# Separating the Wheat from the Chaff

## *Meerut and the Creation of "Official" Communism in India*

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Few events have been as significant for the leftist movement in colonial India as the Meerut Conspiracy Case. At the time, the case captured the imagination of virtually all political sections in British India as well as left-leaning organizations around the globe. It also defined the way in which the Left viewed itself and conducted its politics. Since then, the case has continued to attract the attention of historians working on the Indian Left. Indeed, it is difficult to come across any work on the Left that does not accord a prominent place to Meerut.

Despite this, the case has been viewed mostly in terms that tend to diminish its larger significance. For one, within the rather substantial body of literature devoted to the Indian Left, there have been very few works that examine the case with any degree of depth. Most of those have been authored by the Left itself or by political activists who were defendants in the case. Whether authored by the Left or by academics, the literature generally contends that the Raj failed in its objective to administer a fatal blow to "communism" in India. Instead, it's commonly thought that the trial actually provided a fillip to communist politics in India.[1] Not only did the courtroom provide an unprecedented opportunity to the accused to openly articulate their political beliefs, but it also generated public sympathy for communism.

To an extent, this assessment was also shared by the colonial state itself. Officials at the time privately acknowledged that the trial had failed in its aims. In the short term, it was partially successful in curbing radical working-class activism while the entire leftist leadership was defending itself at Meerut, but in the long term, the conspiracy case had spectacularly backfired. Unwittingly, the colonial state played into the hands of the Left by elevating it to an iconic status by virtue of treating it as a serious political player that was subject to incessant persecution. This was important in a political landscape where revolutionary credentials were often determined by a movement's vulnerability to state persecution. Indeed, the politics of victimhood were instrumental in how the Left viewed itself and defined its internal and external engagements. On balance, therefore, the Left gained far more than it lost in the wake of Meerut. That, at least, seems to be the academic and political consensus. Yet this view reduces Meerut to a simplistic debate about success or failure, which in turn is largely the way in which the Left has historically been analyzed.

1. See, i.e., Pramita Ghosh's claim that "the Meerut trial appears to have worked less to the advantage of the government than to that of the communists." Ghosh, *Meerut Conspiracy Case and the Left Wing*, 165.



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Viewed apart from the simplistic binary of success/failure and the importance of the trial archive itself, Meerut is significant as a moment that indelibly shaped the course of leftist politics in India specifically and regional and national politics more generally. It came at a time when politics in India, as elsewhere in the world, was rapidly becoming more defined and "crystallized."[2] Along with other events, Meerut played a crucial role in providing an impetus to this process. This article, then, will highlight the significance of Meerut in these terms by analyzing its impact on regional politics in the Punjab and the position of the leftist movement within it. I will attempt to show how the regional landscape provides a glimpse into the shifting contours of politics in British India during the 1930s in which the contribution of Meerut was considerable. In this sense, the trial had an impact that went far beyond what the colonial bureaucracy had anticipated.

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But first, a few remarks on the trial itself. To start with, it is important to emphasize that Meerut was, in a sense, merely a continuation of a series of conspiracy cases that had been launched against communists in British India. The first of these were the five Peshawar Conspiracy Cases that prosecuted and convicted Indians returning from the Soviet Union. Most of these individuals were veterans of the *hijrat* movement under which thousands of Muslims emigrated from India in a protest against Britain's conflict with Turkey during the First World War. The charges against them were familiar. They were charged under Section 121–A of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalized any attempt to deprive the king-emperor of his sovereignty over British India. These trials were supplemented by the Cawnpore (Kanpur) Conspiracy Case, in which communists were charged and convicted under the same section. Termed the "first important Communist conspiracy case,"[3] Cawnpore marked the first tentative attempt by the state to outlaw communism as an ideology. Yet, as a Calcutta newspaper remarked on the uncertain conclusion of the trial, "It has been settled that to have faith in Communism in itself is no offence. Thus the fear of the law against communism has been removed."[4]

This abortive attempt, however, did little to dampen the British government's determination to stamp out communism through juridical means. This was where Meerut became all the more significant, since it marked the culmination of the judicial approach that the state adopted for the better part of the 1920s. As the last and most sustained attempt at criminalizing communism, Meerut became crucial for determining how the state would deal with those it regularly termed as "subversives" and proxies of the Soviet Union. Building up from Cawnpore, Meerut sought to outlaw communism in and of itself. In other words, merely subscribing to or sympathizing with communism was deemed worthy of a criminal offense. In modern parlance, therefore, communism was viewed as a thought crime. It was an entirely different matter, of course, that there were varied interpretations of what communism actually was. This at least was evident in the varied political leanings of the individuals prosecuted at Meerut. The trial, then, was significantly different from the conspiracy cases that preceded it. The other obvious difference was the sheer ambitiousness and scale of the trial, which Michele Louro and Carolien Stolte's introduction to this special section points out.

The fact that the state sought to criminalize communism as a political belief demonstrated how far official thinking had come since the Left emerged as a recognizable political force in the early 1920s. During that period, the government of India was in constant communication with the India Office, which was keen on adopting a stricter line toward communists. In its replies to London, the government of India pointed out that there was nothing resembling a large-scale communist movement in India. Moreover, it felt that the existing laws were adequate for dealing with the communist threat, and it noted the difficulties of pro-

2. See Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah's use of the term *crystallized* in this special themed section.

3. Mukhopadhyay, *India and Communism*, 94. Muzaffar Ahmad discusses the Kanpur Conspiracy Case in the last section of *Myself and the Communist Party of India*. For more details on the case, see *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, 2:273–322.

4. Ibid., 95.

curing sufficient evidence to ensure conviction in courts.[5] More crucial, the government argued that under ordinary law, the mere state of being a communist was not considered an offense unless it was conclusively proven that the aim and object of an individual or organization was to overthrow British rule in India through violent means.[6]

That point of view had changed by the mid-1920s. By then, the leftist movement had become a significant force to contend with, especially in Bombay, which was paralyzed by a militant trade union movement. More important, this growth had occurred after the uncertain success of the Cawnpore Conspiracy Case. In response, the government of India expressed a greater readiness to criminalize communist ideology through the judicial process as a means of subverting leftist politics. These measures acquired a greater sense of urgency after the government's clumsy attempts to push through anticommunist legislation such as the Public Safety Act and the Trade Disputes Bill. These bills were aimed at curbing working-class activism and deporting members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) who were working in close liaison with workers and peasants groups in India. Yet, after facing strong opposition in the legislative assembly to these measures,[7] the Raj instead chose to tackle the communist threat by launching a conspiracy case against prominent leftists.

