

Bringing Asia to the world: Indian trade unionism and the long road towards the Asiatic Labour Congress, 1919–37*

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Abstract

This article considers Asianism in the Indian trade union movement, against the backdrop of increasing international cooperation between Asian trade union movements in the interwar period, which culminated in the short-lived Asiatic Labour Congress (1934–37). It demonstrates how Asianist enthusiasm both propelled and hampered Indian workers' representation at the International Labour Organization and other international bodies. Finally, it considers Asianism as a crucial characteristic of Indian trade unionism in the interwar period, by showing how the All-India Trade Union Congress, once the hope of Indian labour as an organized force, split into rival federations over the issue of its Asian affiliations.

Keywords Asianism, International Labour Organization, interwar, South Asia, trade unionism

Asianist initiatives in the context of interwar internationalism

The interwar period witnessed an unprecedented increase in movements and associations whose activities covered vast expanses of the globe. This was no less the case for South Asia than for other parts of the world.¹ Nevertheless, histories of South Asia during the interwar period have largely focused on local and national narratives, a tendency that has led to the overlooking of international dimensions and transnational solidarities in this period. This article argues that Asianist discourse and practice were an inextricable part of the public sphere in interwar South

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1 See, among others, Sugata Bose, *A hundred horizons: the Indian Ocean in the age of global empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anti-colonialism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009; and Sugata Bose and Kris Manjappa, eds., *Cosmopolitan thought zones: South Asia and the global circulation of ideas*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Asia. It is thereby understood that Asianism – in this period often explicitly anti-imperialist in tone – did not exclude the pursuit of national sovereignty. Rather, it was intimately entwined with it.

Throughout this period, actors from different levels of society developed a variety of discourses on ‘Asian’ identity, and initiatives for Asian unification, around widely divergent issues. Pan-Asiatic leagues, associations, and conferences were found in cities as far apart as Paris, Baku, Nagasaki, and many others.² As such, the term ‘Asianism’ is commonly used to refer to discursive constructs of the region in general, but it should be remembered that these constructs were intimately connected to specific social, political, and cultural projects.³ In South Asia, these initiatives spanned the full spectrum of ideological and religious persuasions. It would be simplistic to treat them merely as affirmations of Asian (spiritual) identities drawn from imported Orientalist stereotypes, although these too are found in many guises, spearheaded by Keshab Chandra Sen in the second half of the nineteenth century, and championed thereafter by Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and many others.⁴ Indian internationalists used Asianism as a mobilizing tool for a variety of alliances, from explicitly anti-Western or anti-imperialist projects to solidarity-driven movements intended to bridge Asian developmental gaps in the field of education, industrialization, or, in this particular case, labour legislation.⁵

This article seeks to locate this form of Asianism within the internationalist momentum of the interwar period. By highlighting the importance of Asian regionalism in the international engagements of the Indian trade union movement, along with not only the solidarities and opportunities but also the challenges and antagonisms that the Asian theatre presented, it enquires into the nature of Asianism as a tool for political mobilization, and the ways in which it was both propelled and hampered by the imperial balance and ideological struggles of the times. Finally, it looks at Asianism as a contested project that was shaped and discussed in the Indian public sphere and that transcended the strict purview of nationalist elites.⁶

During the 1920s, the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was faced with several options for trade union cooperation in Asia. In fact, in 1929 the Congress split into two rival

2 These examples refer to a meeting of Indian revolutionaries in Paris in 1909, the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku in 1920, and the Pan-Asiatic Conference in Nagasaki in 1926 respectively. See, among others, Cemil Aydin, *The politics of anti-Westernism: visions of world order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian thought*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007; John Riddell, ed., *To see the dawn: Baku, 1920 – first congress of the peoples of the East*, New York: Pathfinder, 1993; Birendra Prasad, *Indian nationalism and Asia (1900–1947)*, New Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1979.

3 Marc Frey and Nicola Spakowski, ‘Asianismen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert: “Asien” als Gegenstand nationaler und transnationaler Diskurse und Praktiken’, *Comparativ*, 18, 6, 2008, p. 7.

4 For analysis of this particular discourse see, among others, Mark Frost, ‘“That great ocean of idealism”: Calcutta, the Tagore Circle and the Idea of Asia, 1900–1920’, in Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal, eds., *Indian Ocean studies: cultural, social, and political perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 251–79; Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tiné, ‘Imagining India in Asia: nationalism and internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54, 1, 2012, pp. 65–92.

