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# The Form of Ideology and the Ideology of Form

Cold War, Decolonization and Third  
World Print Cultures



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Cover image: installation view of *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (Naeem Mohaiemen, 2017) at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2020.

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# 1. The Traveller as Internationalist

Syed Mujtaba Ali

*Supriya Chaudhuri*

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Among four artists shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2018, and therefore on view that December at the Tate Britain gallery in London, was Naeem Mohaiemen, a film-maker and installation artist who grew up in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and whose work I have greatly admired since I first saw it in India at Kolkata's Experimenter gallery. He had three works on show: the feature film *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017), about a stranded traveller in the abandoned Ellinikon airport in Athens; a three-screen documentary called *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017), narrated by the Marxist historian Vijay Prashad, on the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1970s when it was overtaken by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC); and *Volume Eleven (Flaw in the Algorithm of Cosmopolitanism)* (2018), a concertina book with photographs and text. All three were representative of Mohaiemen's research-driven art, focusing on decolonization, the radical left, failed transnationalisms in the post-World War II period, the history of Bangladesh, and family histories. Though I had seen his work before, it took me a few minutes to register that the book title, *Volume Eleven*, was actually a reference to the final volume of his great-uncle Syed Mujtaba Ali's collected works, which represent an exceptional Bengali literary oeuvre from the era after decolonization.

The exhibition left me thinking about a faint, almost invisible trajectory, one that Mohaiemen did not emphasize, that connected all three works and clarified for me certain aspects of South Asian history.

Mohaiemen's reference was to three articles by Syed Mujtaba Ali on Hitler and Germany, only one of which actually appears in the current Volume 11 of the *Collected Works*, under the damning title 'Hitler Māhātmya' or 'Hitler's Greatness'.<sup>1</sup> It was originally published in the Bengali newspaper *Dainik Basumati*, and is partly a review of Raymond Cartier's *Les Secrets de la Guerre dévoilés par Nuremberg* (Paris: Fayard, 1946), praising Hitler's military achievements. The other two essays are analyses of post-war Germany. In one of these, strongly critical of British-American Cold War policy and the self-serving calculations of the US-funded Marshall Plan, Ali recalls Goebbels's prediction that the Western powers would be forced to revive Germany in order to counter their real enemy, the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> In the other, one of a series of newspaper columns published from July 1945, he begins by noting the similarity between the Nazi myth of Aryan supremacy and the self-deluding 'Aryanism' of Hindu fundamentalists in late nineteenth-century India. Citing a brilliant satirical attack on the latter by Dvijendranath Tagore (Rabindranath's elder brother) in 1890, Ali contrasts the failure of the Hindutva version of Aryanism, described as an imported ideology that played no part in India's gaining of political independence, with the monstrous historical crimes generated by Nazi racist ideologies. This secular critique of racism, fascism, and communalism uncannily anticipates the issues dividing the Indian polity today. In the second half of the essay Ali urges support for the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in post-war Germany, recalling that it had been one of the pillars of the Weimar Republic, welcoming Rabindranath Tagore there in 1920 (actually 1921), and working tirelessly to revive Germany after World War I. Its members, whom he knew personally, had never endorsed the fascist Aryan myth.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 'Hitler Māhātmya' (Hitler's Greatness) in Syed Mujtaba Ali, *Rachanābālī* (Collected Works) (11 vols, Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 2014–2015), vol. 11, pp. 118–20, cited henceforward as *Rachanābālī* with vol. and page no. See also 'Sudine Durdine Germany' (Germany in Good Days and Bad), in vol. 10, pp. 232–37, and 'Parājita Germany' (Defeated Germany), in vol. 9, pp. 306–16. Mujtaba Ali's writings and the scholarship on him are almost entirely in Bengali: all translations here are mine.
  - 2 'Sudine Durdine Germany', *Rachanābālī*, vol. 10, p. 236. The essay is undated but appears to have been written after the initiation of the Marshall Plan (1948–1951) by the USA to revive Western Europe.
  - 3 'Parājita Germany', *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9, pp. 306–09, 313–16. First published in the *Anandabazar Patrika* in a newspaper column (1948) titled *Satyapīr-er Kalame* (From the pen of Satyapir).

Yet despite this clear rejection of Nazi ideology and its Hindutva variants, Ali's pro-German stance dismays Mohaiemen, who refers to it in the text of *Volume Eleven* as 'a poisoned poultice', citing Subhas Chandra Bose's war-time collaboration with Nazi Germany and the troubled inter-war politics of revolutionaries like Taraknath Das. There is a connection here between what Mohaiemen calls a flawed cosmopolitanism, the internationalism of the interwar years (or what Raza, Roy and Zachariah call the 'scramble for the transnation'), Pan-Asianist dreams under colonial rule later fostered by the Afro-Asian alliance of Bandung, the Non-Aligned Movement itself, and the ideological struggles within print cultures of the Cold War period.<sup>4</sup> Mujtaba Ali's writings and travels offer a key to understanding literary cosmopolitanisms and transnational alliances before and after Indian Independence. As I went round the exhibition, the hidden history towards which Mohaiemen gestures seemed newly important and relevant in a world under fascist threat and shadowed by another Cold War.<sup>5</sup>

## Syed Mujtaba Ali, Writer and Traveller

By any reckoning Syed Mujtaba Ali was an extraordinary figure: scholar, polyglot, academic, traveller, raconteur, anecdotal essayist, editor, and political commentator. His contributions to twentieth-century Bengali literature are generally classed in an in-between genre suited to periodical publication called *ramya-rachana* (*belles-lettres*). From the later 1940s onwards, he wrote voluminously, both in the essay form for journals and newspapers, and in the longer literary genres of the novel and short stories. After his death in 1974, his collected works were published in eleven volumes in Kolkata by four of his literary colleagues, Gajendrakumar Mitra, Sumathanath Ghosh, Sabitendranath Ray, and Manish Chakraborty.<sup>6</sup> Right up until his death, Mujtaba Ali produced a running commentary on his life and times, in which travel and *adda* (conversation) in all kinds of settings, including Cairo, figure

4 Ali Raza, Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah, *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds and World-Views, 1917–39* (Delhi: Sage, 2014), p. xxi.

5 Both US-China and US-Russia face-offs have recently been so described, e.g. in the right-wing journalist Edward Lucas's *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

6 Syed Mujtaba Ali, *Rachanābali*, 1st ed. (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1974–1983).

prominently.<sup>7</sup> His most characteristic work—travel narrative, short fiction, or essay—is presented in his signature *baithaki* or *majlisi* style, a major gift to twentieth-century Bengali prose, and has been described as *adda-sahitya* or *majlisi-sahitya* (conversational literature).<sup>8</sup> Steeped in the Bengali, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic literary cultures that mingled in the soil of Bengal, Mujtaba Ali brought breadth of learning, as well as geographical range and historical depth, world affairs, and world writers, into the conversational space he created for Bengali literature.

Born in Sylhet, now Bangladesh, in 1904, Syed Mujtaba Ali was one of the first students to graduate from Rabindranath Tagore's university, Visva-Bharati, having studied (1921–1926) not only under Tagore himself, but within a circle of extraordinary scholars and artists who fostered his linguistic, philological, philosophical, and literary interests: Vidushekhar Shastri, Haricharan Bandyopadhyay, Kshitimohan Sen, Nitaibinode Goswami, Mark Collins, Carlo Formichi, Giuseppe Tucci, Moriz Winternitz, Sylvain Lévi, Stella Kramrisch, Binodebehari Mukhopadhyay, Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore, and many others.<sup>9</sup> Following a few months at Aligarh Muslim University, he accepted a lectureship in Kabul, setting out for Afghanistan in 1927 by train from Delhi to Peshawar, and crossing the Khyber Pass by bus. During his year and a half in Kabul, he witnessed the rebellion that led to the deposition of its ruler, Amanullah, by the tribal leader Bacha-e-Saqao, before being evacuated out during the turmoil and suffering that followed. Subsequently, he attended the universities of Berlin and Bonn between 1929 and 1932 on a Humboldt fellowship, writing his doctoral dissertation on the origin of the Khojas and their religious life. In 1934 he travelled around Europe before going on to post-doctoral studies at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo (1934–1935). Returning to India at the

7 See *Chāchā Kāhini*, in *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9, pp. 169–239; vol. 10, pp. 93–136. On *adda* in Cairo, see 'Āddā' in *Rachanābālī*, vol. 1, pp. 74–82; 'Āddā-Passport', vol. 3, pp. 308–13.

8 Gajendrakumar Mitra, 'Introduction' in Ali, *Rachanābālī*, vol. 1, p. 'ta'.

9 For Mujtaba Ali's own list of these luminaries, see 'Visva-Bhārati' in *Rachanābālī*, vol. 1, pp. 215–16; for his daily study of English, French, German, and the history of Sanskrit literature with Winternitz, see his letter of 15 January 1922 to Saraf-ul-Alam, in *Syed Mujtabā Ālīr Patra-gucchha* (Letters of Syed Mujtaba Ali), ed. by Bishmadeb Choudhury (Dhaka: Bangla Akademi, 1993), p. 58. Ali was already familiar with Bengali, English, Hindi and Urdu: he studied German, French, Sanskrit, Arabic and Farsi at Santiniketan, assisted Haricharan Bandyopadhyay in his lexicographical labours, and wrote out the library catalogue. See Prasanta Chakrabarti, *Syed Mujtabā Ālī* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2018), pp. 9–13.

invitation of Sayaji Rao Gaikwad, ruler of the princely state of Baroda, he taught at his new university there for eight years (1936–1944), making another European trip in 1938, but left after Sayaji Rao's death to travel and write. Following the Partition of India, he moved to East Pakistan, immediately attracting the wrath of the government by championing the cause of Bengali against Urdu as the state language. His speech on this incendiary issue, delivered in a meeting of the *Muslim Sahitya Samsad* at Sylhet on 30 November 1947, was published in the Calcutta literary journal *Chaturanga* in 1948.