In contrast to what it argued in the early 1920s, the government sought to equate communist politics itself with a conspiracy to deprive the king-emperor of his sovereignty over British India. This linkage was made possible by making Meerut explicitly about the International, which was most powerfully manifested through the Comintern. Communism in India was thus inextricably tied to internationalist politics, which in turn was held to be diametrically opposed to national politics. Above all, it was this distinction and the linking of communism to internationalist and hence subversive politics that made Meerut a class apart from the conspiracy cases that preceded it. Unlike those cases, the defendants of Meerut had, the odd expressions of solidarity aside, very little, if any, direct connection to the Soviet Union or the Comintern. Again, unlike Peshawar and Cawnpore, very few defendants had actually been to the Soviet Union.[8] That aside, there were of course allegations, not entirely without merit, that the accused were in receipt of funds from abroad, particularly from the Comintern. Yet above all else, what was considered more of an offense was an adherence to communist ideology, which was enough to mark an individual out as a proxy of the Comintern, and by extension the Soviet Union. If nothing else, this was reflective of how seriously the state treated the power of ideas, especially those that were considered to be subversive.

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Yet, ideas were rarely as fixed or rigid as the state made them out to be. Rather, they evolved in unpredictable ways and rarely traveled in straight lines.[9] This at least was evident in the political trajectories of many of the Meerut accused, whose personal journeys reflected the times and spaces they inhabited. Chief among such individuals was Sohan Singh Josh, a radical leftist who was serving as editor of the *Kirti* (*Worker*) and a leader of the Punjab Workers' and Peasants' Party (Kirti Kisan Sabha) when he was arrested for the Meerut trial. Josh's political career mirrored the wider political shifts within the Punjabi and All-Indian landscape. More crucial, though, his career was also indicative of the seminal impact that Meerut had on the course of leftist politics in India. It's useful, therefore, to view and contrast Josh's career both prior to and after Meerut. With respect to his political career prior to Meerut, the relevant intelligence abstract on Josh reads as follows:

5. "Bolshevik Danger in India," telegram from viceroy to secretary of state, 21 December 1922, 103–4, box 117, Records of the Public and Judicial Department (hereafter L/PJ), India Office Records, British Library, London (hereafter IOR).

6. "Bolshevik Danger in India," telegram from viceroy to secretary of state, February 1923, ibid.

7. The most iconic protest, of course, was carried out by Bhagat Singh and his comrades, who threw bombs in the legislative assembly against the proposed bills and afterward surrendered to the police.

8. Amir Haider Khan, M. A. Majid, and Shaukat Usmani were the rare few who did go to the Soviet Union. The latter two were veterans of the Hijrat movement.

9. See Zachariah, "Internationalisms." See also Chatterjee, preface to *Nationalist Thought*.

> Sohan Singh Josh, son of Lal Singh, Jat of Chetanpura, P.S Ajnala, District Amritsar. Has studied up to the Matriculation standard. Took a prominent part in the Akali movement and was given the sobriquet of "Josh" (fiery) on account of his violent speeches at Akali Diwans. In 1921 he helped to foment anti-Government agitation among the Sikhs over the question of the possession of the keys of the Golden Temple, Amritsar and in 1922 identified himself prominently with the agitation arising out of the Guru-ka-Bagh *morcha*. Was the secretary of the Akali Dal. Became a member of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. Was arrested in October 1923 in the Akali leaders Case. While still under trial he was elected a member of the Shiromani Akali Dal. . . . Developed communistic ideas and on Santokh Singh's . . . death took up on the management of the "Kirti" paper with Bhag Singh Canadian. Sohan Singh was the chief organizer of the "Workers and Peasants Party" in the Punjab and was elected Secretary of the party in August 1927. Was one of the moving spirits of the Communist Party in the Punjab. Presided over the meetings of a Lahore Conference organized by the Kirti group on the occasion of the sixth session of the Central Sikh League, at Hoshiarpur in October 1928 and delivered an address sympathizing with China's struggle for freedom, and suggesting that in the event of a war with Russia, Indian Labour should withhold all help from Government. . . . Throughout 1928 he spoke at several political diwans, urging the attainment of Swaraj by all possible means. . . . Was twice elected President and vice-President of the Amritsar branch of the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha and the Congress Committee respectively, in 1928. Visited Calcutta . . . and presided over the All-India Workers and Peasants Conference held in the last week of December 1928, at which it was decided to form an All-India Kirti Party of which Sohan Singh was to be the representative from the Punjab. Presided over the second session of the Punjab Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha Conference held in . . . Lahore (in) February 1929, and in his address advocated a mass revolution by the peasants and labourers, and warmly appreciated the "sacrifices and courage" of the Ghadr conspirators of 1914–15. . . . Was arrested in connection with the Meerut Conspiracy Case in March 1929 and was convicted and sentenced to seven years R.I in January 1933. The sentence was later reduced on appeal to one year's RI under Section 121-A, IPC in August 1933.[10]

On the face of it, this lengthy description is typical of the many accounts on leftists during this period, and especially those associated with the Ghadar movement. Yet, when read between the lines, the abstract provides important insights into the political landscape that Josh inhabited.

But first, a few details about Josh, which this abstract neglects to mention. Of particular interest is the fact that prior to entering the political fray in the Punjab, Josh worked in various capacities as a government functionary. After his matriculation and an abortive attempt to obtain higher education at the Khalsa College in Amritsar, Josh worked for a while in Bombay at the censor's office in the postal services, where he was charged with censoring mail in Gurmukhi. Later, in 1918, he returned to his native village and became a school teacher.[11] Already affected by the failed Ghadar uprising, his district soon became the center of various agitations against the Raj that convulsed central Punjab by the end of the First World War. And it was during this period, as we learn from the intelligence abstract, that Josh emerged as a political activist of note in the Akali movement. Perhaps the leap from a government functionary to an irreconcilable enemy of the British Raj was not as great a transition as it seemed in retrospect.

