

# MUZAFFAR AHMAD'S Unexpected Turn in Life

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Muzaffar Ahmad (1889-1973), one of the earliest communists in India, became the representative figure of a socialist and communist circle in Bengal during 1921-22. His life had taken a turn that involved a rejection of mainstream politics based on the identities of 'nation' and 'community'. He and his fellow activists stepped out of the confines of nationalism dominated by the Hindu *bhadralok* landed caste-classes, of political movements based on perceptions of Muslim exclusivity and of the primacy of ethnolinguistic identities. They came to regard class politics from below as the source of freedom. Class-consciousness, therefore, was regarded as a space beyond the politics of identities.

## A MIGRANT

Muzaffar Ahmad, born in 1889 on the remote coastal island of Sandwip on the Bay of Bengal, was one of many who travelled to the city in search of colonial education. He was also eager to become a part of the urban literati. Musapur, his village, was indistinguishable from other villages in every respect except for its weekly *haat* (village market). The material conditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicated island life encouraged migration. Limited education and job opportunities meant a section of the male children from genteel families would leave the island in search of livelihood. For them, growing up meant moving away from rural origins. Those from the impoverished peasant families also left.

Muzaffar was the youngest child of his parents, Mansoor Ali and Chuna Bibi. In 1910, he shifted to Noakhali District School and completed his secondary education. The stages of Muzaffar's migration to the city were intertwined with insufficient access to colonial higher education in the districts. Muzaffar arrived in Kolkata in 1913 and enrolled as a college student. Having failed to qualify in the pre-graduation examination, he gave up on attaining formal education. Though

journalism in 1920 was also a step in this direction. By late 1921, he had aligned himself with a left political course.

## THE LEFT TURN

The international anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist groundswell at the end of the First World War encouraged a group of urban intellectuals and political activists, predominantly Muslim, to initiate an early socialist nucleus in Kolkata (1922-1924). The failure of the Non-Cooperation and the Khilafat Movements and the disillusionment with mainstream political ideologies of 'nation' and 'community' set the immediate local context for the popularisation of a 'class'-based anti-colonial tendency.

The first attempt to offer a Marxist and Leninist critique of Indian society and its anti-colonial movement came in the form of a leaflet, M. N. Roy and Abani Mukherjee's 'Manifesto to

Muzaffar Ahmad moved independently towards Marxist and Leninist ideology. No link with the Third International existed before late 1921. Yet, an anti-Bolshevik surveillance network was already in place by this time, and its origins could be traced back to the closing years of the First World War. The police started following Muzaffar Ahmad's correspondence with M. N. Roy in 1922, and he was arrested in 1923. In May 1924, Colonel Cecil Kaye, director of the Central Intelligence Bureau, specially congratulated the Intelligence Branch of the Bengal Police for the efforts in bringing the 'Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case' to 'a satisfactory conclusion'. Two of the four accused, Nalini Gupta and Muzaffar Ahmad, were from Bengal and statements of police officers as prosecution witnesses played a key role in their quick conviction by the colonial state.

After his release from prison, Muzaffar

vocabulary, and to spell certain Bangla words in ways that delinked them from their Arabic and Persian roots. Simultaneously he wrote in a modern style that originated from the great nineteenth-century Hindu *bhadralok* writers. He also mastered reticent humour through his sentence structures. This acted as a tool of subversion while the prose was adapted to put forward the social interests of the lower orders of society. Therefore, his writings were examples of radicalism in the formal sense as well. One way of arriving at class-based politics was an interpretation of 'freedom' and, more importantly, identifying its enemies. 'Bharat Kano Swadhin Noy?' ('Why is India Not Free?') offered an analysis of class forces, obstructing 'freedom' for the vast majority of peasants and workers.

Muzaffar turned to the autobiographical genre from the late 1950s and continued writing

Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad (1889-1973)

Muzaffar Ahmad became friends with anti-colonial Urdu and Bangla Muslim political activists engaging with labour issues and organisation of strikes by workers, which strengthened the ongoing Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements. His turn toward radical political journalism in 1920 was also a step in this direction.



Portrait of 25 of the Meerut Prisoners taken outside the jail (early 1930s). Back row (left to right): K. N. Sehgal, S. S. Josh, H. L. Hutchinson, Shaukat Usmani, B. F. Bradley, A. Prasad, P. Spratt, G. Adhikari. Middle Row: R. R. Mitra, Gopen Chakravarti, Kishori Lal Ghosh, L. R. Kadam, D. R. Thengdi, Goura Shanker, S. Bannerjee, K. N. Joglekar, P. C. Joshi, Muzaffar Ahmad. Front Row: M. G. Desai, D. Goswami, R.S. Nimbkar, S.S. Mirajkar, S.A. Dange, S. V. Ghate, Gopal Basak.