Ali joined the Azizul Haq College in Bogura as its principal, but was forced to leave, returning to India in 1949 while the language movement in East Pakistan gathered momentum. On 21 February 1952, a day now commemorated as *Shahid Dibash* ('Martyrs' Day', also International Mother Language Day), several student protestors were killed in the capital, Dhaka. Bengali was eventually recognized as the state language of East Pakistan in 1956, and Mujtaba Ali's Sylhet speech was printed in Chattagram (Chittagong) as a booklet titled *Pūrba-Pākistāner Rāshtra-bhāshā* (The State Language of East Pakistan).<sup>10</sup> By then, Ali, an impressive linguist knowing at least twelve, and possibly fifteen languages, among them Arabic, Bengali, Farsi, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Pashto, Sanskrit, Urdu, English, French, Russian, and German, had served in independent India as the first Secretary of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (1950–1952), editing its Arabic journal *Thaqāfatu'l-Hind*. After four years at All India Radio (1952–1956, posted in Delhi, Cuttack, and Patna), he was appointed professor of German and Islamic Culture at his *alma mater*, Visva-Bharati (1956–1964). This and the post-retirement period in Calcutta marked the peak of his intellectual and literary influence. After the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, Ali returned to his homeland. He died in Dhaka in 1974.

Incontestably, Mujtaba Ali's life was marked by momentous public events. He was a witness to, sometimes even an actor and agent in, anticolonial movements and revolutionary uprisings; he saw the rise of fascism and nationalism in interwar Germany and Egypt; he experienced the turmoil of decolonization, and shared the hopes and aspirations of at least three new nations, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. He commented

10 Syed Mujtaba Ali, *Pūrba-Pākistāner Rāshtra-bhāshā* (Chattagram: Boi-ghar, 1956); in *Rachanābalī*, vol. 10, pp. 137–70.

on many of these events, sometimes controversially. As a colonial subject, he made no secret of his lifelong detestation of British rule, and was more sympathetic to the Russians in Central Asia, especially Afghanistan. He was himself a beneficiary of the efforts by German diplomats and members of the Deutsche Akademie in the interwar years to cultivate Indian scholars and intellectuals, thereby enabling anticolonial activists to expand the bases established in Germany from before World War I.<sup>11</sup> Ali's student years in Berlin brought him into contact with the intense political ferment of interwar Germany, but he has received little attention in studies of transnational intellectual networks forged in the Europe of the time.<sup>12</sup> He has proved difficult to categorize as a writer, despite his influence and popularity in the print culture of the decades after decolonization.

In an important book on the 'travelling autobiographies' of M. K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Iqbal, Javed Majeed has argued that for each, self, nation, and post-national identity are closely bound up with the experience, and conscious literary representation, of travel. For each, the travelling self, or selves, become a means of accessing the fluidity and interconnectedness of a modern world order.<sup>13</sup> Ali's travelling personhood, expressed in a body of writing produced almost entirely in the era following decolonization but drawing upon his global travels in the interwar years, is a significant marker of the times he inhabited. I argue in this essay that it is key to our understanding

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- 11 On Indian students, activists and political networks in Germany, see Benjamin Zachariah, 'Indian Political Activities in Germany, 1914–1945' in *Transcultural Encounters between Germany and India: Kindred Spirits in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, ed. by Joanne Miyang Cho, Eric Kurlander and Douglas T. McGetchin (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 141–54. Zachariah writes (p. 146) that 'The Deutsche Akademie's India Institute awarded scholarships to about 100 Indian students between 1929 and 1938'. See also Nirode K. Barooah, *Germany and the Indians Between the Wars* (Norderstedt: BoD, 2018), and Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 48–52, 88–108.
  - 12 There is a strange and inaccurate essay by Kris Manjapra, 'Queer Diasporic Practice of a Muslim Traveler: Syed Mujtaba Ali's *Chāchā Kāhini*' in *How to Write the Global History of Knowledge-Making: Interaction, Circulation and the Transgression of Cultural Difference*, ed. by Johannes Feichtinger, Anil Bhatti and Cornelia Hülmbauer (Cham: Springer Nature, 2020), pp. 151–66, marred by translation errors and failures to understand Mujtaba Ali's Bengali.
  - 13 Javed Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel, and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal* (Delhi: Primus, 2015), pp. 167–70 (here commenting on Nehru).



of his internationalism and his contribution to modern Bengali letters. The fact that his work is available to us not as a single *magnum opus* but in the dispersed mode of the newspaper article, journal essay, serial reminiscence, or short story (and some novels) is also representative of postcolonial print culture in India, when periodical publication, even for those working in longer genres, became a lifeline for literary networks and communities. The eleven volumes of Mujtaba Ali's collected works testify both to his prodigious output and to the respect he commanded, but they remain largely untranslated. His distinctive place as a writer of Bengali prose rests on the ease and naturalness of his style, drawing freely upon Urdu and Farsi to strengthen the historically 'mixed' vocabulary of modern Bengali, in which *tatsama* (Sanskrit-derived) words form only a small proportion. Even the linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji acclaimed Mujtaba Ali's contribution to the Bengali language, and the scholar and critic Pramatha Bishi commented:

What Kazi Nazrul Islam has done in poetry, Syed Mujtaba Ali has done in prose. This is not the Persianate Bengali of *Alaler Gharer Dulal*—it is a new style, mingling Farsi with Bengali, yet it never appears un-Bengali. This style, characteristic of the *baithaki* mode in which he wrote, is his chief gift to Bengali. His second gift was to mingle the atmosphere of many lands with the air breathed by Bengalis. And for the third gift, we must go back to the first, which was to manifest his genius in the *baithaki* style. To have learning, but not to appear a pedant; this is like being weightless on the moon. He was a great scholar, yet he never flaunted his scholarship; this is why ordinary readers were drawn to his writings.<sup>14</sup>

### 'At Home and Abroad': History, Politics, and Culture in Afghanistan

It was as a traveller that Syed Mujtaba Ali entered the stage of Bengali letters, through his narrative *Deshe Bideshe* (At Home and Abroad), serialized from March 1948 in the Bengali periodical *Desh*, and appearing in book form in 1949 to become the best-loved, possibly the best-known, of all travelogues in a language especially rich in this

14 Pramatha Bishi, 'Kathārasik Syed Mujtabā Āli' in Ali, *Rachanābali*, vol. 1, p. 'cha'. Pyarichand Mitra's *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* (The Spoilt Son of a Rich Family, 1858) is the first Bengali novel. For Suniti Kumar Chatterji's encomium, see *Visva-Bhārati Patrikā*, 'Grantha-Parichay', Kartik-Poush 1373 (1956).

form of literature.<sup>15</sup> Set in Afghanistan between 1927–1929, and written up in Bangalore from 1944 but published only after India gained political independence, it illuminates an important set of concerns in postcolonial history. It is a work of considerable structural depth and artistry, distinguished by its ‘architectonics’ from the simple linearity of travel narrative.<sup>16</sup> Only the first section (Chapters 1–12) reads like the record of a journey, as the author travels by train and bus to Peshawar and thence to Jalalabad and Kabul, providing vivid accounts of the landscapes and people he encounters *en route*. Descriptions of his companions on the train, the Anglo-Indian and the elderly *Sardarji*, followed by his host in Peshawar, the Pathan police officer Sheikh Ahmad Ali, then the Sikh bus driver who takes him and his fellow passengers to Kabul, and the military officer stationed at the Khyber Pass, mingle personal vignettes with informal ethnography. Ali’s account of the Pathans of Peshawar is offered with the self-deprecating humour of the ‘five-and-a-half-foot delicate Bengali’, raised on the rice and water of the Gangetic delta. Yet he commands respect from the martial Pathans since he is a Syed (belonging to the Prophet’s family), and also because the Bengalis, with their history of political insurgency, ‘bomb the British’.<sup>17</sup>

After a hair-raising bus journey, Ali arrives in Kabul, where he is welcomed by Igor Bogdanov, a Tsarist Russian philologist and professor of Farsi, one of the Russian scholars in exile earlier invited by Tagore to Santiniketan. In fact, Tagore’s Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati as an institution (founded in 1921) link four members of Kabul’s tiny academic community: Mujtaba Ali himself; Bogdanov, who returns to Santiniketan during the course of Ali’s narrative; the French-Swiss linguist Fernand Benoit, another of Tagore’s recruits, ‘like the bereft Yaksha’ perennially homesick for Santiniketan; and Maulana Ziauddin, a sometime Khilafat activist from Amritsar who had, like Ali, studied Farsi at Visva-Bharati under Bogdanov and who travels from there to Kabul.<sup>18</sup> Later, Mujtaba Ali recalled that Visva-Bharati was at that

15 *Deshe Bideshe*, in *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9, pp. 15–167; vol. 10, pp. 9–91. See Ali, *In a Land far from Home: A Bengali in Afghanistan*, trans. Nazes Afroz (Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015); but translations here are mine.

16 See Jitendranath Chakrabarti, ‘Introduction’, *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9, p. 7.

17 *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9, pp. 27–30, 46–47 (Ch. 3, Ch. 6).

18 *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9, p. 157 (Ch. 27); vol. 10, p. 18 (Ch. 31) on Benoit as the bereft Yaksha. For Mujtaba Ali and Ziauddin studying under Bogdanov at Visva-Bharati,

time the only place where one could learn French, Farsi, and German together, a fact that helped him obtain his job in Kabul.<sup>19</sup> It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect upon this network of scholars from Santiniketan in remote Kabul, proof of the cultural reach of a non-colonial institution whose degrees were not recognized by the British colonial government. Tagore's name is Ali's passport in both Peshawar and Kabul, and when he tells the German ambassador who promises him a scholarship that he had studied in Tagore's university, he is assured that no other certificate will be needed.<sup>20</sup> It is important to set these scholarly links, with Ali's own historicization of his Afghanistan experience, against the sentimental, trivializing impulse that is content to cite Tagore's short story 'Kabuliwallah' as a marker of the poet's love for Afghans.<sup>21</sup> Santiniketan, and the culture of transnational intellectual and affective links that it fostered, is a reference point that opens and closes the circle of Mujtaba Ali's peripatetic career, and Tagore's example remains at the core of his cosmopolitan humanism. As one of Visva-Bharati's first students, directly taught by Rabindranath himself, Mujtaba Ali testifies to the uniqueness and life-changing potential of that educational experiment. In a moving personal account appearing among the 'Uncollected Writings,' he speaks of the poet as his personal talisman in Kabul and Berlin, and of his last meeting with him in 1939.<sup>22</sup>

The narrative of *Deshe Bideshe* is built around Afghanistan's cultural and political history and its relation to the larger Indian landmass. Ali leaves us in no doubt of the critical importance of Afghanistan in the

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see Prasantakumar Pal, *Rabi-jībanī*, vol. 8 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), p. 287. After sharing with Ali the extreme sufferings of their delayed evacuation from Kabul, Ziauddin returned to Santiniketan as a lecturer. Tagore wrote a poem of tribute after his death in Lahore in July 1938, reproduced in the epilogue to *Deshe Bideshe* as a memory of their friendship; see *Rachanābālī*, vol. 10, pp. 90–91.