Like many Punjabi leftists, Josh obtained his political education during the Akali movement. The movement, which lasted from 1920 to 1925, posed perhaps the most sustained and serious challenge to the authority of the provincial government since the annexation of Punjab in 1849. While the movement itself was centred on the crucial issue of *gurdwara* reform, it soon adopted a radical position against the Raj and its loyalists. In part, the issue of *gurdwara* reform was a direct consequence of the evolving debates on Sikh iden-

10. Ghadr directory 1934, 270–71, IOR/V/27/262/6.

11. See "Sohan Singh Josh," *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*; and Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, chaps. 1–2.

tity and religion that had been raised by reformist and revivalist Sikh movements during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In these debates, the issue of *gurdwara* management, supervision, and function was a pressing concern. For the most part, *gurdwaras* were controlled by *mahants* (managers or caretakers) of a particular sectarian affiliation, who enjoyed unchecked and absolute power that in due course led to accusations of corruption and a variety of vices. In some cases, *mahants* were also blamed for introducing certain Hindu practices and rituals. Consequently, Sikh reformers issued demands for *gurdwaras* to be administered on terms acceptable to the wider Sikh community. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to wrest control of the *gurdwaras* through litigation and petitioning, groups of radical reformers took matters into their own hands by forcibly ousting *mahants* from certain *gurdwaras*.[12] These tactics set the stage for a series of confrontations with the authorities who were perceived to be in favor of the status quo.

More important, though, the campaign for *gurdwara* reform gave birth to two organizations that profoundly shaped Sikh communitarian politics in the ensuing decades. In various periods, both were often indistinguishable. The first of these, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), was formed in 1920 with the explicit purpose of bringing all Sikh religious spaces, including their vast estates and significant income, under *Panthic* control and management.[13] Given its all-encompassing remit and wide-ranging powers, which were given legal sanction by the government in order to placate Sikh opinion, the SGPC over the years was the site of frequent political jousts among various organizations, including those within the Punjabi Left. The second organization, the Shiromani Akali Dal, otherwise also known as the Akali Party, was founded by the SGPC shortly after its own creation in 1920. Although the SA Dal was closely tied with the SGPC in its formative phase as well as at various other periods, it also exercised a degree of autonomy and assertiveness over key political issues. Initially, though, the Dal was founded as an umbrella organization with the purpose of unifying and coordinating the activities of the numerous Akali *jathas*[14] that emerged throughout the province in order to forcibly retake *gurdwaras* from corrupt *mahants*.

While an exhaustive account of the Akali movement is not the aim of this essay, it would be pertinent to highlight some of the prominent features of this agitation. First, soon after its inception the Akali movement moved beyond its central agenda of *gurdwara* reform to incorporate a radical form of anticolonial politics. In doing so, it fed off anticolonial resentment in the Punjab, which was provided a further impetus by the Khilafat and noncooperation movements. Like other anticolonial agitations, the Akali movement too had radicals and revolutionaries who were dedicated to opposing the Raj beyond immediate political or socioreligious objectives. While the Akali movement was, for the most part, nonviolent, with thousands of its volunteers peacefully courting arrest, it nevertheless did spawn a number of small-scale, highly organized "terrorist" groups. The most significant among such groups was the Babbar Akali *jatha*. Like other terrorist or revolutionary groups in the 1920s, this *jatha* was formed in 1922 by Akali radicals disenchanted with the tactics of nonviolence. The group's ranks and finances were bolstered by diasporic revolutionary networks and in particular by the Ghadar Party.[15] While not belonging to the Babbar Akali network, Josh was nevertheless associated with the radical wing of the Akali movement, which was implacable in its opposition to the Raj.

Here Josh's intelligence abstract provides us with a clue about the shifts in the Punjabi political landscape. Soon after the successful conclusion of the Akali movement and his release from jail in

12. See Tan, "Assuaging the Sikhs," 660–63. For more details on the Akali movement, see Singh, *Akali Movement*.

13. Singh, *Akali Movement*, 18.

14. These *jathas*, or bands of Sikh volunteers, called themselves Akalis after a legendary sixteenth-century group of warrior ascetics. Akali *jathas* varied in number from a few dozen to hundreds of members, and, initially, usually functioned within a certain locality or district from which volunteers were drawn. Each *jatha* was headed by a *jathedar* who would be in charge of all activities within his vicinity. See Tan, "Assuaging the Sikhs," 665; and Singh, *Akali Movement*, 93.

15. See file no. 283–S, From L. L. Tomkins, Inspector-General of Police, Punjab to the Home Secretary to Government, Punjab, Simla, July 1921, 19, Report on the Police Administration in the Punjab (RPAP), Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, UK. Also see Singh, *Akali Movement*, 114–15.

late 1926, Josh, according to the intelligence report, "developed communistic ideas." This in itself is evidence of the flexibility latent in "communist ideas" during this period. The attraction to communism of course dated back to the October Revolution. At the time, the revolution was welcomed across the colonized world, where it was viewed as the first definitive blow against European imperialism. This feeling was further underscored by V. I. Lenin's declaration of support to national liberation struggles across the globe, a promise that was most clearly manifested through the founding of the Communist International, or Comintern, in 1919. Owing to these developments, scores of Indian revolutionaries such as M. N. Roy, Maulvi Barkatullah, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, and members of the Hijrat network and the Ghadar Party made their respective pilgrimages to Moscow. Similarly, in India, too, the revolution was greeted with fervor by virtually all sections of the political spectrum, including by those nominally identified with Hindu communalist politics.[16]

