedition in 1915. But beyond these ornaments, how does the Library manifest its desire to draw a connection 'from glorious past to promising future'? On my first visit in 2012, the chairperson of the Library was Hemant Goswami, a member of the Lok Sevak Mandal ('Servants of the People Society', also founded by Lajpat Rai in 1920), which runs the library, and a prominent social activist in his own right.⁵⁵ Aside from efforts to preserve aging or damaged books, Goswami was working to ensure the Library facilitated political discussions and organization as much as study. He offered space in the Bhawan for local activists to run workshops on issues of public health, food security and the use of media for social change.

Though Goswami affirmed a sense of responsibility to the institution's history, he was cautious about dwelling on the past. 'You have to actually see the practical reality', he told me. 'And this is what Bhagat Singh, Lalaji [Lajpat Rai], Mahatma Gandhi...they all did. What was practical at that point of time to do.' What Goswami takes from anti-colonial history is not a compulsion for deference but an inspiration to critically analyse the present. 'Wherever there are

⁵⁴ Dwarka Das Library, 'From glorious past to promising future', Leaflet 2012.

⁵⁵ The Servants of the People Society was established by Lala Lajpat Rai following his return to Lahore from New York in 1920, and today operates in India as a social-service organization with interests in education, health, and agriculture. See the official website, <http://sops.in/>, last accessed September 2019.

revolutions, it is always based on what is required at that point of time, so it is always contextual.⁵⁶ This might explain why, when Bhagat Singh's martyrdom anniversary is marked each year at the Library, it takes the form of activist workshops and discussion groups on contemporary political issues, interspersed with poetry and other creative responses to revolutionary struggle.⁵⁷

In 2012, the Dwarka Das Library became 'Asia's first RTI library', making available to the public an open-source depository of information collected under the 2005 Right to Information (RTI) Act. This transparency tool allows citizens to request information from any public authority in India, which is then required by law to reply. The aim of creating a depository of such materials, according to Onkar Chand of the Lok Sevak Mandal, was to help other activists 'who want to refer to them for litigation or research purposes'.⁵⁸ In this sense, the library continues a tradition of facilitating action against the state – even if here it manifests in a call of 'accountability' rather than a project of disruption. The desire to facilitate this particular type of citizens' activism appeared in the wake of a broader movement against corruption in India, initiated in 2011 with the aim to 'purge' government institutions of graft and corrupt officials. The India Against Corruption movement demanded better oversight from above and vigilance within, rather than questioning the structure and nature of these institutions themselves. In this sense, Goswami is no revolutionary, and the Lok Sevak Mandal retains some of the organic nationalist presumptions and slippages to majoritarianism that concerned Bhagat Singh about Lajpat Rai. But there is still the claim that one way to honour the sacrifices of anti-colonial revolutionaries is to update their struggle for the present, here as it relates to digital advocacy and accessible, open-source repositories. As Gaurav Chhabra, a Chandigarh-based activist closely associated with the library, has argued, in twenty-first century India 'the megabyte is the new dynamite'.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Interview by the author with Hemant Goswami, Dwarka Das Library, Chandigarh, 27 March 2012.

⁵⁷ 'Reading up a revolution', *The Times of India*, 23 March 2011.

⁵⁸ 'Chandigarh gets Asia's first RTI library', *Times of India*, 16 June 2012.

⁵⁹ This was the slogan for a film Chhabra produced in part at the library. The film is available online as 'Inklab', posted by user 'humlog' on YouTube, 7 April 2012: www.youtube.com/watch?v=59Ajx0vVPZA. Last accessed September 2019.

This turn to the digital raises the questions of the books themselves – many of which have travelled from American bookshops to Lahore residential spaces, storage boxes in Shimla to crowded shelves in Chandigarh. Like many libraries and archives in India, the Dwarka Das library struggles to fund its activities, and cannot afford to allocate resources to the preservation of particularly vulnerable materials like old newspapers and journals.⁶⁰ Goswami spoke optimistically about plans for digitization, but this too requires time, money and volunteers with the appropriate training. When it comes to applying for funding – something like the British Library’s ‘Endangered Archives’ programme, for instance – the Dwarka Das library falls short because its collection is not composed of ‘original’ or ‘primary-source’ documents. The majority of its contents can be found elsewhere, in other libraries. There are editions of rare materials – gazetteers, newspapers, resolutions of the Indian National Congress, and so on – though again, these are copies of documents more widely circulated, and in their deteriorating form not easy to make widely accessible. If the coherence and long-term viability of archives and historic collections relies on the ‘controlled destruction’ of duplicates, what argument can be made for the protection and maintenance of the Dwarka Das Library?