- 19 'Gurudev' (undated), in 'Aprakāshita Rachanā', *Rachanābālī*, vol. 10, p. 184. Ali's degree from Visva-Bharati carried more weight in Kabul than any certification from a colonial university.
- 20 *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9 p. 157 (Ch. 27). On the non-recognized status of Visva-Bharati and Tagore's certification, see *Rachanābālī*, vol. 10, pp. 86–87 (Ch. 42).
- 21 E.g. the statement by Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2015), cited in Avinash Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 27–28.
- 22 'Gurudev', *Rachanābālī*, vol. 10, pp. 182–89. Ali recalls listening to Tagore's recorded voice in his phonetics class in Berlin, and Tagore's fervent hope for the obliteration of differences between Hindus and Muslims.

'balance of power' (another name for imperial rivalries, still evident today) in Asia and Europe, as evident in Britain's three Anglo-Afghan wars. The second of these (1878–1880), set off by Afghanistan's preferring diplomatic relations with Russia over Britain, saw Kabul occupied twice by the British, the second time after the murder of the British envoy and his escort. In 1919 the Afghan ruler Amir Habibullah, who had adroitly balanced British and Russian interests, was assassinated in a palace intrigue, and the throne was claimed by his younger son Amanullah, who consolidated his authority by defeating the British in the third Anglo-Afghan war (6 May–8 August 1919). The Durand Line became the territorial boundary between Afghanistan and the Indian Empire. For colonized Indians, especially Muslims, Afghan military victory and independence—'*Khudā-dād* [God-given] Afghanistan', as Ali describes it—were a source of inspiration. Anticolonialists and pan-Islamists laboured for decades to draw Afghanistan into the larger struggle against British imperialism. In 1914 a group of Muslim students (known as *muhajirs*, those who perform *hijrat*, religious flight or emigration) fled from Lahore to Kabul, hoping to join the anti-imperialist struggle after Britain declared war on Turkey. In 1920, when leaders of the pan-Islamist Khilafat Movement, inspired by Afghan independence, called for mass *hijrat*, their numbers swelled to nearly 40,000. The *muhajirin* received no encouragement in Afghanistan, but some travelled to Tashkent, where the Communist Party of India was founded in 1920, to join revolutionary movements.<sup>23</sup>

Ali deliberately includes one of the most remarkable preliminaries to the third Anglo-Afghan war, the 1915 Turko-German mission to Kabul, which sought Amir Habibullah's aid in liberating India from the British.<sup>24</sup> The delegation, sponsored by the German Foreign Office

23 See Suchetana Chattopadhyay, 'Towards Communism: 1917 and the *Muhajirs* from India Adrift in Central Asia', *Social Scientist*, 47.7–8 (2019), 3–30 (pp. 5–8, 11–14). Chattopadhyay cites the Bengali revolutionary poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's support for *muhajirs* killed by the British military police.

24 The initiative came from the Berlin Committee (led by Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, Sarojini Naidu's eldest brother, known as 'Chatto') which became the Indian Independence Committee in 1915, after Har Dayal, founder of the Ghadar movement, reached Berlin. The Committee included Chatto, Bhupendranath Datta (brother of Swami Vivekananda), Champak Raman Pillai and other revolutionaries, and interacted with Iranian and Egyptian nationalists with their own Independence committees in Berlin. See Arun Coomer Bose, *Indian Revolutionaries Abroad*,

and backed by the Ottoman general Enver Pasha, was led by a colourful Indian Swadeshi revolutionary, Raja Mahendra Pratap, accompanied by the pan-Islamist Maulana Barkatullah. Habibullah gave the delegation a royal welcome, but isolated it in the Babur Gardens and showed no appetite for war, despite strong anti-British feeling among the powerful Afghan *mullahs* and nobles. A German-Afghan agreement was prepared, and Pratap liaised with Indian *muhajirs*, prisoners of war, and *mujahideen* in Kabul. Encouraged by these contacts, Pratap took a 'bold decision of considerable symbolic value.'<sup>25</sup> On 1 December 1915 he announced the formation of a provisional Government of Free India at Kabul, with himself as President, Barkatullah as Prime Minister, and Maulana Obeidullah Sindhi as Home Minister, sending a secret message to the Indian nationalist leader Maulana Abul Kalam Azad to join them in Kabul. Failing, however, to persuade Amir Habibullah to attack the British, Pratap left Kabul after the Russian Revolution in 1917.<sup>26</sup>

These stirring events are recounted by Mujtaba Ali to explain the Afghan succession, with Amanullah (backed by his friend Mahendra Pratap) not only claiming the throne over his uncle and elder brother, but winning a war against the British.<sup>27</sup> This political and family history—into which Ali inserts his own tennis matches with the Crown Prince, 'Moin-us-Sultana' Enayetullah—is a necessary prelude to the book's account of Amanullah's misplaced efforts at social modernization, his advocacy of women's education and removal of the veil, his lavish Western lifestyle, his efforts to alter public behaviour and impose Western dress (*direshi*), all treated by Ali with a characteristic blend of satire and sympathy. Ultimately, these measures led to popular resentment, fierce opposition from Afghanistan's *mullahs*, the Shinwari tribal rebellion, and the invasion of Kabul by the Tajik bandit Bacha-e-Saqao from

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1905–1922, in *the Background of International Developments* (Patna: Bharati Bhawan, 1971), pp. 91–94.

25 Bose, *Indian Revolutionaries Abroad*, p. 111.

26 For an account of these events, see *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9, p. 94 (Ch. 14), pp. 143–48 (Ch. 24); Raja Mahendra Pratap, *My Life Story of Fifty-Five Years* (Dehradun: World Federation, 1947), pp. 39–55. Pratap returned to Kabul during the third Anglo-Afghan war as part of a Soviet mission, after meeting Lenin in 1919 (see *My Life Story*, pp. 60–2); he remained a lifelong ally of Afghanistan, offering to lead a revolutionary army against Bacha-e-Saqao in 1929, and visiting the exiled Amanullah in Italy (*My Life Story*, pp. 156–57, 164).

27 *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9, p. 144. For the palace intrigue, see pp. 138–48 (Chs. 23–24).

Kohistan, all witnessed by Ali. There are suggestions in the text that the British, perturbed by Amanullah's closeness to Soviet Russia, colluded in this rebellion.<sup>28</sup> Kabul is overtaken by fighting and looting, Bacha declares himself the new Amir, and Amanullah surrenders the throne to Enayetullah, though eventually both flee Kabul. Told by the British ambassador that he and other Indians might be evacuated 'as a favour', Ali responds that Indian money is funding their planes and pilots, and his name is promptly crossed off the evacuation list.<sup>29</sup> He and Ziauddin suffer terrible hardship before an influential relative intervenes to have them flown out, and Ali reflects:

One does not fully realize the humiliation and insult suffered by a colonized country until one goes abroad. The German poet Goethe has observed that you cannot see the true image of your own country until you travel out of it.<sup>30</sup>

This realization is an integral part of Mujtaba Ali's sensibility as a traveller. His internationalism is linked to a critical understanding of history, politics and nation, while he absorbs and communicates the distinctive elements of the places he visits. The charm and brilliance of his narrative lies in its ability to combine explosive political content with accounts of ordinary life and his own response to the intensely cosmopolitan, multilingual society he inhabited at all levels, from the company of his rural neighbours and Panjshiri Tajik personal servant, Abdur Rahman, to the bustle of Kabul's bazars with the Pashto, Urdu, Turkish, and Farsi spoken there, and the convivial circle made up of colleagues, Afghan friends like Dost Muhammad and Mir Aslam, the ex-Bolshevik Russian *émigré* Bolshov, a pilot in Amanullah's airforce, and French, German, and Russian diplomats (the British remained aloof). The text seems uncluttered, though it is full of historical references, citations of Sanskrit and Persian literature, medieval and modern Bengali poetry (Sukumar Ray as well as Tagore), and snatches of remembered poetry and song. Ali speaks of his delight in the beauty of the Kabul spring, described untranslatably as '*gachhe-gachhe dekhan-hashi, patay-patay ara-ari*' (the smiles of trees, the whispers of leaves).<sup>31</sup>

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28 *Rachanābālī*, vol. 10, pp. 45–46 (Ch. 37); see Ali, *In a Land Far from Home*, 'Translator's note', pp. xx–xxi.

29 *Rachanābālī*, vol. 10, p. 58 (Ch. 39).

30 *Ibid.*, p. 40 (Ch. 35).

31 *Ibid.*, p. 16 (Ch. 31).