This above all else was indicative that communism or bolshevism, which were seen as interchangeable at the time, were viewed more as an inspiration than a set of fixed and rigid ideas. Communism had a fascinating ability to incorporate sets of political ideas, norms, and idioms that are retrospectively viewed as antithetical to its doctrines. It was thus perfectly plausible for activists emerging from an ostensibly socioreligious reform movement, like Josh, to adopt the mantle of communism in their ceaseless struggle against the British Raj. Indeed, in this sense, it is important to emphasize just how typical Josh's political journey was for this period. Aside from him, scores of Akali activists "developed communistic ideas" after their movement concluded in 1925. It was hardly surprising therefore that the Akali movement was one of the three most prominent networks that produced communists in the Punjab. In making this transition many were undoubtedly inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution and in thrall of its perceived ideals. More significant, many individuals saw no contradiction between their professed religious beliefs—with its ostensible emphasis on egalitarianism, social justice, and in a peculiarly Punjabi idiom, martyrdom—and the perceived ideals of communism.[17] This was in part the reason why Sikh religious symbolism was actively used for leftist political mobilization, particularly during the 1920s. Religious and cultural fairs such as *Baisakhi* and *Puranmashi* also became sites for leftist political activism.[18] The reverse was true as well. Leaders of the Akali Dal, for instance, like activists of other political groups, regularly referred to the Russian revolution and its ideals even while addressing explicitly communitarian concerns. A prominent activist, Mota Singh, made this connection explicit at an Akali conference. "Communism," he was reported to have said, "was nothing new . . . as it had been started by Guru Nanak Dev. The principles of the Sikh religion were the protection of the poor and the destruction of tyrants and this was nothing but communism."[19] Above all, these remarks illustrated how communism had become embedded in local spaces. And it is for this reason that during the late 1920s, it was almost futile to draw a distinction between Sikh communitarian politics and leftist politics. The same issue bedeviled a state bureaucracy accustomed to neatly classifying people and their politics. Thus, in the period leading up to the Meerut Conspiracy Case, leftist political activities were often reported in intelligence abstracts under "Sikh affairs" and vice versa.

During this period, the Kirti Kisan Sabha (Workers' and Peasants' Party, or WPP) was the most prominent leftist organization in colonial

16. Madan Mohan Malaviya was but one among many noteworthy individuals. According to Shaukat Usmani, who met him in connection with a campaign for the release of a political prisoner, "Malaviyaji was very enthusiastic about the Soviet Union, and said that he would do anything for the people suffering for the sake of their ideology. Further, he exclaimed in glee, 'I would like to go to receive the Bolshevik Army at Peshawar if they came to liberate us.'" Usmani, *Historic Trips*, 90.

17. These connections were not merely made in the Sikh religious idiom. They were also made with respect to Islam. For instance, in a famous pamphlet penned for "Muslim brothers" in Central Asia (ostensibly written at the behest of Lenin), Maulvi Barkatullah urged Muslims to respond to the "divine cry" and to embrace the Soviet cause and its "noble principles" wholeheartedly. Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh*, 40.

18. See, i.e., file no. 46, Lahore, November 1932, 651, Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence (hereafter PPSAI), National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, Islamabad, Pakistan. For more details see Raza, "Interrogating Provincial Politics," chap. 5.

19. File no. 26, Simla-E, 29 June 1929, 334, PPSAI.

Punjab. Given that its ranks were mostly filled by veterans of the Akali struggle and Ghadarites, the party's membership was primarily Sikh. The party was one of a number of WPP's that emerged across India in 1927–28, which were largely intended as fronts for the Communist Party of India. Yet, the Kirti Kisan Sabha was built on a legacy that predated the Bolshevik Revolution. The genealogy of the party could be traced back to the shores of California, where the Ghadar Party was established in 1914. Formed by discontented Punjabi immigrants to the United States and Canada, the Ghadar Party struggled for the complete independence of India from British rule. With thousands of returning migrants, the party launched an abortive uprising in the Punjab. After the failure of its rebellion, and with the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent defeat of Germany, which supported the movement in limited ways during the First World War, the Ghadar Party looked to the Soviet Union for assistance. Like other networks of dissident Indians, the party also dispatched its delegates to Moscow. Over the course of the next two decades, dozens of Ghadarites from across the world traveled to Moscow to obtain political and military training. The first delegation sent by the Ghadar Party was led by Santokh Singh, who is mentioned in the intelligence abstract on Josh. Santokh Singh attended the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922 and stayed for two years in the Soviet Union, where he also obtained political training at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East. After his training he proceeded through central Asia to India, where he was promptly arrested and incarcerated in his village for a year. Released in 1925, he brought out the *Kirti*, which, along with its successive editions published under various names, remained the flagship journal of the Kirti Kisan movement, the most prominent Punjabi leftist network up until Partition and beyond.[20]

With the untimely death of Santokh Singh, Josh assumed the editorship of the *Kirti*. Along with other like-minded comrades, he founded the Kirti Kisan Party and was subsequently elected as its general secretary. Josh, as the abstract details, remained active in leftist politics until his arrest in 1929 in a coordinated crackdown across British India. Leaving aside these details, what is more interesting is what Josh's activism reveals about the Punjabi political landscape immediately prior to Meerut. For instance, the abstract informs us that he "presided over the meetings of a Lahore conference organized by the Kirti group on the . . . session of the Central Sikh League." As argued above, this was one indication of how close leftist politics was aligned with Sikh communitarian politics during the 1920s and early 1930s. Thus, it was fairly common for leftist parties to share platforms with communitarian groups such as the Central Sikh League or the Akali Dal. And this was equally true for political organizations that operated beyond the ambit of Sikh communitarian concerns. It was, for example, quite usual for a number of different political organizations to share a common platform and organize their own conferences in a grand "Provincial Political Conference," such as the one that was organized in 1928 in Lyallpur, where Josh had organized a parallel Kirti Kisan conference. Other occasions also included the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress in which leftist organizations inevitably organized their own conferences and meetings. Also difficult to distinguish from one another were leftist organizations. Thus, during this period, it was difficult to differentiate the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (Youngmen of India Association) from the Kirti Kisan Party. As the abstract makes clear, Josh often frequented the platforms of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NJBS), of which he was also a member, in addition to his membership in the Congress Party. Indeed, cross-party memberships and affiliations were fairly common during this period for many political activists. It was thus perfectly acceptable for an individual to be simultaneously a member of a communitarian organization (like the Akalis), a socialist/communist/revolutionary organization (like the KKS), and the leading nationalist party, the Congress. Above all else, this was indicative of a political landscape where political languages greatly overlapped and ideological frontiers were

20. "Note on the Kirti Kisan Sabha," file PJ (S) no. 1013 (1932), 1, IOR/L/PJ/12/300. Also see Petrie, *Communism in India*, 150–57.

often amorphous. Very frequently, there was a convergence of political idioms and sociopolitical objectives in which, crucially, the idea of internationalism held great importance. "Sympathizing with China's struggle for freedom," for instance, as Josh's intelligence abstract reports, was not just restricted to the Left. Rather, national liberation struggles across the globe, in China, Ireland, and elsewhere, as well as the successes of the Bolshevik Revolution were repeatedly invoked and glorified across party lines.

