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CONFERENCE PAPER • PROF. DR IMTIAZ AHMED



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Confronting WWI: Tagore, Gandhi, MN Roy and the Anti-colonial Resistance in India

Abstract

Anti-colonial resistance in India started, albeit in myriad modes, before World War I (1914-1918) and continued long after it ended. The War, in fact, made the propounders of anti-colonial resistance more resolute in pursuing their respective modes. But then what is worth retelling is how diverse and myriad were the modes of anti-colonial resistance, indeed, modes which to this day have kept on impressing and influencing humans not only within the region but also beyond. Three key but very different modes could easily be identified. The first one relates to Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and his critique of nationalism. Tagore saw the War as an outcome of the nationalist zeal then prevailing in the West and Japan, and urged both Americans and Japanese, including people at home, not to fall prey to the 'menace of nationalism.' Instead, an alliance of humans from all social categories both within and beyond territorial boundaries was deemed vital for displacing colonialism and making the world a better place. The second mode of anti-colonial resistance which caught the attention of many relates to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) and his advocacy of accommodation of the contradictory forces. Gandhi first highlighted this in his book, *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule, publ. 1909-1910), and continued to advocate such a policy throughout his life. The War only made him realize the importance of the confluence of means (upaya) and end (upeya) and the justification for non-violence, indeed, not only for putting an end to the British colonial domination in India but also for transforming the human mind for the cause of the disempowered. The final mode relates to Manabendra Nath Roy (1887-1954) and his campaign to overthrow the British colonial power through violent military means. In contrast to both Tagore and Gandhi, Roy upheld what could be best referred to as the Machiavellian dictum of 'end justifying the means.' And this ranged from organizing 'underground revolutionary group,' 'political robbery' (dakati) to travelling abroad for German or Chinese arms, all for freeing India from the British. Roy saw the War as an opportunity to wage a battle against the British and for this Roy was ready to shake hands with anti-British forces throughout the world. In the course of his strenuous campaign, however, Roy moved from militant nationalism through socialism to Marxism. World War I otherwise transformed not only the world, but also the mind of many a person, including Roy's. The paper will take this up in some details.

Profile

Imtiaz Ahmed (Bangladesh) is Professor of International Relations and also Director, Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka. Professor Ahmed was educated at the University of Dhaka, Carlton University, Ottawa, and the Australian National University, Canberra. He is also currently Visiting Professor at the Sagesse University, Beirut. Professor Ahmed is the recipient of various awards and honours. Notable among them are the SSRC Award on International Conflict Zones, Social Science Research Council New York (2002); Honorary Citizenship, the State of Maryland, USA (1993). He has authored, co-authored and edited 17 books and 6 monographs. More than 100 research papers and scholarly articles have been published in leading journals and chapters in edited volumes. His most recent publication is a co-edited volume titled: *Contemporarising Tagore and the World* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2013). His forthcoming book is an edited volume titled: *Human Rights in Bangladesh: Past, Present and Futures* (Dhaka: University Press Limited), i.p.