Among the most spell-binding episodes in *Deshe Bideshe* is the account of an old master singer at a wedding feast:

before the sitar's tone faded a low steady tone emerged from the old man's throat—no, not from his throat, from his chest, his heart, the pores of his skin. Who knows when the sitar was tuned, it seemed as though his whole body had been tuned by some other *ustad* of *ustads*, to reach its first fullness in the last quarter of this very night. [...] It was a Farsi ghazal.<sup>32</sup>

Language acquisition, as well as a genuine philological interest in etymology and transmission, are inseparable from Mujtaba Ali's cultural curiosity. Already fluent in German and French, Ali improves his Farsi in Kabul, and commences a formal study of Russian from the gentle, hospitable Russian envoy Demidov, to whom he explains that 'in Bengal, the place formerly occupied by French literature has for some years now been yielded to Russian. Many Bengali intellectuals rate Chekhov's genius much higher than Maupassant's'.<sup>33</sup> His Pathan host in Peshawar, Ahmad Ali, had predicted: 'Spend a month frequenting any one of these inns, you'll learn a dozen languages without strain or effort. Start with Pashto, you can quickly proceed to Farsi, after that Chagatai Turkic, Mongol, Usmanli, Russian, Kurdish—the rest will come of itself'.<sup>34</sup> But it is in Kabul, rather than Peshawar, that Ali's language skills are multiplied, and it is the rich human, material, and linguistic variety of Kabul's bazaar that reminds him of the first Mughal emperor Babur's listing, in the *Baburnāma*, of the languages he had heard there.<sup>35</sup>

Kabul's bazaar was far poorer than Peshawar's, but much more colourful. People from at least twenty-five ethnic groups, retaining their own costumes and customs, did their buying and selling here. Hajara, Uzbek (Bengali Uzbek), Kafiristani, Qizilbas (there's a reference to Qizilbas in the poet Bharatchandra, and the annotator has glossed it as 'a kind of curtain!'), Mongol, Kurd — the shopkeepers of Kabul could tell their country, business, parsimony or generosity, at a glance from their turbans, *topi*, *pustin* cloak or riding boots. They walked the streets without a care, accepting their differences. [...] It was like a pageant of dreams.<sup>36</sup>

32 *Rachanābali*, vol. 9, p. 122–23 (Ch. 19).

33 *Ibid.*, p. 159 (Ch. 27).

34 *Ibid.*, p. 32 (Ch. 4).

35 *Ibid.*, p. 111 (Ch. 17).

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10 (Ch. 17).

Like the *Baburnāma* itself, Ali's text is part-travelogue, part-autobiography, part-regional history. Characteristically, his leave-taking of Kabul involves two moments of deep intimacy. The first is his visit to the simple, unadorned tomb of Babur, both emperor and 'fakir', unparalleled chronicler of his times, to pray for India's freedom. The other is the parting from his personal attendant, Abdur Rahman, a lonely figure waiting at the airfield as Ali's plane takes off, his dirty turban appearing at that moment as pure as his heart.<sup>37</sup>

### *Adda*, Print Culture, and Interwar Internationalisms

*Deshe Bideshe's* anticolonial content, forcing its late, 'post-colonial' printing, established Syed Mujtaba Ali as writer and cultural informant, a distinctive and original voice in newly independent Bengal. In 1952, he published *Pañchatantra* Part I (Five Treatises, borrowing the title of the Sanskrit fable-collection), which included his articles from the Bengali newspaper *Dainik Basumati* and the literary weekly *Desh*, and *Chāchā Kāhini* (Chacha's Tales), stories set mainly in Europe. *Chāchā Kāhini* gave cult status to its hero, 'Chacha' ('uncle,' used as a nickname), an East Bengali Muslim exiled in Germany between the wars, though he narrates only five of the eleven tales, the rest, with more dispersed settings, being told by Ali's own literary *persona*.<sup>38</sup> For Bengali readers in the 1950s and after, Mujtaba Ali's essays and reminiscences were a means of keeping the world in focus, his interwar experiences and cultural criticism casting light on the global divisions that produced bitter rifts among Indian writers and intellectuals in the Cold War era. The traveller's *persona* he adopted—speaking in his 'own' voice or through the fictional Chacha—allowed readers in a newly decolonized nation to identify themselves with migrant, dispossessed actors on an international stage during the upheavals of war and nation-building, and to take lessons learnt from them into the post-war period. Uniquely, Mujtaba Ali frames this engagement in the dialogic space of *adda* (conversation, conversational circle), giving print embodiment to the culture of oral sociability.

37 *Rachanābālī*, vol. 10, p. 70 (Ch. 41) and p. 89 (Ch. 42).

38 'Trimurti,' another of Chacha's tales, was separately printed: *Rachanābālī*, vol. 2, pp. 288–93.



Unusually for a Bengali writer in the 1950s, Mujtaba Ali maintained a studied, 'non-aligned' distance from both sides of Cold War divide. His literary tastes were classical and romantic, unlike those of his Bengali modernist peers, and he was not a member of left-leaning modernist groups surrounding journals like *Kallol* (1923–) and *Parichay* (1931–).<sup>39</sup> He never embraced Marxist cultural movements like the Indian Progressive Writers' Association (IPWA, 1933–), and its successors in Bengal, the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association (1942–) and Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA, 1943–). Despite his prodigious linguistic expertise, knowledge of Russian and love of Chekhov, he resisted the call put out by the Soviet Foreign Languages Publishing House (FLPH, later split into Progress Publishers and Mir) to work as a translator in Moscow in the post-Stalinist period when so many of his fellow writers responded: among them the Hindi writers Madan Lal Madhu and Bhisham Sahni and the Bengali modernists Samar Sen, Kamakshiprasad Chattopadhyay and Mangalacharan Chattopadhyay. But an intransigent anticolonialism made him deeply sceptical of Anglo-American intentions after World War II, a distrust manifested in essays on post-war Germany and the Arab-Israeli conflict. He was not a crypto-Fascist or wartime Nazi, despite Mohaiemen's disquiet; nor was he linked to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-funded Indian Congress for Cultural Freedom (ICCF). The first ICCF meeting in Bombay in 1951 was endorsed by writers like Agyeya (S. H. Vatsyayan), B. S. Mardhekar, Sumitranandan Pant, Jainendra Kumar, and the distinguished Bengali modernist, Buddhadeva Bose (see Orsini and Zecchini's chapters in this volume).<sup>40</sup> But unlike Bose and his son-in-law Jyotirmoy Datta, with their links to PEN and the ICCF journal *Quest*, readily accepting invitations to lecture in the USA, Mujtaba Ali seems to have kept such contacts at arm's length. If, as Greg Barnhisel shows, aesthetic style was pressed into the service of ideology during the Cold War, with 'free world' support for modernism, and social realism endorsed by the communist bloc—a distinction dividing

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39 See Supriya Chaudhuri, 'Modernist Literary Communities in 1930s Calcutta: The Politics of *Parichay*' in *Modernist Communities Across Cultures and Media*, ed. by Caroline Pollentier and Sarah Wilson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019), pp. 177–96.

40 On the ICCF, see Laetitia Zecchini, 'What Filters Through the Curtain', *Interventions*, 22.2 (2020), 172–94.

Indian writers as well—Mujtaba Ali, romantic rather than modernist, fell between these two camps in respect of both form and ideology.<sup>41</sup> Ensnared in the Santiniketan cultural community, he resisted the group identifications of journals like Buddhadeva Bose's *Kabitā* (1935–), or the post-Independence *Kṛttibās* (1953–). In retrospect, it is significant that having begun by writing in the *Māsik Mohammadi* in 1932, he went on to publish almost exclusively in mainstream Bengali literary magazines like the universally respected *Desh* (1933–), *Chaturāṅga*, *Māsik Basumati*, *Kālāntar*, *Muktadhārā*, and newspapers such as *Anandabazar Patrika* and *Dainik Basumati*, commanding the largest readership in Bengal.<sup>42</sup>

But Ali is scarcely an apolitical writer. *Deshe Bideshe*, *Chāchā Kāhinī*, *Panchatantra* and the later travelogues like *Jale-Dāngāy* (By Sea and Land, 1956), *Bhabaghure o anyānya* (The Wanderer and other essays, 1962), *Panchatantra Part II* (1966), and *Musāfir* (The Traveller, 1972), as well as other stories and essays, use the figure of the Bengali traveller, in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, as a vehicle not simply for interwar cosmopolitanism, but for political commentary and social critique. The political stance of the anticolonial migrant, negotiating global ideological conflicts, is especially important in *Chāchā Kāhinī*, which opens in interwar Berlin and provides a vivid personal account of the atmosphere of cafes and beer-houses frequented by Indian students: notably the Hindustan Haus café-restaurant (described in *Chāchā Kāhinī* as the only Indian eatery in Berlin) at 179 Uhlandstrasse, close to the Kurfürstendamm crossing in the borough of Charlottenburg.<sup>43</sup> This was run (and perhaps owned from 1928) by Nalini Gupta, an early

41 See Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

42 For a full list of these early publications, see Chakrabarti, *Syed Mujtabā Ālī*, p. 34.

43 Contemporary records indicate that this was a student dormitory sponsored by the *Deutsches Institut für Ausländer* (German Institute for Foreigners) at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, now the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Its café-restaurant, at the Uhlandstrasse address (mentioned in 'Svayambarā', *Rachanābalī* vol. 9, p. 171) is said to have lasted up to the Nazi era ('Mā-janani', vol. 9, p. 201). Student cards of Indian residents have been located by Razaq Khan (see <https://www.projekt-mida.de/reflexicon/entangled-institutional-and-affective-archives-of-south-asian-muslim-students-in-germany/>); Somnath Basu has found Syed Mujtaba Ali's university registration record and the *Ausländerkarten* of both Syed Mujtaba Ali and Ram Manohar Lohia; Sujaan Mukherjee has shared a postcard showing the café interior. The verso reads 'Hindustan-House, Berlin W, 179 Uhlandstr. Tel J1 Bismarck 2461, Indian tea-room, ping-pong and indoor games.' The 'Indian restaurant' of 179 Uhlandstrasse is mentioned by Raja Mahendra Pratap in *My Life Story*, p. 162.