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Josh's repeated invocation of internationalism was an integral part of the case against him at Meerut. Despite his denials of being affiliated with the Comintern, his statements and political activities were sufficient for him to be considered as such. The judgment against him not only covered the details outlined in the intelligence abstract but also looked closely at his other political engagements, speeches, court statements, writings, and correspondences.[21] Interestingly, Josh was in part convicted on the basis of his correspondences, meetings, and engagements with his codefendants. The same was true for the latter as well. This made the judgment a self-fulfilling prophecy, namely, that the accused stood trial for the simple crime of engaging with one another. In other words, the conviction of the Meerut accused was a forgone conclusion.

More crucial, the trial itself profoundly shaped the politics of the accused as well as the wider political arena. When they were first arrested, the defendants were incarcerated in separate cells and were not allowed to see or talk to one another. Neither were they allowed access to reading material. These conditions persisted until protests within the prison walls and beyond forced the authorities to loosen some of the restrictions. As part of this relatively relaxed regime, the prisoners were removed from their cells and housed together in a barrack.[22] More important, the trying magistrate, Milner White, allowed the provision of proscribed literature that could help the accused in preparing their defense. This development was to have a profound impact on the case and on the accused themselves. All the literature that had been much sought after by the Meerut prisoners prior to their incarceration was now made available to them by the state, which had proscribed them in the first place.[23] Thus, as Lester Hutchinson later recounted:

> The one bright feature of our imprisonment was that there was no restriction on our reading. We had been allowed to form a small library of proscribed literature to enable us to prepare our defense, but which also served the more useful purpose of enabling us to increase our political and general knowledge. The library was under close supervision in case any of the "poison" should escape into the outside world and it was periodically inspected to see whether any books were missing. But it was of inestimable value not only to our defense but to our own educational development.[24]

It should be mentioned, however, that these concessions were given in part because the trial from its very inception was a carefully orchestrated exercise in public relations. With an eye on public opinion in India and abroad, and particularly in Britain, the government was anxious to keep up appearances of a fair and just trial. Moreover, the authorities also had to contend with the fact that three of the accused were British citizens. Such courtesies might not have been extended had all of the accused been Indians. Yet, as other episodes prior to and after Meerut proved, prisons always had the latent potential to be spaces for learning and meaningful engagement. A good illustration of that came from the Deoli prison camp, where communists and socialists were incarcerated on account of their opposition to British India's involvement in the Second World War. Despite the fact that there were restrictions in place on the provision of communist literature, the experience of incarceration proved beneficial for the Deoli pris-

21. See *Meerut Conspiracy Case Judgment*, 2:579–90.

22. Josh, *The Great Attack*, 86.

23. This did not mean that proscribed literature was unavailable prior to Meerut. As the lists of confiscated material showed, many of the accused had impressive personal collections of proscribed literature that had been smuggled into India. Meerut happened to be the first instance, though, where they had unrestricted access to the full gamut of proscribed literature.

24. Hutchinson, *Conspiracy at Meerut*, 126.

oners who educated one another about Marxism-Leninism and conducted discussions among themselves on the important political issues of the day.[25] Among other things, those discussions led to the formation of the first united communist party in the Punjab. Collective incarceration therefore was far more educationally and politically useful than the usual mode of *nazarbandi* favored by provincial governments.[26] This only underscored how jails, in a saying ascribed to Lenin, were universities for communists.[27] In this sense Meerut was better placed to afford the accused a space where they could orient themselves with the classical texts of Marxism. Meerut University, or "Meerut Jail University," as Josh called it, offered plenty of opportunities for the previously uninitiated to "equip themselves politically and theoretically for future work."[28] For Josh it was a godsend as the nearly two hundred books and pamphlets that were supplied by the government were new to him. He was thus able to devote the period of the trial to diligent study of Marxism-Leninism. For Josh, though, this must have been a situation with which he was all too familiar. During his imprisonment in the trial against Akali leaders, he came across a book that, as he claimed, "changed his life." Compiled by Charles Sprading, *Liberty and the Great Libertarians* "opened a new world" for Josh. This book compelled him to question his religion and culture and eventually inspired him to sever his links with Sikh religious movements and make his initial foray into communism.[29] With Meerut, Josh and his compatriots were provided with another opportunity to deepen their understanding of Marxism-Leninism. It was hardly surprising, then, that Josh described the period of trial as "one which benefitted the communist accused tremendously."[30]

This at least was evident in Josh's statement to the court. After the case had been committed to the sessions court, the Meerut accused made the crucial decision to use the courtroom to publicize their political beliefs. Even at this stage, though, political boundaries were becoming more distinguishable. After the committal order, a distinction had been made between those who considered themselves communists and those who denied being one. It was the communist group that decided to conduct its own defense and use the courtroom for propaganda purposes. Two resolutions were agreed upon in this regard. The first was that anyone defending himself in court should not seek to "save [his] skin" but should instead "challenge the very nature of the charge of communist conspiracy and the intention and purpose of the British rulers working behind it." This was in addition to the joint statement that the accused issued before the court.[31] Second, every member of the group was expected to seriously study the case, prepare statements defending their political ideals, deny wrongful accusations, and uphold the freedom of speech, assembly, and organization. Among other things, they were also expected to defend the Russian revolution, Marxism-Leninism, and the ideals of internationalism.[32] To do so, the accused obviously first had to thoroughly educate themselves about the principles of Marxism-Leninism.

To his credit, Josh stuck to his task admirably well. His statement to the court traversed through the points of debate that had been agreed upon by the communist group. More significant though, Josh's statement amply reflected his reading and knowledge of Marxism-Leninism. As an illustration, he spoke at length on the seminal texts of Marxism-Leninism and demonstrated his understanding of minute issues such as the debates between Lenin and Kautsky[33] and the "Communist anarchism of Kropotkin."[34] This was in marked

25. See Dhoot, *Political Memoirs*, 213–16.

26. Under *nazarbandi*, political activists were incarcerated in their respective villages with strict restrictions on their movements and engagements.