5 On developmental initiatives, see Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India, 1930–1950*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

6 In this way, this study connects to a recent historiographical trend, which has seen a move away from Asianist projects as top-down processes. See Ethan Mark, ‘“Asia’s” transwar lineage: nationalism, Marxism, and “Greater Asia” in an Indonesian inflection’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 65, 3, 2006, pp. 461–93; Sven Saaler and Christopher Szpilman, ‘Introduction’, in Sven Saaler and Christopher Szpilman, eds., *Pan-Asianism: a documentary history, vol. 1: 1850–1920*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011; Maia Ramnath, *Haj to utopia: how the Ghadar movement charted global radicalism and attempted to overthrow the British empire*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, esp. pp. 123–65.

federations over the issue of its Asian affiliations. The focus of this article is on the 'moderate' or 'reformist' section of AITUC, which preferred the parliamentary route and sought to address Asian labour issues through the machinery of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva. As Stephen Legg has noted, the new institutional framework of Geneva augured not only a shift in diplomatic practice but also a utopian vision of cohabiting rather than competing states.⁷ From the outset, the Indian workers' delegations to the ILO sought to integrate Asia (and, by extension, India) into this utopia of international equality. To that end, they cooperated with Japanese Trade Union Federations to convene an Asiatic Labour Congress in the 1930s, which was explicitly intended to facilitate Asia's integration in Geneva. The universalist aspirations of the ILO in this case actually served to fortify a regionalist movement, much like the relationship between the Pan-European movement and the League, as examined by Anne-Isabelle Richard elsewhere in this special issue. This interaction between regional and global levels is also evident in Su Lin Lewis' contribution, which notes the rejection of an 'Asiatic League' in favour of global inclusion, yet also discusses the formation of regional blocs, such as 'Middle Asia', within a wider context of Rotary internationalism. The reformist section's polar opposite in the Indian trade union movement was the militant trade union section, which courted cooperation with the Asian branch of Profintern, the Red International of Trade Unions, and, more specifically, with its Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat (PPTUS).

Both factions consciously sought out Asian platforms to express anti-imperialist solidarities in the specific context of Asian workers' issues. And both did so in a period of international upheaval that far transcended the eagerly awaited global power shift referred to in interwar India as 'Renascent Asia'.⁸ The global financial crisis, increasing militarism in Japan, the Manchuria crisis, and Moscow's rapprochement with Geneva all impacted on the regional and global alignments of Asian trade unionism.⁹ Examining the Asiatic Labour Congress, along with the clash over the form of Indian labour's Asian cooperation that preceded it, this article explores an under-researched mode of Asianism by enquiring into the motives of its protagonists to work in an Asian context and to use the Asian environment to further their agenda.

The Indian trade union movement: international engagements

The AITUC aspired to international activity from its inception. The very reason that the existing Indian trade unions had federated into the AITUC in 1920 was to represent Indian

7 Stephen Legg, 'Of scales, networks and assemblages: the League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2009, p. 240.

8 The concept of an Asian renaissance was liberally used by actors collaborating in international organizations, not least by Taraknath Das: see Taraknath Das, 'Pan Asianism, Asian independence and world peace', *Modern Review*, January 1929, pp. 44–52.

9 On the Manchurian incident and the League of Nations, see Rana Mitter, *The Manchurian myth: nationalism, resistance, and collaboration in modern China*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000, esp. pp. 164–6; Akira Iriye, *China and Japan in the global setting*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 81–8. On the inclusion of the Soviet Union in the League and its impact on regional power alignments, see J. Hochman, *The Soviet Union and the failure of collective security, 1934–1938*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984; R. H. Haigh, D. S. Morris, and A. R. Peters, *Soviet foreign policy, the League of Nations and Europe, 1917–1939*, Aldershot: Gower, 1986.

workers at the ILO, a subsidiary organ of the League of Nations, of which India had been a founding member in the previous year.¹⁰ An Indian delegation had attended the Paris Peace Conference, leading India to become a signatory to the League in recognition of the country's war effort. As this had been a major victory in India's battle for international status as a nation, representation at the ILO was considered vital to further cement that status. Moreover, the tripartite structure of the ILO, whereby delegations consisted not only of government representatives but also of employers' and workers' delegates, provided Indian trade unionists with the opportunity to make themselves heard internationally. In that sense, the ILO offered a voice and an agency that the League of Nations did not.