Communist and associate of Manabendra Nath Roy (M. N. Roy, a pseudonym adopted by Narendranath Bhattacharya), one of the founders of the Communist Party of India.<sup>44</sup> Bengalis in Berlin also frequented the ‘clubhouse’ in Halensee, at the other end of Kurfürstendamm (called ‘Hindustan House’ in some accounts) and housing the India News Service and Information Bureau (Indian Information Bureau) started by the revolutionary socialist Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (Chatto) in 1921, and run by his brother-in-law A. C. N. Nambiar. Both it and Chatto’s home in Georg-Wilhelm-Strasse acted as meeting-place and lodging-house for Indian students, drawing them into networks of anticolonial resistance.<sup>45</sup>

This political and revolutionary tumult is refracted by Mujtaba Ali through the distinctive cultural lens of a Bengali *adda*. Ali is himself a justly celebrated witness to this Bengali social habit, a cosmopolitan site where, for historians like Dipesh Chakrabarty, the ‘debates of modernity’ were played out.<sup>46</sup> Unlike those who see the practice as uniquely Bengali, Ali finds *adda* wherever he travels, assigning its highest form to the coffee-houses of Cairo. *Adda* is his chosen setting for the ‘traveller’s tale,’ just as it provides the distinctive mode for his *baithaki* or *majlisi* style, which converts the spoken word to the medium of print. In *Chāchā Kāhīnī*, the *adda* of expatriate Bengalis conveys political and social commentary through a critical, sympathetic, but non-partisan narrator, whether ‘Chacha’ or Ali’s own *persona*:

In 1929, a restaurant called ‘Hindustan Haus’ was born in Berlin’s Uhlandstrasse, and true to their nature, the Bengalis established an *adda* in its furthest corner. The *adda*’s leader was Chacha—a rank East

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44 ‘Sunil Das Gupta is No More’, *Mainstream Weekly* 53.8 (14 February 2015) at <http://mainstreamweekly.net/article5452.html>, claims that Nalini Gupta owned the Hindustan Haus restaurant from 1928.

45 On the busy cosmopolitan character of the Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf neighbourhoods, see Gerdien Jonker, *On the Margins: Jews and Muslims in Interwar Berlin* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 35–39. Manjapra (*Age of Entanglement*, pp. 93, 106) confuses the Uhlandstrasse and Halensee properties. For conflicting accounts of the latter, see Jonker, *On the Margins*, p. 55, and Zachariah, in ‘Indian Political Activities in Germany’, pp. 145, 145n.33. Jonker (p. 37) quotes Reginald Dyer, the butcher of Amritsar, as saying ‘persons educated in Germany... talk sedition’.

46 Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘*Āddā: A History of Sociality*’ in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 180–213 (p. 210).

Bengali Muslim from Barishal—and Gossain, Mukhujye, Sarkar, Roy and the flippant young Golam Moula were his disciples.<sup>47</sup>

The stories in *Chāchā Kāhini* create a succession of character vignettes, sharp, humorous, and ironic, of individuals caught up in the upheavals of ‘world events’: they cast a clear, unsparing light upon interwar politics, the rise of fascism, the pain of colonial subjection, communal prejudice, and ethnic hatred. Berlin between the wars was a hub for revolutionary groups, especially from India and the Middle East, while Germany provided a haven for disaffected colonial intellectuals. The poet Muhammad Iqbal completed a doctorate in Persian metaphysics at Munich in 1909; Zakir Husain, future President of independent India, studied economics in Berlin in the 1920s; and the Indian socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia, Ali’s direct contemporary in Berlin, also frequented Hindustan Haus. Even Raja Mahendra Pratap was in Berlin in 1929, trying to build a ‘World Federation’.<sup>48</sup> Bengali circles in Berlin also included fascist fellow-travellers like Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Tarak Nath Das.<sup>49</sup> Sarkar later claimed intermittent attendance at the Hindustan Haus *adda* and acquaintance with its original Chacha, whom he described as belonging to a well-known Bengali family, one of the many individuals swept away on the currents of resistance to rising Nazi power.<sup>50</sup>

Researching the origins of the Nizari Ismaili Shi’a community of Khojas, and attending the Fehrbelliner Platz mosque in Berlin’s Wilmersdorf district (an ecumenical centre frequented even by Bengali

47 ‘Trimurti’, *Rachanābālī*, vol. 2, p. 288.

48 See Pratap, *My Life Story*, p. 157. Manjapra’s identification (in ‘Queer Diasporic Practice’, p. 157) of the newspaper columnist ‘Surya Ray’ in *Chāchā Kāhini* with M. N. Roy is questionable. Roy was in Berlin for just the first year of Muftaba Ali’s stay, though he began publishing his journal *Vanguard* from there in 1922. In the 1920s Roy travelled and wrote extensively to prepare the East for revolution, at Lenin’s behest. He incurred Stalin’s wrath after his 1927 mission to China, and was forced to escape from Moscow to Berlin in 1928 for medical treatment, returning to India (and imprisonment) in 1930. For Roy in Berlin, see V. B. Karnik’s ‘Epilogue’ to M. N. Roy, *Memoirs* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1964), pp. 580–87.

49 On Indian fascism, see Benjamin Zachariah, ‘A Voluntary *Gleichschaltung*? Perspectives from India towards a Non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism’, *Transcultural Studies*, 2 (2014), 63–100, and ‘At the Fuzzy Edges of Fascism: Framing the Volk in India’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38.4 (2015), 639–55.

50 See Chakrabarti, ‘Introduction’, *Rachanābālī*, vol. 9, p. 11; Chakrabarti identifies the *adda*’s youngest member, Golam Moula, as Muftaba Ali himself.

Hindus), Ali must have come into contact with *émigré* Muslims from India and the Middle East.<sup>51</sup> Gerdien Jonker speaks of an ‘odd transnational mix of religious scholars, linguists, diplomats, students, journalists and political entrepreneurs, in which Shi’ites peacefully rubbed shoulders with Sunni Muslims’.<sup>52</sup> Indian Muslims in Berlin during and after World War I included revolutionary Pan-Islamists like Maulana Barkatullah, the brothers Abdul Jabbar and Abdul Sattar Khairi, Khwaja Abdul Hamied, founder of India’s oldest pharmaceutical company (Cipla), the ornithologist Salim Ali, and India’s future President, Zakir Husain. Yet though this vibrant milieu is conveyed in *Chāchā Kāhinī*, Ali’s testimony is neglected in the growing scholarship on Muslim communities in interwar Germany and institutions like the Berlin mosque, founded in 1925 and run by the Lahori-Ahmadiyya sect.<sup>53</sup>

Ali has left a vivid record of his own arrival in Berlin, and his accidental encounter with Rabindranath Tagore’s communist nephew, Saumyendranath, who was in and out of Berlin from the late 1920s to 1933, and accompanied his uncle from Berlin to Russia in 1930. He took Ali along to meet the charismatic Chatto, referred to as Chatujye, ‘honorary public relations officer for Indians’ in Berlin. Tall, dark, romantic, immaculately dressed, with wavy hair, dreamy eyes, and sideburns, Chatto is described closeted in the remotest corner of the Hindustan Haus restaurant, sharing a glass of watery beer with Nalini Gupta, and ‘thinking all day, his head supported on his hand’.<sup>54</sup> During the 1930s, Chatto was active in the resistance to Hitler, and issued calls from Moscow to free Asia from colonial rule. He was

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51 See Syed Mujtaba Ali, *On the Origin of the Khojas and their Religious Life Today* (Bonn: Ludwig Röhrscheid, 1936). On the ecumenism of the Berlin mosque, see *Rachanābalī* vol. 9, p. 173.

52 Jonker, *On the Margins*, p. 42.

53 Gerdien Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest for Religious Progress: Missionizing Europe 1900–1965* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 63–76. On pan-Islamism, see K. H. Ansari, ‘Pan-Islam and the Making of the Early Indian Muslim Socialists’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 20.3 (1986), 509–537; Humayun Ansari, ‘Maulana Barkatullah Bhopali’s Transnationalism: Pan-Islamism, Colonialism, and Radical Politics’ in *Transnational Islam in Interwar Europe: Muslim Activists and Thinkers*, ed. by Götz Nordbruch and Umar Ryad (London: Palgrave, 2014), pp. 181–209; and David Motadel, ‘The Making of Muslim Communities in Western Europe, 1914–1939’ in *Transnational Islam in Interwar Europe*, pp. 13–43.

54 *Musāfir*, in *Rachanābalī* vol. 7, pp. 270–71. Ali cites a Bengali proverb ‘Mukhujye’s a devious crook, Bandyo straight as anything: Chatto sits among them, undisputed king’.

executed in Stalin's Great Purge on 2 September 1937.<sup>55</sup> Nalini Gupta (educated at Visva-Bharati, like Ali) was active on M.N. Roy's behalf in organizing socialist-communist networks in Bengal, before being arrested in the Kanpur ('Bolshevik') Conspiracy case on 20 December 1923, and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. The Communist Party of India believed him to have betrayed his co-conspirators, since he was released early, returned to Berlin and opened a restaurant.<sup>56</sup> Such figures were part, as Hari Vasudevan puts it, of 'a cosmopolitan set whose "revolutionary" character was shaped within a global defiance of empire located in transnational social spaces'.<sup>57</sup> But while Mujtaba Ali may have drawn from Gupta's personality, the fictional Chacha is, like Ali himself, a Bengali Muslim, a patron of the restaurant and nucleus of its *adda*, not its owner.<sup>58</sup>

The Berlin stories refer to post-World-War-I economic hardship in Germany, the Munich Putsch of November 1923, the flight of Jews to Shanghai, and bullying and racist abuse by young Nazis.<sup>59</sup> Two complementary tales, 'Colonel' in Part I, related by Chacha, and 'Punascha' ('Postscript') in Part II, from the narrator's own boyhood in Sylhet, analyse race or caste prejudice coupled with the humiliation of poverty. In the first a Prussian colonel, close to starvation but unyielding

55 See Nirode K. Barooah, *Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian anti-Imperialist in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); see also Arun Coomer Bose, 'The Indian Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks — their Early Contacts, 1918–1922', *Asian Studies*, 8.3 (1970), 336–51 (pp. 346–48).