27. Dhoot, *Political Memoirs*, 213. See also Hardt, "Prison Time," 64.

28. Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, 169; Josh, *The Great Attack*, 91.

29. Josh was in good company when it came to such formative experiences. His compatriot Santokh Singh, who founded the *Kirti*, also became heavily influenced by Marxism during his imprisonment. A member of the Ghadar Party, Santokh Singh was convicted in the San Francisco Conspiracy Case and imprisoned in 1917 for two years. By the time he was released he had gone through some seminal works such as Karl Marx's *Capital* and Moissaye Joseph Olgin's *Soul of the Russian Revolution*. See ibid.

30. Josh, *The Great Attack*; 91.

31. See Ahmad, *Communists Challenge Imperialism*.

32. Josh, *The Great Attack*, 94–95.

33. Sohan Singh Josh statement to court, 342, Meerut Conspiracy Case Papers, National Archives of India, New Delhi (MCC).

34. Ibid., 316.

contrast with Josh's earlier speeches and writings, where he does not closely engage with Marxist debates. Nor does he seem to view communism as a fixed and defined doctrine.[35] Admittedly, though, public forums were better suited for popular sloganeering as opposed to hair-splitting discussions on Marxist legalese. And if anything, political rhetoric necessarily had to be tailored from one audience to another. Yet, as Josh candidly admitted, his understanding of communism prior to Meerut was anything but satisfactory. He was in fact embarrassed by it and called his prior thinking "utopian" and his Marxism "crude and immature."[36] Josh's erudite expositions in court, therefore, were the outcome of his close engagement with Marxist texts and political debates. Unlike the political space beyond the prison walls, inside there was ample time and opportunity to read, write, think, and debate. This above all was the seminal contribution of Meerut University.

Josh's journey to a more defined, doctrinaire, and orthodox form of communism was most evidently manifested in the politics he pursued after his release from prison. While he was in prison, the Kirti Kisan Party did not suffer a serious setback, especially compared to leftist movements elsewhere, which were seriously encumbered by the incarceration of the entire top leadership. After suffering a momentary setback with Josh's arrest, the Kirti movement was reorganized and led mostly by returning Ghadarites, some of whom were trained in Moscow and were veterans of the Akali struggle.[37] As with Josh in his days prior to Meerut, the reorganized Kirti group, despite the fact that some of its cadres had been "trained" in the Soviet Union,[38] drew on popular social, cultural, and religious idioms in its brand of communist politics. Like Josh's, this brand of politics was a function of pragmatic politics as much as it was an outcome of genuinely held beliefs and their compatibility with what was understood to be communism. There also was, as Gurharpal Singh has called it, a strain of "anti-intellectualism" in this movement, which was disinclined and even hostile toward the overtly doctrinaire, theoretical, and rigid forms of communism or Marxism.[39]

This mode of politics became increasingly contentious after Josh was released from prison. After serving the reduced sentence given on appeal by the Allahabad High Court, he was released in September 1933. By that time, he had developed a few grievances with his erstwhile Kirti comrades. According to him, the Kirtis had not bothered to contact him, Majid, or any of the Meerut accused while they were in prison, and though he was expecting a rapturous homecoming, none of his Kirti comrades came to receive him upon his release. He also had other reasons to feel aggrieved. While in prison, his wife and children had suffered inordinately owing to the lack of any regular income.[40] If true, this was indeed an egregious betrayal. For in the world of Punjabi radical politics, the families of political prisoners were looked after by their comrades. Since the Akali agitation, entire organizations such as the *Desh Bhagat Qaidi Parwar Sahaik Committee* (Welfare for Families of Patriotic Prisoners Committee) had been set up to support the affected families.[41] Like other leftist figures, Josh too had fallen victim to political and personal intrigues. The same was the case with the leftist movement as a whole. By the time Josh was released, both the Kirti Kisan Party and the Naujawan Bharat Sabha were, in the time-honored tradition of leftist politics in British India, hopelessly riven by factionalism and internal disputes. In this, allegations of financial embezzlement, personal impropriety, and personality clashes played a seminal role in rupturing the Left, particularly in the Punjab.

Also added to the mix were inevitable political and ideological disputes. These became most evident after Josh rejoined politics. Despairing at what he considered to be a crippled leftist movement, he set up his own organization called the Anti-Imperialist League. Returning to the fold of the Kirti Party, insofar as it was possible to call it

35. See, i.e., Josh's writings in the *Kirti*, collected in the MCC, where he invokes cultural and religious iconography such as "martyrdom."

36. Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, 185.

37. See Mukhopadhyay, *India and Communism*, 223–30.

38. Many of the cadres were said to be of "poor quality." Ibid., 232.

39. Singh, *Communism in Punjab*, 50–51.

40. See Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, 185–86.

41. See Raza, "Interrogating Provincial Politics," 66.

one, was impossible given the personal and political animosities at work. Neither party, however, could last for an appreciable period of time. Stung by the early release of the Meerut convicts and perturbed by the reorganization of the Communist Party of India, the government banned the party and its affiliates across India in 1934. In the Punjab, the Anti-Imperialist League, Kirti Kisan Party, and three other bodies were proscribed. These proscriptions, though, could not hide the glaring ideological divisions that had emerged post-Meerut. Josh, being a member of the CPI, styled himself as part of the official group in the Punjab. The official group, prior to and after the proscription of the Anti-Imperialist League, continued to ideologically oppose the Kirti group, which in turn refused to consider an affiliation with the CPI. As far as the Kirti group was concerned, the CPI representatives in the Punjab were "just a group of intellectuals with no mass influence."[42] Indeed, the differences between ideological heterodoxy and orthodoxy were best summed up by Bhagat Singh Bilga, a member of the Kirti group, who remarked: "*sanu angrezi nahin si aaundi, ohnaa nu siyasat*" ("We did not know English, and they did not know politics").[43]