It must be noted that the workers' representatives to the ILO were not, in fact, workers. Nor were they representative of India's labour force as a whole, for the unionized wage labourer, generally taken as a norm by labour historians, accounted for only a small minority of workers.¹¹ Moreover, for much of the interwar period, Indian trade union leadership was drawn from the educated classes, with many rising to prominence in the Indian National Congress. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar has noted that their connection with the workplace was often tenuous and that 'some unions had about as much life as the letterheads which they printed ostentatiously on their notepaper'.¹² Moreover, much of AITUC's moderate leadership was influenced by ideas of top-down social reform, the leaders taking it upon themselves, not the workers, to mould workers' rights into a worthy civil cause deserving of notice in the halls of Whitehall and Geneva. Finally, as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us in his study of working-class organization in Bengal, an educated man who had been to Europe was not a *coolie* but a *babu*.¹³

Nevertheless, the selection of Indian workers' representatives (even if the eligible candidates were not workers themselves) by Indian trade unionists, rather than by the Government of India, was vitally different from the selection of delegates to the League. The latter consisted mostly of British Government of India representatives and Indian princes. The scholar and revolutionary Taraknath Das voiced the opinion of many when he remarked that 'the fundamental principle of the British Government was and is that the Indian people should not have any representation with the independent nations and when there will be any representation of India ... it should be done by those Indians willing to misrepresent India'.¹⁴

10 On the All-India Trade Union Congress, see Gopal Ghosh, *Indian trade union movement*, Kolkata: People's History Publication, 2005; Shiva Chandra Jha, *The Indian trade union movement: an account and an interpretation*, Calcutta: K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1970; N. Pattabhi Raman, *Political involvement of India's trade unions: a case study of the anatomy of the political labor movement in Asia*, New York: Asia Publishing House, 1967; Harold Crouch, *Trade unions and politics in India*, Bombay: Manaktalas, 1966; B. L. Mehta, *Trade Union Movement in India*, New Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House, 1991; Prem Sagar Gupta, *A short history of the All-India Trade Union Congress*, New Delhi: AITUC, 1980.

11 Willem van Schendel, 'Stretching labour historiography: pointers from South Asia', in Rana Behal and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *Coolies, capital, and colonialism: studies in Indian labour history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 229–62.

12 Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *Imperial power and popular politics: class, resistance and the state in India, ca. 1850–1950*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 74.

13 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history: Bengal, 1890–1940*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1989, p. 152. On the influence of reformist ideals on trade union leadership, see also Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Sasipada Banerjee: a study in the nature of the first contact of the Bengal bhadralok with the working class of Bengal', *Indian Historical Review*, 2, 2, 1976, pp. 339–64.

14 British Library, India Office Records, L/PJ/12/166, copy of an untitled 1923 pamphlet by Taraknath Das.

Through AITUC's right to select ILO delegates, the leaders of India's trade unions, regardless of their own politics, had a voice in who was seconded to Geneva. Nor were the delegates whom they selected completely divorced from the trade union scene in India. For example, both N. M. Joshi and R. R. Bakhale (considered below) were involved in the organization of several Bombay strikes in the 1920s. Through the machinery of the ILO, these trade unionists could bring these experiences, as well as their visions of reform, to a new international podium.

In that context, it is interesting to note that visions of reform were not limited to India but extended to the wider context of the imperial exploitation of Asia. The speeches made by delegates at the annual ILO conferences were often explicitly intended to draw the West's attention to Asia as a whole. That given by the ILO delegate and prominent Indian trade union leader N. M. Joshi at the 1929 conference is revealing:

Of the labour conditions in Asia may I say that even in Japan conditions are not actually very much improved? China, Siam and Persia have not yet made a beginning. Afghanistan and some other parts of Asia are not even touched. The imperial States ruling over a large number of Crown Colonies, several of which are vast, have not done much to discharge their responsibilities towards the workers living in them.¹⁵

Conversely, the ILO conferences themselves caused several issues to become more prominent in Indian thinking on Asian development, notably the underrepresentation of the countries of Asia. Only India, Japan, China, Persia, and Siam were members of the ILO; in the case of the last two, the ILO and its workers' delegations played a subordinate role in their Geneva activities. Siam had no workers' representation because trade unions were outlawed in Siam until the advent of constitutional monarchy in 1932. For much of the 1920s, labour protection was not a priority for the absolutist governments.¹⁶ Persia, like Siam, remained aloof from Asian workers' activism, and China did not send a full delegation to the ILO until 1929. Compounded by political upheaval in China, this meant that 'Asia' at the ILO was largely sustained by India's and Japan's drive for international inclusion.¹⁷