56 See M.N. Roy, *Memoirs*, pp. 489–90, 547–48; Bose, 'The Indian Revolutionaries', pp. 346–348; and Suchetana Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta, 1913–1929* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2011), pp. 105–109, 129–133; and <http://cpiml.org/library/communist-movement-in-india/introduction-communist-movement-in-india/peshawar-and-kanpur-conspiracy-cases/>. My thanks to Dr Chattopadhyay for details of Gupta's education and his political career.

57 Hari Vasudevan, 'Communism in India' in *The Cambridge History of Communism, vol. 2: The Socialist Camp and World Power 1941–1960s*, ed. by Norman Naimark, Silvio Pons and Sophie Quinn-Judge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 491–517 (p. 494).

58 Gupta's first arrival in Berlin in 1920 and his return to start the restaurant in 1928 (Chacha's dates are 1919 and 1929, see *Rachanābali* vol. 9, pp. 174, 186, 201); his family's origins in Barishal, East Bengal (*Rachanābali* vol. 2, p. 288), and his reputation as a storyteller, roughly agree with the Chacha of Mujtaba's stories, but unlike Gupta, Chacha is a Muslim whose upbringing seems closer to that of Ali himself (vol. 2, p. 288; vol. 9, p. 196).

59 See *Rachanābali* vol. 9, pp. 224–39 ('Beltolay') and pp. 196–97 ('Colonel'); vol. 2, pp. 289–90 ('Trimurti'); vol. 11, pp. 105–11 for political commentary.

in his pride of race and bloodline, explains the principles of the *Manusamhitā* to his 'pupil' Chacha; in the second, a Brahman pandit's caste pride is ironically undermined by his state of colonial subjection. Chacha reflects:

I am a Muslim, and moreover I've had to stand at a distance of three feet from the Brahman pandit at school to show him my slate; as a youth I've visited the Hindu Hostel in Calcutta and been refused admission—I'm unlikely to feel overly enthusiastic about caste discrimination.<sup>60</sup>

For post-Independence Bengali readers, *Chāchā Kāhinī* offered a unique perspective on the bitter legacies of revolutionary aspirations, war crimes, ideological conflicts, and social inequalities. Formally, it offered *adda* at two levels, with the social occasion refracted through its print embodiment. Its cosmopolitan content bore the unmistakable stamp of Mujtaba Ali's *baithaki* style, offering anecdotal access to places, people, and events, through the sceptical but sympathetic gaze of the Bengali abroad: traveller, interpreter, gossip, political critic, and cultural informant. Moreover, it established the *adda*, a conversational free-for-all serving as stage for the gifted *raconteur*, as the distinctive medium for Mujtaba Ali's literary self-representation. Political and historical commentary is leavened by witty allusions to rural or urban life in India, Ray, Tagore, and Sanskrit and Persian romantic poetry. Writing with immense stylishness but informally and without pretension of transnational social spaces and the experiences of migrants, students, renegades, and exiles, not just in Berlin, the Rhineland, or Paris, but also Suez, Jerusalem, Cairo, and Kabul, Mujtaba Ali drew the attention of his Bengali readers to global power struggles and the anticolonial prehistories of post-war 'Non-Alignment.'

*Pañchatantra* Part I includes justly celebrated essays on 'Cairo,' and 'Āddā,' while 'Āddā-Passport,' also about *adda* in Cairo, appears in a later collection, *Rājā-Uzir* (*Kings and Ministers*, 1969).<sup>61</sup> There is no single connected account of Ali's stay in Egypt. In *Jale-Dāngāy*, he describes his first voyage to Europe in 1929, when the ship stopped at Suez and he was able to make a quick dash to see the pyramids and visit Cairo. He notes

60 *Rachanābalī*, vol. 9, p. 196.

61 'Cairo' and 'Āddā' in *Pañchatantra*, *Rachanābalī* vol. 1, pp. 7-10, 74-82; 'Āddā-Passport' in *Rājā-Uzir*, *Rachanābalī* vol. 3, pp. 308-13.

the declining reputation of Al-Azhar University owing to its failure to engage with modern learning, and arraigns both India and the Arab world for the mistaken belief that they could live off the riches of their ancient cultures.<sup>62</sup> The most sustained treatments of the cosmopolitan culture of Cairo are in the essays on *adda*, locating the true nerve-centre of this most 'Bengali' of social habits in a city where, he reports, even Egypt's great leader Sa'd Zaghlul Pasha might be found holding court in a café.<sup>63</sup> In the essay on 'Cairo,' he explains:

I love Hedua, Hatibagan, Shyambazar. Those places have no Taj Mahal, no Pyramids. This doesn't cause me the slightest regret. I love my neighbourhood tea-shop. I visit it morning and evening, meet up with Potla and Habul, to enjoy ourselves smoking our *bidis* and airing our collective expertise. Whatever I have by way of knowledge is collected from the scraps of that *adda*.

So when I was compelled by fate to set up lodging in Cairo, I was ready to give up the ghost in three days or so. I kept wandering around the city in a daze, mingling my sighs for the Basanta Restaurant of Potla and Habul with the hot winds of the Sahara. At this point, by my good Guru's grace, I noticed that about five people were carrying on arguments and shouting-matches, consuming endless coffee and cigarettes in our local coffee-house.<sup>64</sup>

Soon, he contrives to get himself invited to join this group, reciprocates with an invitation to sample the duck-egg omelettes of Basanta Restaurant should they happen to visit Calcutta, and rapidly concludes that his homegrown *adda* is not a patch on Cairo's. In 'Āḍḍā', he remarks humorously that the typical Cairo conversationalist claims to have a direct line to Beria in Russia, Himmler in Germany, and Teggart in Calcutta. Even if your visits are infrequent, the coffee-house welcomes you, he says, 'with open arms, as though you are a rediscovered, long-lost brother'.<sup>65</sup>

*Rājā-Uzīr*, which contains the essay on 'Āḍḍā-Passport' describing Ali's quest for a visa to visit Palestine, then under the British Mandate in 1934, also features later essays from the 1960s on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

62 *Jale-Dāṅgāy*, in *Rachanābalī*, vol. 7, p. 76.

63 'Āḍḍā' in *Rachanābalī*, vol. 1, p. 81.

64 'Cairo' in *Pañchatantra*, *Rachanābalī*, vol. 1, p. 8.

65 'Āḍḍā' in *Pañchatantra*, *Rachanābalī*, vol. 1, p. 82.



In these six essays Ali offers, in his characteristic style, a close political and historical analysis of the antagonism, thrown into harsh focus because of the backdrop of war, together with personal reminiscences of his efforts to learn Hebrew and his travels in Palestine.<sup>66</sup> In 'East is East and—', he writes categorically on the eve of the Six-Day War of 1967:

Israel is a pretext. Rais Jamal Abdel Nasser is a pretext. Behind these two stands the divided world: that we have so long known as the West and the East. [...] These two parts of the world are unitedly facing off against each other, ready for war. The mighty soldiers of the West are Johnson, Wilson and De Gaulle. The warriors of the East are Kosygin and Mao. Israel is supported by the Americans and the British, the Arab states by Russia and China.<sup>67</sup>

On the one hand Ali is sharply critical of the British role in creating the problem of Palestine, which he sees as fundamentally insoluble because of the Israeli state's denial of full citizenship rights to displaced Palestinians and its insatiable hunger for land, exacerbating Arab hostility towards it. On the other, he presents himself, in the spring of 1935, a traveller standing at the long-distance bus-station outside the walls of Al-Quds, the Arabic name for Jerusalem. From this perspective, that of the enquiring traveller, Ali offers a spatial tour of the Jerusalem's sacred sites, including the Wailing Wall, interspersed with amusing anecdotes of his personal encounters with tourists, rabbis, and touts. At the same time, he writes with sympathy and understanding of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sacred histories, of the meaning of the Greek *diaspora*, of later oppressions (including the Nazi Holocaust), and of the present conflicts.

Most striking is the personality of the traveller himself, recalling, in a decolonial era when economic constraints, new visa regimes, and the hardening of state borders caused by the Cold War made travel impossible for most Indians, an earlier time of transnational links and cosmopolitan attitudes fostered by relatively easier international mobility. To re-read these essays today is to recall India's support for

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66 For the six succeeding essays on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Jerusalem and the Wailing Wall, see *Rachanābalī*, vol. 3, pp. 316–38. 'Palestine,' which first appeared in *Satyapīr-er kalame* (1948) is in vol. 9, pp. 316–22.

67 See 'East is East, and—' in *Rājā-Uzīr*, *Rachanābalī*, vol. 3, p. 314.

Palestine right through the Nehruvian period, and its opposition to Israel's foreign policies, although Israel had been formally recognized in 1950. For Bengali readers in the 1960s, Mujtaba Ali's articles, appearing in the daily press and in mainstream journals, were influential in forming public opinion (and informing the public) on Cold War antagonisms in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

## India in Global Networks

If Ali's cosmopolitanism was fostered by international travel, anticolonial and nationalist aspirations, and transnational ideologies emerging in the interwar period, what vision of the world, and India's place in it, does he offer his decolonized readers? As I have suggested earlier, there is a link between his personal history, the role he plays in the internationalist cultural initiatives of a newly independent India, and the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement itself in the 1950s, post-Bandung, as a rejection of the neo-colonialism of the Great Powers, forging anti-imperial solidarities in a world polarized by the Cold War. In some ways, Mujtaba Ali appears as a pivotal figure in the long history of decolonization, Afro-Asian alliances, the new internationalisms of the 'developing' world (that we would today call the Global South), and its cultural expressions.

In one of the throwaway comments for which *Deshe Bideshe* is justly celebrated, Ali himself distinguished his stance from earlier pan-Asianisms:

It's astonishing. Article after article on the ruins of Borobudur and twenty out of focus prints of the same photograph have strained the limits of our endurance, yet the proponents of 'Greater India' show no curiosity or family feeling regarding this very-much-alive Indian colony. Dead Borobudur became part of our kin-group, but this living Indian settlement was rejected, cast out.<sup>68</sup>

Crucial ideological affiliations are at issue here. Ali refers derisively to the 'Greater India' dream that obsessed a group of a Calcutta-based 'Orientalist' scholars (including Hindu nationalists), with links to Tagore's Santiniketan, such as R. C. Majumdar, Suniti Kumar Chatterji,

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<sup>68</sup> *Rachanābali*, vol. 9, p. 109 (Ch. 17).