It is a matter a speculation, of course, whether these differences would have cropped up in the absence of Meerut. Indeed, they may well have, especially considering the process of Stalinization in the Soviet Union itself. Yet, it would be difficult to understate the impact of Meerut in accentuating these political divisions. The trial had unwittingly laid the foundations for the formation of a communist clique, many of whom had met each other for the first time, which led and played a crucial role in the CPI up until Partition and beyond. And Meerut, as a space for debate and learning, also provided an opportunity to these individuals to define the contours of official communism in India. This set it apart from other articulations of communism that were rooted in particularistic social, cultural, and religious idioms. The period after Meerut therefore stood in marked contrast to the period prior to it when communism had a remarkable degree of ideological flexibility. It was thus only after the trial that allegations of ideological deviancy and heterodoxy deepened rifts within a leftist movement that was already weakened by other disputes. A minor episode that aptly illustrates this development came after the formation of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), which became the only leftist platform where activists could converge and conduct their politics following the proscription of their organizations in 1934. Tellingly, Josh initially refused to align himself with the Punjab CSP because, as he claimed, he was a "communist," not a "socialist."[44] Indeed, it is hard to imagine this distinction having such a profound meaning to many leftists prior to Meerut. And it was this distinction that continued to divide the Indian leftist movement as a whole up to Partition and beyond. In the Punjab, the divide between the Kirtis and the official group lasted until the 1940s, when both groups were forcibly reunited in the confines of the Deoli incarceration camp. Just as one prison laid the foundations for division within the communist movement, another laid the basis for its reunification. It was only in 1942 that a united communist party was established in the Punjab. Yet, for all the rhetoric of unity, the gulf between the politically grounded Kirti group and the party intellectuals, as represented by Josh, proved far too wide to bridge. The Punjab Party continued to be a victim of internal divisions until the Kirti group was finally expelled in the days leading up to Partition. Communism, in other words, had become far too overbearing, uncompromising, and rigid to incorporate varying and dissenting articulations within its fold.

Lest it be forgotten, this process coincided with and indeed was also driven by events halfway across the globe. Even before Meerut, Stalinization was well underway in the Soviet Union. There, too, Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy was purging vaguely dissenting voices from its fold. Two heads of the Comintern, Grigory Zinoviev and Nikolai Bukharin, were dismissed in quick succession.

42. Statement of Gangadhar Adhikari, cited in Singh, *Communism in Punjab*, 52.

43. Bhagat Singh Bilga, interview by Amarjit Chandan, London, October 1986.

44. Speech by Josh, file no. 50, Lahore, 29 December 1934, 549, PPSAI.

Meanwhile, the global ambitions of Communist Internationalism were being checked by the implementation of "Socialism in One Country," which quickly became the defining thesis of Stalinism. The process of retreat, increasing centralization, and lesser tolerance for diverse articulations of communism was implemented through large-scale purges. Large numbers were systematically killed, exiled, or incarcerated, many of whom were also members of the Comintern. One of those killed in the purges was none other than Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, better known as Chatto, who founded the Berlin India Committee during the First World War. There can be little doubt, therefore, that the process of distilling and refining communism, together with the contribution of Meerut, also had a profound impact on communist politics in India. After all, communist politics in India had always been conducted with an eye on developments around the globe, and particularly in the Soviet Union, which often issued directives and guidance to its affiliates in India through the Comintern.[45] The birth of "official" communism in India was therefore driven both by national and international developments.

Beyond the Left, Indian politics itself was undergoing a significant shift. In marked contrast to the previous decade, the beginning of the 1930s witnessed the emergence of distinct political streams. This was, in other words, the beginning of the "great divergence" in Indian politics. Increasing communalism, competing caste, ethnic, and regional claims, and the gradual inward turn of the nationalist movement from its internationalist sympathies combined to distinguish one brand of politics from another. Multiple political affiliations and flexible ideological moorings became rarer. This marked the beginning of the end of the internationalist moment in South Asia.[46]

As part of these developments, official communism, too, was making itself distinct from other political streams. Soon after Josh was released, for example, he was approached by his former comrades in the Akali struggle, who were interested in soliciting his support for Akali politics. According to Josh, stalwarts of the Akali Party such as Master Tara Singh were expecting him to return to the Sikh *Panth*. Yet during Meerut he "had embraced communism and stood by it firmly."[47] Far removed from the heady pre-Meerut days, Josh never again shared a platform with members of the Akali Party. That said, the party itself was becoming more parochial or communal with its narrowing focus on Sikh communitarian claims. This divide grew all the more pronounced in later years, such that by the 1940s, the Akali Party was an implacable enemy of both the official and the Kirti group.

Cementing this divide were a host of claims that were first raised most forcefully in the Meerut courtroom. As public prosecutor Langford James remarked in his opening speech before the court:

> It is the case for the prosecution that these accused are Bolsheviks . . . and that they designed and worked to install in India the same rule as that exists in Russia. . . . To be a Bolshevik of unimpeachable character, you require certain definite qualifications to which the ordinary man does not aspire. You do not love your country, you are anti-country, you are anti-God and you are anti-family. . . . In fact, a Bolshevik of unimpeachable character is anti-everything! A large part of Bolshevik propaganda is directed to destroy belief in God, whether he be the god of the Christians, the Jews, the Mohammedans or the Buddhists.[48]

These arguments, which were later affirmed by the sessions judge, resonated far beyond the courtroom. Indeed, they traveled much farther than what was originally anticipated. While the communists in some ways achieved a propaganda coup, the arguments employed against them became part of a wider public discourse that was used to great effect by their political opponents. As Josh himself remarked: "It would however be wrong to deny that this poisonous propaganda against communism and communists did not cut some ice among nationalists and ignorant people. Preju-

45. For a broader discussion on the Comintern's relationship with the Indian communist movement, see Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism*; and Gupta, *Comintern, India, and the Colonial Question*.

46. See Raza et al., introduction to *Internationalist Moment*.

47. Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, 187.