If Asia was underrepresented in the ILO conference, it was even more so in the organization's structure. The lack of 'Asian' staff appointments was seen as part of the reason why Asian issues of labour and industry received so little attention at the ILO. As Purushottoma Padmanabha Pillai, an Indian interwar ILO veteran, later lamented: 'Europe [with] 402 millions gets 12 seats on the Governing Body; the Americas with 274.3 millions, get 11 seats; Asia with 1154 millions or with well over half the total population of the world, gets only 5 seats.'¹⁸

A second problem was the ratification of ILO conventions by Asian countries, as most conventions were based on conditions in the West and there were no provisions for partial or

15 AITUC *Bulletin*, July 1929, p. 5.

16 Stefan Hell, 'Siam and the League of Nations: modernization, sovereignty and multilateral diplomacy, 1920–1940', PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2007, p. 54.

17 On Japan, see Tomo Akami, *Internationalizing the Pacific: the United States, Japan and the Institute of Pacific Relations, 1919–1945*, New York: Routledge, 2004, esp. ch. 1; Tomo Akami, 'Between the state and global civil society: non-official experts and their network in Asia and the Pacific, 1925–45', *Global Networks*, 2, 1, 2002, pp. 65–81.

18 Purushottama Pillai and Lakshminiwas Birla, *India and the ILO*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1945, p. 32.

gradual ratification. A convention was either ratified completely or not at all. The conditions of labour and industry in most Asian countries meant that ratification was often impossible. This became clear as early as 1921, a year that saw a series of conventions and recommendations on the employment of women and children in agriculture, a sector of great importance in Asia, all of which India failed to ratify.¹⁹ This presented a problem. On the one hand, delegates pressed for a modification of the ratification protocol, 'as being very necessary for Asiatic countries, which have a long and difficult journey to cover'.²⁰ On the other hand, in the words of Atul Chatterjee, who would become the first Asian member of the ILO Governing Body in 1933: 'we do not want to be considered a backward nation always and forever'.²¹

The proposed remedy was simple: the ILO conference should be more sensitive to problems of Asian labour. The Asian delegations proceeded to invite the Director of the ILO to tour Asia and visit its workers, in order to learn about specific Asian problems. They managed to convince the ILO Director of the need for an 'Asiatic Inquiry', and the mission was undertaken. However, the results remained unpublished, and the expected discussion of the mission's findings was not carried out at the subsequent ILO conference.²² The delegations then proposed an 'Asiatic Labour Congress' under the auspices of the ILO, but the response from the ILO conference was lukewarm. The ILO was not as adverse to regionalization as the League of Nations, and had considered regionalism favorably since its inception in 1919, even if longstanding plans for a regional conference of American states were not realized until 1936 in Santiago.²³ However, the fear that an Asian gathering would provide anti-imperialists with a platform was a deterrent for many members of the ILO conference, not least the British, who feared the 'anachronistic regionalism which might result from such a conference'.²⁴

ILO conferences fortified the belief that Asian countries had labour issues in common, which were the result of shared trajectories of imperial exploitation and lagging development. Most importantly, the ILO served as a means to increase contact between Asian delegates themselves. Considering the imperial travel restrictions in place within Asia, Europe remained the most likely place to meet: throughout the interwar period, travel between the colonies and Europe remained easier than travel across imperial boundaries in Asia. Benedict Anderson's argument about 'long-distance nationalism' might well be extended to interwar regionalism, and Geneva was an important site for such interactions.²⁵ Both the subject matter of the ILO conferences and the intensification of contacts between Asian workers' representatives led to an increasing realization that the ILO agenda should be more reflective of their concerns. Without much hope that an official Asian ILO conference would materialize, the workers'

19 On the conventions in question, see International Labour Organization, *International Labour Conventions and Recommendations (1919–1981)*, Geneva: International Labour Office, 1982, pp. 703, 715–16, 744. On Indian ratification, see B. D. Rawat, *India in ILO*, Jaipur: RBSA Publishers, 1990, pp. 334–5.

20 Pillai and Birla, *India and the ILO*, p. 12.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *AITUC Bulletin*, July 1929, p. 5.

23 Warren Irvin, 'Labor conference of American states', *Monthly Labor Review*, 43, 2, 1936.

24 National Archives of India (henceforth NAI), Dept of Industries and Labour, Labour Branch, L-1779(1), 1932, Proposal of the ILO to convene an Asiatic Labour Conference.

25 Benedict Anderson, *The spectre of comparisons: nationalism, Southeast Asia and the world*, New York: Verso, 1998, pp. 73–4.

delegations of India and Japan finally decided to convene the Asiatic Labour Congress on their own, to address the specific issues of Asian Labour.