the 36<sup>th</sup> Indian National Congress, Ahmedabad, 1921'. Smuggled into India and circulated by Roy's contacts, it projected 'complete independence' as the foremost demand. The leaflet argued for a transformation of the Congress into a platform for the majority of the population, namely the workers and the peasants. Roy was also carefully building a combined analysis of the Indian proletariat, reformism in trade union circles, and imperialist and anti-imperialist strategies. He criticised nationalist ideology, including its 'extremist' variant, for its dependence on Hindu revivalist forms and subordination of working-class and peasant demands. The process of forming a socialist network in Kolkata and Bengal gained momentum after Nalini Gupta, M. N. Roy's emissary, arrived. Probably having heard of Muzaffar and Nazrul's socialist leanings, he met them during the last week of December 1921. After they met, Muzaffar learnt that an émigré Indian Communist Party had emerged in Soviet Tashkent in 1920 under M. N. Roy's leadership and the Communist International's directions. Nalini Gupta decided Muzaffar was best equipped to be the Third International's contact in Kolkata.

Dissemination of socialist literature and ideas was one of Muzaffar's principal aims. Since Muzaffar was part of the wider anti-colonial literary circle in Kolkata and had access to periodicals and journalists, he also managed to influence some radical anti-imperialist Bangla Muslim periodicals. During his correspondence with Roy in 1922-23, he was encouraged to take over and transform *Moslem Jagat* (Moslem World) into a communist newspaper. The paper enjoyed a brief existence, and Muzaffar's stint there as the de facto editor was even shorter, lasting only a few months. Nevertheless, his own efforts among Muslim anti-colonial activists and Roy's correspondence with *bhadralok* revolutionaries yielded results. British Intelligence reports complained that 'extremist' newspapers were spreading Bolshevik ideas.

attended the first Communist Conference at Kanpur in December 1925, which helped forge an all India network. He returned to Kolkata and, in 1926, joined his comrades from the left circle to organise the Peasants and Workers Party (renamed Workers and Peasants Party), the open legal organisation of the Communist Party of India, which was banned. The mouthpiece of this group was *Langal* (The Plough), which reappeared as *Ganabani* (Voice of the Masses) and consciously promoted left ideas, analysis and literature. Political analysis and critical reportage, fiction and non-fiction, prose and poetry dealt with social oppressions and institutional mechanisms to perpetuate and enforce them.

During the second half of the 1920s, significant shifts in the realm of politics were evident in Bengal. Historians have overwhelmingly focused on the impact of these changes, introduced by colonial constitutional reforms, which intensified communal polarisations and the related making of segmented 'constituencies'. Only a few have treated the demands for redistributive justice from below, expressed through new approaches to political identity and movements. The role of Muzaffar Ahmad and his colleagues in systematically developing a left perspective on contemporary social conflicts through a prism of 'class' started during this period. This ideological orientation also made them look beyond urban metropolitan boundaries, even if Kolkata was the centre of activism. The first socialist organisation signalled the appearance of a new kind of political formation in the history of modern Bengal. Its structure and expansion also created a political space for wider receptions of communist ideas and practices in the region. Organisation among workers, several militant strikes and attempts to influence the youth again attracted police attention. As strike actions gained ascendancy and plans were made to build a peasant league, the colonial state became eager to suppress the left current in general and communism in particular. In 1929, Muzaffar Ahmad was arrested and put on trial along with 30 others in the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case (1929-31), the most protracted judicial process in the history of colonial India. Muzaffar Ahmad was the Chief Accused and received the longest sentence. The individual and joint statements of those charged with sedition popularised communist ideas by receiving wide press coverage in the depths of the Great Depression. The communists challenged 'imperialism from the dock'.

## A WRITER

In 1913, Muzaffar Ahmad was just one more in the sea of migrants from rural Bengal to Kolkata. His ambition was to be a writer. Yet, in the vortex of metropolitan upheavals, his life would take a completely different direction. Muzaffar Ahmad's emergence as a communist polemical writer in the second half of the 1920s mirrored a break from his earliest intellectual engagements. An advocate of a distinct language that was rare in the 1920s, his prose style, shaped by radical modernist perceptions, attracted only a small left readership even if other writers acknowledged its significance later. During his career as a Bangalee Muslim cultural polemicist, Muzaffar supported Islamic content, but not Islamisation of form, opposing artificial Arabisation or Sanskritisation. As his political outlook changed, his rejection of attempts to communalise the Bangla language became even more pronounced. Muzaffar refused to do away with Arabic and Persian words, which had been part of the Bangla

during the 1960s while in and out of prison as the undivided CPI faced a split. This would culminate in the formation of another party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), in 1964, independent of Moscow and Peking, which he joined as one of the senior-most communist leaders. His memoirs generated controversy and recalled his days as the leading figure on the left and the literary world with Nazrul at its centre. The revised and final versions, including a major sourcebook on communism in India, *Amar Jibon o Bharater Communist Party* (My Life and the Communist Party of India), were mainly completed and published during the last ten years of his life (1963-73). Muzaffar's emphasis on documents to support his version of events and their context was motivated by the desire to give his narrative a sense of historicity, even if he was adamant that the exercise was to remember his past. The prose style of Muzaffar's autobiographical writings reflected the same syncretic modern language which had evolved during the early decades of the twentieth century.