48. Ibid., 167.

dices sown against the communists and communism from the early days persist and refuse to die even in some sections of the rural and urban poor even today."[49]

An excellent example of these prejudices was the increasing use of the *nastik* (atheist) card against the Left from the mid-1930s on. Remarkably, this occurred in the Punjab as well, where the leftist movement actively employed religious idioms in its politics and that in fact emerged from a religious movement itself. Yet by the 1940s religion was being used to devastating effect against communists by the Akali Party. This tactic of delegitimizing leftist politics was so effective that in certain districts, communist and *kisan* workers were forced to grow beards and wear their hair long in order to be politically effective.[50] In other localities they resorted to exhibiting the *Granth Sahib* and administering *amrit* to villagers as part of their political activities.[51] Needless to suggest, this tactic would have backfired prior to Meerut. Even then, the Left had its fair share of opponents. Yet they very rarely used the religious card, despite the fact that religious parochialism, fatalism, and communalism were regularly attacked in leftist public meetings. After Meerut, however, this line of attack became part of a wider discourse that in due time gained so much credibility that any protestations to the contrary fell on deaf ears.

This was equally true for the "antinational" card. From its very inception, the trial attempted to convince the public that "communism was not the kind of movement that should receive the sympathy of nationalists."[52] Indeed, Langford James repeatedly contrasted communism with nationalism.[53] Nationalism, along with its concomitant rhetoric of nonviolence, was declared legitimate while communism was considered illegitimate. This, according to Josh, was the reason why Jawaharlal Nehru was not implicated in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, despite "knowing more of communism than the Meerut accused."[54] The attempt to distinguish nationalism from communism was added further credence by the sessions court, which essentially agreed with virtually all the major arguments presented by the prosecutor. A key aspect of the court's judgment was the explicit linking of communism with internationalist politics. Communism, in other words, was antinational. This, it's important to emphasize, was a crucial intervention. For, the 1920s marked a period when few saw any contradiction between the impulses of internationalism and nationalism. Both were viewed as complementary philosophies. Indeed, this prevailing zeitgeist was most eloquently summed up by Nehru himself, who called for the "spirit of Internationalism to replace the spirit of Nationalism."[55] While this process was underway globally as well, the intervention of Meerut created the first definitive split between the two impulses within India. In this, matters were further complicated by the Meerut defendants' uncompromising attacks on the Indian National Congress and Gandhi within the courtroom. Yet, these criticisms were part and parcel of leftist politics prior to Meerut as well. Neither did these attacks prevent leftists from sharing congress platforms. While this remained true post-Meerut as well, the cleavages between the two grew deeper over the 1930s until they resulted in a complete split in the 1940s. Within the nationalist press and wider public discourse, the argument of Meerut that communism was "essentially foreign to the ideas and traditions" of India gained greater credibility.[56] In due course, the antinational card was employed to great effect against the Left. In this case, a line was definitively drawn in the sand with the People's War doctrine formulated by the CPI after Operation Barbarossa was launched in Europe. Under this diametric shift, the CPI supported the British war effort against fascism. To the Congress, this was an egregious betrayal. Consequently, communists were systematically expelled from the Congress after the cessation of hostilities in Europe. And it was Nehru again who

49. Josh, *The Great Attack*, 91.

50. File no. 6, Lahore, 5 February 1944, 86, PPSAI.

51. File no. 30, Simla, 11 August 1945, 274, PPSAI; and file no. 4, Lahore, 27 January 1945, 36, PPSAI.

52. Josh, *The Great Attack*, 90.

53. For an excerpt in which Langford James explicitly characterizes the revolution envisaged by the accused as an antinational revolution, see Noorani, *Indian Political Trials*, 250–51.

54. Josh, *The Great Attack*, 99.

55. File no. 7, Lahore, 18 February 1928, 71, PPSAI.

56. Letter from Secretary, Home Department to the Chief Secretaries of Provinces, in "Measures for Dealing with Communist Activity in India," 38, IOR/L/PJ/12/325.

most eloquently summed up the prevailing mood by commenting that the difference between the Congress and the communists was a clash between nationalist and internationalist ideals.[57]

. . .

If the reductive and unimaginative binary of success or failure is applied to the Meerut Conspiracy Case, then the trial proved to be, on balance, a success for the British. Indeed, its eventual outcomes went far beyond what the Raj hoped to achieve from the trial. This was never fully comprehended by the government, though, which prematurely wrote the trial off as a partially failed attempt to curb communism in India. Frustrated with the limitations of the judicial approach with its "restricted interpretation"[58] of the law and fearful of the reorganization and growth of the leftist movement after the conclusion of the trial, the government eventually declared the CPI and its affiliates "unlawful associations" in 1934.[59] As a justification for the 1934 notification, the government pointed to the judgment of the Meerut Conspiracy Case, which had "proved that the CPI was a revolutionary party with the avowed object of overthrowing the existing order of society and bringing about India's independence by means of a violent revolution."[60] The government, however, was only able to ban the CPI as an *association*. For as the Allahabad High Court order of the chief justice conclusively established: "The mere holding of Communist beliefs or doctrines is not punishable per se. . . . If a Communist were to work individually, in furtherance of his belief, he would not be guilty of conspiracy." Instead, a "conspiracy" could only be instituted through the association of individuals holding "communist beliefs."[61] This was, in other words, a failure on the part of the prosecution and the government to outlaw communism as an *ideology* and a success in terms of outlawing all organizations that acted as or claimed to be communist.

One could argue that in conducting this case, the state unwittingly contributed to the creation of official communism in British India. Yet, in creating such conditions, the state also laid the groundwork for the communist movement's marginalization in Indian politics up until Partition. This occurred through a process whereby the communist movement resorted to a restrictive definition of itself, which distinguished it in clearer terms from other political streams. Complementing this development was the state's success in distinguishing the communist movement from legitimate politics in India. Above all, then, Meerut's seminal contribution lay in accelerating the process through which political divisions in British India were sharpened. As far as the state was concerned, this made politics more manageable, whereby certain political actors, like the communists, could be persecuted and proscribed while others could be played off against one another. Viewed this way, Meerut becomes far more significant than is otherwise portrayed. The case was not merely a landmark event in the history of the Indian Left. Instead, it marked one of the most defining moments in the transition of Indian politics from the 1920s to the 1930s. And it was precisely this shift that determined the eventual shape of politics up until the independence of the subcontinent from British rule. ıılıı

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57. File no. 33, Simla-E, 31 August 1945, 301, PPSAI.

58. Mukhopadhyay, *India and Communism*, 170–71.

59. See the notification in Roy, *Communism in India*, 89–92.

60. Ibid., 89.

61. Noorani, *Indian Political Trials*, 262–63.

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