The resolution to move ahead with the Asiatic Labour Congress, with or without the ILO's blessing, was born out of a meeting between the delegates of India and Japan, with Chaman Lal and N. M. Joshi representing India's AITUC, and Mitsusuke Yonekubo and Bunji Suzuki representing the Nihon Kaiin Kumiai (Japan Seamen's Union) and the Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei (Japanese Federation of Labour) respectively. The idea to convene such a conference had first arisen in 1925.²⁶ The suggested venue had been Shanghai, but political troubles in China prevented the conference from being held at that time. The plans were put on hold, and revisited in 1928, at which point it was decided that India, Japan, and China were to be the organizers of the Congress. However, they had to walk a very fine line if they wanted the Asiatic Labour Congress to improve, rather than hurt, the standing of Asia in the ILO. Even if the organizers were all confirmed reformists, who had explicitly rejected the path of the Red International in favour of that of the ILO, the fact that the Congress would not be held under the auspices of that body was cause for concern to the organization's European members.

The organizers tried to pre-empt these apprehensions by repeatedly stating that the Asiatic Labour Congress was not meant to operate as an alternative to the ILO, but, in fact, was intended to allow Asia to operate better within its confines. This would be demonstrated by holding the conference annually, 'five or six weeks' prior to the Geneva conference.²⁷ In that way, Asian delegations could engage in a preliminary discussion of the ILO's agenda for that year, so that a collective Asian stance on certain issues might be formulated. Chaman Lal, Joshi, Yonekubo, and Suzuki drafted a memorandum to this effect, which was put before an AITUC session and received with enthusiasm:

This Congress, in order to draw closer together the exploited workers of the East hereby decides, in accordance with the Memorandum signed jointly by Mr. Yonekubo, the Japanese Workers' Delegate to the last International Labour Conference and Mr. Chaman Lal, the Indian Workers' Delegate, to issue invitations to the organised Trades of Asiatic Workers ... for the holding of an Asiatic Labour Conference as early as possible in Bombay with the object of concerting measures for effective joint action to combat the capitalist offensive against Asiatic [workers].²⁸

The plans for the Asiatic Labour Congress were prominently published in the May 1929 issue of the *All-India Trade Union Congress Bulletin*. Considering how easily the resolution had passed, it is quite surprising that the Asiatic Labour Congress would eventually cause major trouble for the unity of the AITUC.

Alternative routes to Asian mobilization

In view of the acutely felt importance of taking Indian labour issues to the international stage and carving out a place at the ILO, it is interesting to note that, within a few short years, the

26 Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (henceforth NMML), AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, speech by N. M. Joshi.

27 *AITUC Bulletin*, January 1929, p. 81, 'Memorandum'.

28 *AITUC Bulletin*, December 1928, p. 74, Report of the ninth session, resolution 19.

AITUC had involved itself in a myriad of different Asian activities. These did not always relate to, or indeed fit with, post-war international cooperation as determined by the rules of 'Geneva'. They included cooperation with labour activists from different colonial and semi-colonial parts of Asia, as well as fraternal relations with Soviet-backed labour organizations, both of which were considered seditious by the Government of British India and were perceived as a threat in Geneva. It soon became apparent that the Bolshevik Revolution had inspired Indian trade unionism just as much as the establishment of the ILO.

These developments were driven both by attempts of international groups to engage Indian labour and by Indian attempts to publicize their concerns on international platforms. The potential size of a truly All-Indian Trade Union Congress had not gone unnoticed by the two international bodies in existence at the time: 'Moscow' (the Third International or Comintern) and its competitor, 'Amsterdam' (the International Federation of Trade Unions, IFTU), which cooperated closely with the ILO in Geneva.²⁹ Moscow and Amsterdam both actively pursued AITUC's affiliation. At AITUC's second session in 1921, the former sent a message of 'fraternal greetings', which reads both as an invitation and a warning, and demonstrates the battle for the allegiance of (colonial) workers between IFTU and Comintern that had erupted by then. It was explicitly framed in an Asian context:

Comrades, in wishing you success, we know we are wishing success and freedom to us all. A short-sighted labour movement of the past ... permitted the slavery of Western capitalism to be enforced upon the innocent, helpless human beings of the East, and we have now all seen the result. ... The Amsterdam Trade Union International never took any effective means against, nay, even participated actively in the subjugation of foreign countries like India, Egypt, Persia, Afghanistan and parts of China. ... Our Russian comrades have pointed out who are the real enemies of the workers of the world.³⁰