## IN THE CITY

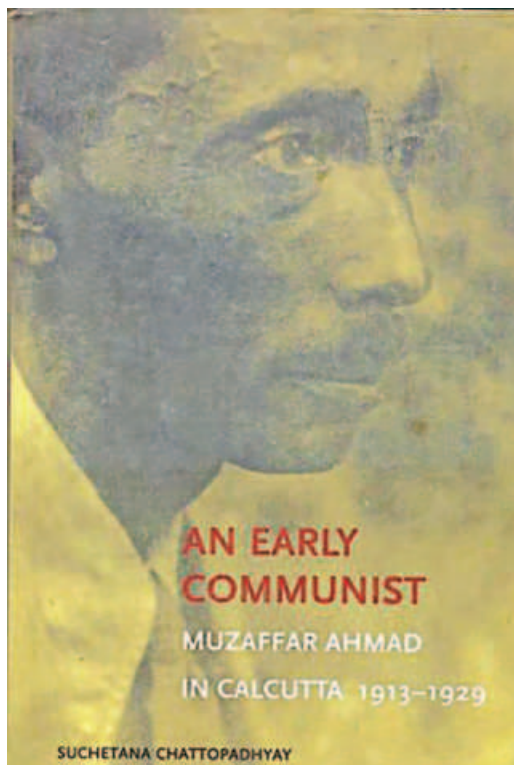
Muzaffar Ahmad's autobiographical accounts centred around, veered away from and always returned to Kolkata, despite the momentous upheavals and uncertainties he was to experience in the urban space and the region from the 1910s to the early 1970s. He and the other early communists journeyed from obscurity in the political wilderness to become radical veterans who paved the way for the later emergence of a mass party and movement. After the Partition, the relegation of East Bengal, in his own words, to 'not just a foreign land but a distant foreign land', even occasional contact with relatives became increasingly difficult to maintain. He visited his friends and relatives, his daughter, grandson and the family in 1972 after Bangladesh was born. This was a final gesture of farewell to Eastern Bengal, where he was born. He died the following year in Kolkata. Towards the end of his life, he remarked: 'My attachment to atheist materialism increases each day. It is said, as people grow older, they become increasingly inclined toward the spirit. In my case, I notice the opposite. I am becoming even more attached to [the world of] matter each year.' Munshi Alimuddin had died long before Muzaffar Ahmad arrived in the city. Yet the nineteenth-century Urdu writer's unobtrusive shadow seems to have followed Muzaffar from the beginning to the end of his time in Kolkata. During the 1910s, Muzaffar found employment as a private tutor and stayed in the house of Alimuddin. Whenever the spectre of destitution visited in the early 1920s, he could seek asylum there. This association was strangely rekindled in the later decades of his life when a communist commune and office were set up at Alimuddin Street, named after the late writer. It became the Bengal headquarters of his party from the 1960s. Following his death, the office was moved to a new building named after Muzaffar Ahmad on the same street. When Muzaffar reached the city in 1913, his ambition was to be a writer. What Munshi Alimuddin became in nineteenth-century Kolkata eluded him. The interplay between his social being and social consciousness took him in directions he could not have envisaged at the moment of his arrival.

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Cover of Muzaffar Ahmad's autobiography.

Muzaffar was in college briefly, College Street and its surrounding neighbourhoods, associated with the intelligentsia as well as subterranean and prominent political currents, remained his regular haunt. In the course of the 1910s, he became engaged with Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Samiti (Bengali Muslim Literary Society) and its journal, Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika (Bengali Muslim Literary Magazine). He had initially wished to devote himself to thoughtful essays on the glories of Islamic culture. However, he gradually involved himself in political activities since, in his milieu, culture and politics had become explicitly intertwined. His political experiences as a marginalised figure on the fringes of society made him focus on the wider anti-colonial struggle and the social questions concerning equality and inequality which they generated. Involvement in militant labour politics heightened during 1920-21 in Kolkata and its suburbs. A simultaneous switch to radical journalism increasingly made him write about the political movements of workers and peasants. Soon Muzaffar developed links with bookshops selling socialist literature under the counter. He became friends with anti-colonial Urdu and Bangla Muslim political activists engaging with labour issues and organisation of strikes by workers, which strengthened the ongoing Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements. His turn toward radical political



Cover of *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta, 1913-1929*