O. C. Gangoly, P. C. Bagchi, and Kalidas Nag. Inspired by the French Indologists Sylvain Lévi and Jean Przyluski (under whom Nag and Bagchi had trained in Paris), the Greater India Society, founded in 1927 and surviving well into the 1950s, assembled a wide range of archaeological, linguistic, and anthropological scholarship to offer ‘polemical and often provocative accounts of Indian culture as a supra-local civilising force’, and a ‘trans-local and supra-national’ ideology extending beyond the unitary nation-state.<sup>69</sup> Susan Bayly describes Kalidas Nag’s view of history as a ceaseless ‘onward march’ by Indian explorers and adventurers, a ‘cultural colonisation’ of Asia, into which Mujtaba Ali slyly inserts his example of Indian economic colonization in Afghanistan.<sup>70</sup> This ‘Greater India’ vision of cultural identity competed with other religious, cultural, and political transnationalisms of the time, like the Buddhist revivalism propagated by the Sinhalese monk Anagarika Dharmapala, or the pan-Islamist Khilafat movement, and the Pan-Asianism expressed in *Ideals of the East* by the Japanese curator Okakura Tenshin, friend and associate of Tagore, and fellow-performer on the world stage.<sup>71</sup>

Mujtaba Ali’s disdain for the ‘Greater India’ pundits who neglect the historical, political, and economic underpinnings of India’s regional identity, demands that we read *Deshe Bideshe* in the context of another transnationalist undertaking that directly preceded its publication, the Asian Relations Conference (ARC) held in Delhi in March–April 1947, where both Gandhi and Nehru gave stirring calls for greater Asian solidarity. The ARC, with 193 delegates and fifty-one observers from thirty-four ‘contingents’, and up to 10,000 auditors, crowding into the Purana Qila in Delhi, has received some attention recently. In a useful essay Vineet Thakur notes that the phrase ‘Third World’ was first used on this occasion.<sup>72</sup> The ARC was a precursor to the Conference of African

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69 Susan Bayly, ‘Imagining “Greater India”: French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 38.3 (2004), 703–44 (pp. 706–07), urges the need ‘for recognition of those far-reaching twentieth-century “imaginings” which envisaged modernist futures on a far wider scale than those of any single ethnic or civic nationality or subnationality’ (p. 708).

70 Bayly, ‘Imagining “Greater India”’, pp. 717–18.

71 On Okakura’s pan-Asianism and Tagore, see Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

72 Vineet Thakur, ‘An Asian Drama: The Asian Relations Conference, 1947’, *The International History Review*, 41.3 (2019), 673–95 (p. 673). Thakur traces the term

and Asian nations at Bandung in 1955, seen by Walter Mignolo as key to 'decoloniality' and the epistemic reconfiguration of the Third World,<sup>73</sup> but Thakur urges that it should not be regarded simply as a 'footnote to Bandung.' He sees it as 'situated in a particular transitional moment in which a decolonial vision is at variance with a postcolonial vision', when post-war allegiances had not yet hardened, and the solidarity of oppressed peoples could still be imagined in non-state terms. While Carolien Stolte reads the event as 'a culmination of interwar Asianism,' Thakur emphasizes its rifts and dissensions.<sup>74</sup>

Non-alignment was indeed an outcome of the transnational imaginaries and global movements of the inter-war years. Nehru had been a member of the League against Imperialism and attended its Brussels meeting in 1927, but was suspended from membership in 1932.<sup>75</sup> The dream of Afro-Asian solidarity, forged by anti-imperialist struggles, by the need for development and social justice, and by disillusionment with the betrayal of Abyssinia to Italian fascist aggression in 1936 by the League of Nations, anticipated the meetings in Delhi, in Bandung, and the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity conference in Cairo in 1957. By the time of Bandung, however, Asia was so deeply divided by the global

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'Third World' to the British ambassador Terence Shone's despatch to Whitehall, recording the suggestion that 'Asia, or at least South East Asia, constituted a "third world" which had its part to play in restoring to equilibrium a balance of power at present too exclusively dependent on the opposed worlds of America and Russia'; Terence Shone to Secretary of the Cabinet, 25 April 1947, BL, IOR and PP, Despatch No. 36, File 20/1 1947, IOR/L/I/1/152, p. 4; reference in Thakur, 'An Asian Drama', p. 690, n.2. Thakur believes that the term, predating Alfred Sauvy's 'tiers monde' of 1952 by five years, was picked up by Shone from the conference deliberations and was not his coinage.

73 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. xxiii, 59.

74 Thakur, 'An Asian Drama', pp. 675–76. See Carolien Stolte, "'The Asiatic hour: New perspectives on the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, 1947,' in *The Non-Aligned Movement: Delhi-Bandung-Belgrade*, ed. by N. Miskovic, H. Fischer-Tine, N. Boskovska (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 57–75.

75 On this, see Dietmar Rothermund, 'The era of Non-Alignment', and Maria Framke 'International events, national policy: The 1930s in India as a formative period for Non-Alignment' in *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War*, pp. 19–34, 37–56; Kris Manjappa, 'Communist Internationalism and Transcolonial Recognition' in *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, ed. by Sugata Bose and Kris Manjappa (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 159–77; and Akhil Gupta, 'The Song of the Nonaligned World: Transnational Identities and the Reinscription of Space in Late Capitalism', *Cultural Anthropology*, 7.1 (1992), 63–79.

Cold War that Nehru's mood was sombre and apprehensive. Warning against the danger of reducing the 'unaligned area', he urged members in the closed session on 22 April 1955: 'Let us not align ourselves as independent nations of Asia and Africa, but take a line of our own'.<sup>76</sup>

Nehru's invitation for the ARC was issued the very day of his famous radio address stating the cornerstones of India's future foreign policy as Non-Alignment, anticolonialism, anti-racism, and efforts towards world peace. The meeting itself, organized on the cusp of India's independence by a body calling itself the Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA), was ostensibly non-political, though as Carolien Stolte notes, the ICWA was scarcely free from political ambitions and interventions.<sup>77</sup> Nehru himself told the ICWA that he had conceived the idea for the ARC at the Brussels conference of the League against Imperialism in 1927, where he had met leaders from all across Asia and Africa. Its task was to break the barriers erected by the old imperialisms and bring about 'a new imagination of Asia'.<sup>78</sup> This Asia included New Zealand, Australia, Egypt, and some Soviet republics. The Tibetan delegation braved Chinese displeasure, trekking for twenty-one days across the Himalayan plateau to reach India. The Hebrew University of Palestine attended despite the Arab League's disapproval. Egypt and Turkey were present, but the Muslim League in India and other Muslim countries boycotted the Conference. A three-member delegation (their messengers had been killed in transit) from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam protested French colonial rule, represented by puppet regimes from Laos and Cambodia.<sup>79</sup> Southeast Asian nations condemned Japanese fascism, and a delegate from Ceylon warned against 'economic and demographic aggression' by 'big brothers like China and India' towards small countries like

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76 Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Speech in the Closed Session of the Asian-African Conference, Bandung, 22 April 1955', File No. SI/162/9/64-MEA, in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series*, vol. 28 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 101–02.

77 Stolte, "'The Asiatic hour'", p. 58.

78 See Thakur, 'An Asian Drama', pp. 676–77. On Nehru's debts to the League, see Michele L. Louro, 'India and the League Against Imperialism: A Special "Blend" of Nationalism and Internationalism' in *The Internationalist Moment*, pp. 22–55.

79 Nehru refused permission for Sarat Chandra Bose's 'Vietnam Brigade' to go to Indo-China to fight the French. See *Asian Relations, being Report of the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March–April 1947* (New Delhi: Asian Relations Organization, 1948), pp. 76–78; Thakur 'An Asian Drama', pp. 679–80.

Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, and Indonesia.<sup>80</sup> Japan was forbidden to travel by an embargo placed on it by General MacArthur. The fear of pre-Partition violence in Delhi led to a curfew being imposed for several periods during the Conference. Asia appeared still in thrall to colonial powers and divided against itself, yet the Conference itself was proof of an impulse towards unity.

The Conference produced a wealth of printed material: five books and ninety-four pamphlets, including Gandhi's closing speech.<sup>81</sup> Nehru's inaugural address on 23 March 1947 suggested that an Asian meeting was a cautious step towards a 'world federation,' though he was careful to distinguish his vision from earlier pan-Asianisms and the political networks of the interwar years.<sup>82</sup> In a triumph of diplomatic phrasing, he projected India as a 'meeting-point' of Asian cultures, citing both the expansionist Greater India vision (largely Hindu and Buddhist) and the 'mixed Irano-Arabic culture' (mainly Islamic, but commencing in pre-Islamic antiquity) that 'poured into India,' but moved on decisively to immediate tasks: 'in order to have 'One World', we must also in Asia think of the countries of Asia co-operating together for that larger ideal'.<sup>83</sup> The Asian leaders he named were Sun Yat-Sen of China, Sa'd Zaghlul Pasha of Egypt, Kemal Ataturk of Turkey, and Mahatma Gandhi from India. But although an Asian Relations Organization (ARO) was set up and scheduled to meet in China in 1949, civil war in China led to the venue being shifted to the Philippines, with severely curtailed representation. Nehru suspected Western efforts to build an anti-communist alliance, and the ARO quietly closed down in 1955, the very year of Bandung.

The Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau (AAWB), formed at Bandung, first met at Tashkent in 1958. But in December 1956, Mulk Raj Anand enlisted Nehru's support after his return from Bandung to organize an Asian Writers' Conference (AWC) in Delhi.<sup>84</sup> This brought together a wide

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80 *Asian Relations*, p. 74.

81 *Ibid.*, pp. 242–45.

82 On these, see Raza et al., 'Introduction', *The Internationalist Moment*, pp. xi–xxxvi, and Benjamin Zachariah, 'Internationalisms in the Interwar Years: The Traveling of Ideas' in *The Internationalist Moment*, pp. 1–21.