Publications that were smuggled into India in various inventive ways also showed the active interest that international communist trade unionists were taking in AITUC. One such publication, intercepted by British intelligence at Calcutta, comprised a full-length article on the Indian trade union movement, complaining that it was hampered by the control of bourgeois nationalists and lacked revolutionary aspirations.³¹ In another, the First International Congress of Revolutionary Trade and Industry Unions called upon the labour movements in Eastern countries to join the Red Trade Unions.³² The bulletins in question had been sent from Berlin. Although British Intelligence were stumped at the time as to who had sent these tracts, they are most likely to have come from Manabendra Nath Roy, the most prominent Indian member of the Comintern and the founder of India's Communist Party.³³

29 See, inter alia, Geert van Goethem, *De Internationale van Amsterdam: de wereld van het Internationaal Vakverbond, 1913–1945*, Antwerp: Houtekiet, 2003; Reiner Tosstorff, 'Moscow versus Amsterdam: reflections on the history of the Profintern', *Labour History Review*, 68, 1, 2003, pp. 79–97.

30 Gupta, *A short history*, p. 30.

31 West Bengal State Archives Calcutta (henceforth WBSA), Police files, 166/22 file 249/22, Weekly report, 24 August 1922.

32 *Ibid.*

33 On M. N. Roy, see Kris Manjapra, *M. N. Roy: Marxism and colonial cosmopolitanism*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2010. On Roy's involvement with the trade union movement, see Dipti Kumar Roy, *Trade union movement in India: the role of M. N. Roy*, Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1990.

Unable to return to India for fear of arrest, he had established a Labour Information Bureau in Berlin, with the purpose of providing a channel of communication between Indian and European labour organizations.³⁴

Roy was actively in touch with several of AITUC's militant trade union leaders, such as S. A. Dange, D. R. Thengdi, and Muzaffar Ahmed.³⁵ All were in favour of affiliating AITUC to the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), which stood more explicitly for the freedom of subject nationalities.³⁶ Their thinking on this subject demonstrates the intimate link between nationalism and internationalism in this period. In their view, the Indian working class could not be indifferent to the political struggle for national independence. Until they were free from foreign rule, they would not be able to improve their economic condition. However, this political struggle, so they believed, could only become successful if it transcended national boundaries and was fought internationally. Only a full-scale attack on imperialism could really set the working classes free.³⁷

Many of AITUC's more moderate members, especially those engaged in ILO affairs, preferred affiliation to IFTU. Although IFTU and the ILO were not officially linked, the early twenties saw strong ties between the two.³⁸ The ILO's close relationship with Geneva meant that AITUC's association with IFTU could have strategic value, and would increase AITUC's acceptance as a full-fledged participant in the international labour movement. But this was a two-way street. In order to be truly representative of international trade unionism, IFTU itself had to broaden its membership. The federation had therefore reserved a place on its council for one of the 'Asiatic countries, so that they might be able to put their case before the International World more effectively'.³⁹ The Commissioner of Police in Calcutta reported in January 1924 that, in view of this, Makunda Lal Sarkar, an AITUC reformist, had suggested the affiliation of AITUC to IFTU on the recommendation of N. M. Joshi.⁴⁰

This competition on the international stage increasingly drove a wedge between reformist and militant sections within AITUC. For the moment, however, competition between the two factions was kept in check by not affiliating to either, waiting instead until 'unity between Amsterdam and Moscow' had been achieved. This was not a fantasy exclusive to AITUC, for some members of IFTU also felt that the organization needed the 'strong and

34 Roy, *Trade union movement*, p. 8; Manjapra, M. N. Roy, pp. 83–4.

35 WBSA, Police Files, 35/26, file 248/26: 'Note on the development of the AITUC and its capture by the Communists'. By 1927, Dange was an assistant secretary of AITUC and Thengdi was one of three vice-presidents. See Roy, *Trade union movement*, p. 19.

36 On the differences between RILU and IFTU on the question of colonialism, see Willy Buschak, 'Internationaler Gewerkschaftsbewegung in Kolonien und halbkolonialen Ländern', in Friedhelm Boll, ed., *Gewerkschaftsbewegung im 20. Jahrhundert im Vergleich*, Bochum: Ruhr-Universität, 1985, pp. 34–55; Tosstorff, 'Moscow versus Amsterdam', p. 82.

37 Gangadhar Adhikari, ed., *Documents of the history of the Communist Party of India, vol. II: 1923–1925*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1974, pp. 77–8.

