

Title—The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, and World Views 1917-1939
Authors—Ali Raza, Franziska Roy, and Benjamin Zachariah
Year—2015

Categories: Politics, Imperialism, Intellectual History, Theory

Place: The World (South Asia)

Time: 1917-1939

Argument Synopsis:

This essay collection is focused on the internationalist moment of the interwar period from a South Asian perspective. The internationalist movement was bookended by Russian Revolution and the outbreak of the Second World War. Raza, Roy, and Zachariah claim that there has been no attempt thus far to identify and understand this moment from a South Asian perspective. This moment brought about a greater realization of the importance of India to the world and the importance of the world to India. India's liberation from imperialism and statist forces and its transformation was seen as the key to the rest's liberation and transformation. They reveal that internationalism evoked an explicitly political project which cast a broad and flexible enough net to incorporate colonized and working-class politics with scientific, literary, aesthetic and gender sensibilities. The essays in the collection attempt to uncover how and in what form ideas traveled to and from South Asia during this period. The polarization of politics eventually overwhelmed the possibilities of the internationalism of the era. Raza, Roy, and Zachariah highlight how the successive institutionalization of formerly open-ended platforms turned this moment into state-led internationalism—leading to an eroding of internationalism from below.

The essays are all part of a wider attempt to reconnect South Asian history to the contexts within which it belongs, from which national histories detach to its impoverishment. Zachariah's essay traces the network of itinerant Indians and their engagements with a wide array of political and social possibilities that are the hallmark of the internationalist moment. Raza's contribution highlights the internationalist dimension of a Punjabi leftist movement and encourages reassessment of how regional politics is viewed in the dominant historiography.

The internationalist moment offered two competing visions of the future of human societies in terms of order and justice: the Wilsonian variant which was anti-imperialist but not anti-statist and the Leninist variant which was more wide reaching and was both anti-imperialist and anti-statist. Both visions relies on the doctrine and promise of self-determination. The authors conceptualize the international not only in terms of interaction but also encounters and sites of engagement. The collection contains nine essays, nearly all of which examine non-statist and non-high politics dimensions of the international. The essays emphasize the importance of recognizing internationalisms of the non-state variety as significant and distinct from the interstate internationalism. In their introduction, the authors propose a methodological framework of 'intermediate histories' for studying actors and ideas in transit.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The term subaltern is unhelpful because it is a relational and relative category that is contingent on time, place, and context
- The internationalism of the working class was gradually undermined through the separate and combined workings of state repression and the Stalinization of the international communist movement
- The destruction of the social stability and hierarchies of the Old World by the First World War was an enabling factor in creating a new perception of the world