83 *Asian Relations*, p. 25.

84 For a detailed account, see Yan Jia, 'Beyond the "Bhai-Bhai" Rhetoric: China-India Literary Relations, 1950–1990' (unpublished doctoral thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2019), pp. 91–117, 117–36. For Mulk Raj Anand's role in organizing it with Nehru's support, see Mulk Raj Anand, 'Mulk Raj Anand Remembers', *Indian Literature*, 36.2 (1993), p. 183.

spectrum of Indian and Asian writers, but exposed their ideological rifts in the Cold War era.<sup>85</sup> The prominence of left and communist comrades from the Indian Progressive Writers' Association, like Faiz Ahmed Faiz from Pakistan, Sajjad Zaheer, Mulk Raj Anand, and Krishan Chander from India, and communist invitees from China, was censured by Congress and ICCF-affiliated writers like Agyeya and Prabhakar Padhye.<sup>86</sup> Several of these writers attended the even more divided AAWB meeting at Tashkent in 1958, where a section of the Indian delegation, led by the Gandhian Tarashankar Banerjee, submitted 'minutes of dissent,' expressing unease at the 'political' (i.e. communist) tone of the meeting.<sup>87</sup>

True to the trajectory we have been tracing, Syed Mujtaba Ali did not attend either the Delhi or Tashkent meetings, both shadowed by Cold War antagonisms, but became heir to another legacy of the Asian Relations Conference, the founding of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 1950 by India's first Education Minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, with the mandate to look towards Asia.<sup>88</sup> On 29 September 1950, Mujtaba Ali wrote to his friend Prantosh Ghatak from Constitution House in Delhi that he had been brought over from Calcutta by the Maulana as the ICCR's first Secretary and editor of its quarterly Arabic journal, *Thaqāfatu'l-Hind* (1950):

The main (and at present the only) task of the organization is to establish Indian cultural relations with Turkish, Arabic and Farsi-speaking nations in the Middle East. The Maulana was born in Mecca and educated at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. He knows all the languages of the Middle East and writes Arabic with great facility. We are at present running an Arabic quarterly. In Iraq and Egypt especially, there is infinite curiosity about India: building on this, we seek to present India's ancient tradition, complex of later cultures, and the contemporary achievements of Gandhi and Tagore.<sup>89</sup>

85 See Jia, pp. 101–06.

86 See *ibid.*, p. 103.

87 See Krishnalal Shridharani, 'Association and Isolation at Tashkent,' *Indian Literature* 2:1 (Oct. 1958–Mar. 1959), 57–60.

88 *The Indo-Asian Culture*, 1.1 (1952), prelims, and pp. 1–11, for letters from Rajendra Prasad, Azad and Nehru. The Council took over responsibility for the Calcutta-based (founded 1944) Iran Society's Persian journal, *Indo-Iranica*; the English journal, initially titled *The Indo-Asian Culture*, and later (from 1971) *Indian Horizons*, was started in 1952.

89 Ali, *Rachanābālī*, vol. 10, pp. 322–23.

Ali mentions the projects of translating the *Pañchatantra* into Arabic, sending Sanskrit professors to Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad, initiating scholarly and cultural exchanges, and extending the ICCR's reach to Southeast and East Asia in the coming years. With his philological and literary interests, Ali is equipped to act as cultural emissary for a newly independent secular nation, making allies in the decolonized world. That his efforts are directed towards 'Western Asia, Egypt and Turkey,' and 'Southeast and East Asia' places him at a formative juncture of India's post-Independence cultural policy, emphasizing anti-imperial Asian and African solidarities against both Eastern and Western blocs.

The roundtable on 'cultural problems' at the ARC had suggested translation of Asian classics, collaboration among libraries and museums, scholarships and research visits, comparative study of Asian cultures, and evolving a common script with the ambitious aim of the 'ultimate evolution of a common [Asian] language'.<sup>90</sup> Early volumes of the ICCR's English journal, *The Indo-Asian Culture*, do include archaeological, historical, and philological articles by scholars of the Greater India persuasion like R. C. Majumdar and Suniti Kumar Chatterji (with an interesting subset of essays written in Pali), but look equally towards West Asia, the Islamic world, and Africa. The ICCR sponsored translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* and Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* into Persian and Dara Shikoh's earlier Persian translations of the Upanishads, as well as the Arabic translations of six Sanskrit classics including the *Gita*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata* by the noted Lebanese poet Wadi-al-Bustani.<sup>91</sup> The journal also published poems by leading poets, like Maithili Saran Gupta, Mahadevi Varma, and Shamsur Rahman from East Pakistan.<sup>92</sup> These are substantial volumes, carrying scholarly contributions as well as essays for the general reader by writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Zakir Husain, Humayun Kabir, and S. Radhakrishnan, with the usual medley of semi-official reports on cultural missions, exchanges, scholarships, and celebrations.

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90 *Asian Relations*, pp. 193–94, 202–06 for the 'cultural problems' roundtable, with the language proposal; *The Indo-Asian Culture*, vol. 2.3 (1954), p. 404, for Asian-African exchanges. Jia notes, p. 96, that the Marathi writer Kaka Kalelkar renewed the call for a common Asian language at the AWC, 1956.

91 *The Indo-Asian Culture*, 6.4 (1958), p. 444.

92 *The Indo-Asian Culture*, 2.3 (1954), pp. 397–401.



## The Traveller as Internationalist

But Mujtaba Ali never settled into a career of cultural diplomacy. After two years he left to join All India Radio, a favoured destination for intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s, moving from Delhi to Cuttack and Patna.<sup>93</sup> Returning to Visva-Bharati (Santiniketan) and Kolkata brought some repose, but his career, commencing in Sylhet and taking him across continents and borders, only came full circle when he crossed one final border to settle in the newly-founded nation of Bangladesh. A traveller to the end, his last published work was a travelogue, *Musāfir* (The Traveller, 1971), though he wrote there that travel had been forced upon him by circumstance, rather than being a way of life he had chosen.<sup>94</sup> This is also true of the figures Javed Majeed focuses on in his study of travel, autobiography, and postnational identity—Gandhi, Nehru, and Iqbal—and others he does not mention, like Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore. Not only was travel constitutive of Mujtaba Ali's internationalism, it was a constant resource for his sense of identity: for a self in relation to others, and for the nation in relation to *its* others. What conveys that self-in-motion, accessing the difference and multiplicity of the modern world, connecting Europe with Asia and Africa, is anecdotal realism, the *majlisi* writer's strength. In a semi-parodic account of the anecdote in history, Joel Fineman called it a '*historeme*, or smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact', uniquely compacting literature and history through its narrative reference to the real, and opening into both the teleological domain of historiography, and the contingency of circumstance, by 'establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity'.<sup>95</sup> Using the textual frame of the periodical article or essay, the *ramya-rachana*, to address his audience, Mujtaba Ali is not Benjamin's story-teller so much as he is a travelling companion in a railway carriage, or someone with whom one might share a table in a café. Framed in the dialogic space

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93 The history of All India Radio and its pre- and post-Independence staff (the brilliant Bokhari brothers, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Samar Sen, Syed Mujtaba Ali, Amita and Iqbal Malik, P.C. (Tiny) Chatterjee, and my father Amalendu Das Gupta) remains to be written.

94 'Kaiphayat' ('Apologia'), in *Musāfir, Rachanābālī*, vol. 7, p. 221.

95 Joel Fineman, 'The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction' in *The New Historicism*, ed. by H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 57–62.

of *adda*, the part-fictional, part-autobiographical content of his writings made it possible for Cold War debates and their interwar pre-histories to be played out on a 'neutral' stage that was, simultaneously, the theatre of the world.

But while Mujtaba Ali wrote on politics and history, I would argue that what lies at the core of his identity both as writer and traveller—as for Tagore and Nazrul Islam—is the life of language. His celebrated address on *Purba-Pākistāner Rāshtrabhāshā*, one of the most important documents of the language movement in Pakistan and Bangladesh, is a sustained examination of the claim of a 'regional' language, Bengali, with deep roots in the life of a people, to national recognition. Not only does he argue here for education in the mother tongue, he makes a nuanced case for distinguishing 'unity' from 'uniformity', for cherishing regional differences in a united nation, and warns against a popular revolt that might cause East Pakistan to secede from the West, which actually happened in 1971.<sup>96</sup> Throughout his life, Mujtaba Ali opposed English as a medium of instruction in India, and claimed untruthfully (like Tagore) that his own command of it was poor. This may seem an argument for regionalism, yet it comes from a truly multilingual repertoire, from profound learning in the languages of both Europe and India, as shown in the literary and etymological references that mark his work, published almost exclusively in Bengali. Though a practising Muslim, his range of reference was uniquely broad, ranging from a Sylheti proverb, a Vaishnava *padavali*, lines from Kalidasa, an *ayah* of the Qur'an, to the poetry of Tagore or Sukumar Ray.

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Naeem Mohaiemen's film, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, looks at a much later period of the Non-Aligned Movement than the one cited here. He refers to the fourth NAM summit in Algiers in 1973, and the meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1974 (the year of Ali's death). The narrator Vijay Prashad comments on the desolation of architectural spaces (like Oscar Niemeyer 'giganticist' Hall of Nations in Algiers), as a visual metaphor for the failure of Non-Alignment, with

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96 See *Rachanābālī*, vol.10, pp. 153, 169–70; see also vol. 2, pp. 86–95, 'Ingreji bonam matribhasha' (English versus the mother-tongue) for Ali's views on English education, a burning issue in post-Independence India.

Bangladesh aligning itself to the OIC. In Mohaiemen's recent Bengali film, *Jole dobe Na* (2020), a character reads from Mujtaba Ali's stories to his dying wife. But the earlier film is placed at the end of a long history, one that covers the period of the Cold War and its resulting dissensions, the gradual failure of the Non-Aligned Movement (despite its formal survival), and the emergence of new alliances in an increasingly polarized world. I do not think that Mohaiemen was mistaken in placing his great-uncle Syed Mujtaba Ali's writings at the heart of that history.

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