It is because of the ‘generic’ nature of individual books and documents that the library must emphasize the historic significance of the collection as a whole and its role in prior political struggles. In his short book *Belyayevo Forever* (2013), Kuba Snopek suggests that arguments for ‘preserving the generic’ can challenge the focus in dominant heritage discourses around the ‘unique’ or ‘singular’ nature of objects and buildings and instead affirm the ‘inseparable bond’ between material heritage and its immaterial context.⁶¹ Snopek’s focus is on the ‘generic’ social housing estate in contemporary Russia – particularly, the Belyayevo neighbourhood in Moscow, where Soviet-era high-rise residential buildings are made in the exact same form and material as countless other

⁶⁰ This struggle is apparent even in the National Archives of India. See Dinyar Patel’s three-part series on this institution for the *New York Times* ‘India Ink’ blog: ‘In India, History Literally Rots Away’, 20 March 2012; ‘Repairing the Damage at India’s National Archives’, 21 March 2012; and ‘India’s Archives: How Did Things Get This Bad?’, 22 March 2012. The series begins here: <https://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/in-india-history-literally-rots-away/>. Last accessed September 2019.

⁶¹ Snopek, *Belyayevo Forever*, p. 67.

neighbourhoods in the city, but which still, the author suggests, deserve heritage status because of their intimate association with an important moment in Russian conceptual art. Snopek's argument, however different the context, resonates with some of the challenges facing the Dwarka Das library in Chandigarh. In statements from the Lok Sevak Mandal, the institution's immaterial significance is romantically appraised: for Onkar Chand, 'this library was known as the Revolutionaries Shrine because Bhagat Singh and his colleagues made this library their sanctuary. It played a home to patriots and freedom fighters'.⁶² Interestingly, its importance in the global history of social science and the development of related disciplines in India is not acknowledged. Whatever the case, the precise purpose of the assembled books themselves is not indicated in the library's rhetoric of distinction. Are they to be acknowledged as heritage objects, worthy of preservation because of their role in historic struggles now finished? Or is it necessary to keep them available to readers as a means to incite new politics and animate the imagination of a new generation, to inspire action in the present? Remember the note on Bhagat Singh's encounter with the anarchist Vaillant: his 'emulation of the narrative inspires us even today'.⁶³

If the aim is the latter, then some lessons may be learned from other archives and collections associated with radical political movements, especially on questions of access and approaches that position stored materials not as a precious patrimony to be protected but as active 'tools': usable and mobile objects. I have written elsewhere on imagining the archive not as an authoritative, final 'destination' but rather as a 'beacon' on a broader journey: something which is stable and reliable, which may prompt a sense of hope, but which is successful only if it is overtaken, left behind on the path of struggle.⁶⁴ The organizing function of the institution is thus not consolidation but rather facilitation and, better, incitement. This ties to a second lesson, which may be drawn from the itinerant history of the library itself, not only in terms of its

⁶² 'Dwarka Das Library, Chandigarh: a Date With History', *Indian Express*, 21 May 2018, accessed online at <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/dwarka-dass-library-chandigarh-a-date-with-history-5185047/>

⁶³ Dwarka Das Library, 'From glorious past to promising future', 2012.

⁶⁴ Chris Moffat, 'Against "Cultures of Hiatus": History and the Archive in the Political Thought of John La Rose', *Small Axe* 55, 2018, pp. 39-54.

travels across oceans and borders but also the porous quality that characterized its walls in Lahore, the movement of books from Lajpat Rai's residence to study groups in the city and smuggled even into the hands of prisoners in the Central Jail. This itinerant history could inform a vision for the institution that is not premised on the long-term coherence of the collection, the prioritization of its survival as a *whole*, but rather an idea of the library as a resource for planting seeds of dissent in the present, such that the loss or further disintegration of certain books may be justified in terms of their participation in contemporary struggles. Here, the generic quality of individual texts emerges as an asset (their content will not be lost if the book is confiscated or destroyed).

Finally, another lesson may be learned from the library's former home of Lahore. Here, in spite of its 1947 disinheritance, in spite of the loss of materials and the difficulty over many decades in acquiring historical literature on anti-colonial revolutionary movements, still there is a desire among youth and left activists in Pakistan to convene with this history, to affirm the 'unfinished business' of Bhagat Singh's struggle in the present. This lesson further undermines a project that would prioritize the preservation of all materials as a necessary first step. Lahore's ability to maintain this link with its radical history is demonstrative of the caution Jacques Rancière offers in his reflections on intellectual emancipation. In thinking about the capacity to learn, we should not prioritize some contingent inheritance but rather the power of one's *will*.⁶⁵ The expansiveness of a collection means nothing without the ferocity of one's will to engage it. So, the Dwarka Das library in Chandigarh needs eager minds, alive to the demands of the present, while those who seek the magic of a similar history in Lahore are not dependent on this material preserve, driven instead to animate the potential of the past in urgent and creative ways. Like Bhagat Singh and his comrades in their relationship to Lajpat Rai, a radical heritage is not about deference to genealogy or feeling hostage to a debt, but about mobilizing the tools gifted by the past in a manner the present demands.

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⁶⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford, 1991.