38 This was mainly due to the close personal friendship between the organizations' leaders, Albert Thomas (ILO) and Jan Oudegeest (IFTU). See van Goethem, *De Internationale van Amsterdam*, p. 129.

39 WBSA, Police Files, Serial no. 49, file 248/36, 'Extract from the report on the political situation and labour unrest for the week ending the 31st of January 1924'.

40 *Ibid.*

youthful' Russian trade union movement.⁴¹ In the absence of a clear-cut decision between Moscow and Geneva, no-one in AITUC, not even the reformists, saw any harm in accepting support from either when domestic strikes occurred. For example, V. V. Giri, of the Railway Workers Federation, received 25,000 roubles for the workers of Kharagpur, although he would later side with the reformists at the time of AITUC's split.⁴² Even N. M. Joshi was quoted saying that 'there is no harm in receiving money from Moscow or anywhere else for the support of a strike'.⁴³ However, a truce is not a peace. As the 1920s progressed, the influence of communist trade unionists within AITUC increased. By 1927, they realized that they might have a narrow majority in the Congress, and a secret meeting was held in the Royal Hotel in Calcutta to discuss ways of ousting N. M. Joshi as Secretary of AITUC.⁴⁴ D. R. Thengdi and Muzaffar Ahmed had initiated this meeting, along with the AITUC leaders R. S. Nimbkar – the evening's host – and K. N. Joglekar. No action was taken for the moment, but it was clear that the two factions were drifting apart.

The fate of AITUC as a unified organization of Indian trade unions would be sealed in the period between 1927 and 1929. While AITUC's ILO enthusiasts were dreaming of Asian cooperation, other Asian platforms addressed AITUC with increasing insistency. By 1927, they had become impossible to ignore. At the Brussels Congress of Oppressed Nationalities that year, where the League Against Imperialism was founded, Asian delegations had already united in several resolutions that condemned imperialism and called for joint action.⁴⁵ Especially close contacts were established between Indian and Chinese representatives in Brussels. AITUC had been hesitant to attend this gathering of revolutionary forces, but the Indian delegation consisted of, among others, the Ceylonese Trade Union Congress, the Hindoo Workers Welfare League, and the Hindoo Journalists Federation in Europe.

After much deliberation, an AITUC delegation was sent to the Second Congress of the League Against Imperialism, held in Frankfurt two years later.⁴⁶ The All-India Workers and Peasants' Party, the Municipal Workers Union (Bombay), the Bombay Trade Council Union, and the Railwaymen's Union were present.⁴⁷ The League Against Imperialism's impact on the Indian trade union movement was considerable. AITUC, despite its absence at the first gathering, had been meticulous in discussing the League's resolutions. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Roger Baldwin, a member of the League's Executive Committee and a personal friend: 'the recent session of the AITUC has been the first international great success of the

41 Van Goethem, *De Internationale van Amsterdam*, p. 50.

42 Roy, *Trade union movement*, p. 21.

43 Minocheher Rustom Masani, *The Communist Party of India*, New York: Macmillan, 1954, p. 51.

44 WBSA, Police Files, Serial no. 49, file 248/36, Secret Report, 24 March 1927.

45 International Institute for Social History (henceforth IISH), League Against Imperialism Archives (henceforth LAIA), file 28, Joint resolution by the Asian delegations. On the League Against Imperialism, see Michele Louro, 'Rethinking Nehru's internationalism: the League Against Imperialism and anti-imperial networks, 1927–1936', *Third Frame: Literature, Culture and Society*, 2, 3, 2009, pp. 79–94; Vijay Prashad, *The darker nations: a people's history of the Third World*, New York: The New Press, 2007, pp. 16–30; Jean Jones, *The League Against Imperialism*, Fulwood, Lancs.: Socialist History Society, 1996.

46 The AITUC had affiliated itself to the League Against Imperialism for the duration of one year, as a protest against the detention of the League representative M. Johnston, as per Resolution 20a of the 1928 Jharia meeting. See NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress: Report of the 9th Session.

47 IISH, LAIA, file 2, List of delegations.

League in view of the fact that all our recommendations have been adopted'.⁴⁸ However, as the one-year-only affiliation of AITUC to the League expired, discussion on the desirability of linking AITUC to this organization, and others with similar pro-Soviet profiles, flared up again.

The Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat fell firmly into the pro-communist category.⁴⁹ It had been established at Hankou in 1927, as a part of the Far Eastern Bureau of Profintern. When the invitation to the Hankou Congress of the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat arrived, AITUC decided to send two official delegates. D. R. Thengdi and S. V. Ghate, both strong communist sympathizers, were selected for the purpose. However, they were refused passports by the Government of India.⁵⁰ As the Deputy Commissioner of Police in Calcutta noted, communism had 'become more to India than the wordy vapourings of a few unbalanced semi-intellectuals whose influence for evil was exceedingly small'.⁵¹ With regard to militant trade unionism, the Government of India was shifting its policy from one of surveillance to one of active intervention. Aside from the refusal of passports, it was decided that all communications from both Hankou and Moscow to AITUC should be intercepted, especially those containing the word 'international'.⁵² Indeed, no Indian delegation was present at this first PPTUS, but the new approach towards Indian trade unionism did not achieve its desired effect. The Congress correctly assumed that the British Government of India had not allowed the Indian delegates to attend, and treated India as a full member anyway, according it a seat on the Bureau of Transport Workers for the Pacific.⁵³ The gathering also explicitly denounced the incipient Asiatic Labour Congress as an agent of imperialism. In its aspiration for international inclusion, AITUC had become caught in a global ideological struggle that had engulfed Asia. With the Congress now facing the choice between Asian cooperation within the ambit of the ILO or that of Moscow, the political tensions within AITUC became urgent.

It had become clear that the strong links between Indian trade unionists and the Kuomintang (Guomindang), which had been forged in the League Against Imperialism, and the plans to convene an Asiatic Labour Congress supporting the ILO could no longer coexist with relations with the incipient PPTUS of the Red International. The Kuomintang had expelled communists from its ranks in 1927 and was now the professed enemy of the Red International. The Red International itself was more than ever suspicious of the ILO as an instrument of imperialism, while the Asiatic Labour Congress intended to increase Asia's impact in that very organization. Cooperation with one excluded cooperation with the other.

Apart from the rift that had opened up in the Chinese labour movement, Japanese trade unionism had to be reckoned with. The reformist Japan Seamen's Union was working with

48 Seeley Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Baldwin papers, box 8, folder 3, Nehru to Baldwin, 26 January 1928.

49 On the PPTUS, see Josephine Fowler, 'From East to West and West to East: ties of solidarity in the Pan-Pacific revolutionary trade union movement, 1923–1934', *International Labour and Working Class History*, 66, 2004, pp. 99–117; Frank Farrell, 'Australian labour and the Profintern', *International Review of Social History*, 24, 1, 1979, pp. 34–54.

50 Mehta, *Trade union movement*, 140; Gupta, *A short history*, 112.

51 WBSA, Police Files, 35/26 file 248/26, 'Note on the Development of the AITUC'.

52 NAI, Home Political Records, File 1927 37/I, 'Disclosure of telegrams emanating from objectionable foreign sources to the Director of Intelligence Bureau'. Interception was rarely completely successful.

53 Xenia Eudin and Robert North, *Soviet Russia and the East, 1920–1927: a documentary survey*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957, p. 268.

N. M. Joshi to convene the Asiatic Labour Congress. The latter's nominated president, Bunji Suzuki, was known as a reformist. However, the Japanese Revolutionary Trade Union Council (Hogaiki) took an active part in the PPTUS.⁵⁴ AITUC would have lost all credibility in the eyes of its contacts if it had continued to refuse to take sides.

In March 1929, the AITUC's hand was forced when the British imprisoned several left-wing trade unionists in the infamous Meerut arrests.⁵⁵ The League Against Imperialism and the PPTUS had been mentioned explicitly in the Meerut indictment, proving in the eyes of AITUC's more moderate members that continued engagement with these bodies was not in the interest of Asian labour. Among those arrested were N. M. Joshi's most vocal opponents on the issue of Asian cooperation: Thengdi, Nimbkar, Joglekar, and Ahmed were all imprisoned.

By AITUC's December session at Nagpur, the thundering of Asia drowned out every other sound. Over the course of the proceedings, it became clear that reconciliation between the rival factions was no longer an option. The proposed Asiatic Labour Congress was one of the main bones of contention, and it was suddenly voted down, despite previous resolutions to the contrary, 'in view of the fact that it is likely to be a rival body to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat'.⁵⁶ The reformists then seceded, as the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF). A number of prominent trade union leaders and former ILO delegates saw the battle for Asia as the principal cause of the rift:

The proceedings of the Executive Council of the AITUC have revealed beyond doubt the fact that the majority of its members are determined to commit the Congress to a policy with which we are in complete disagreement: ... the affiliation of the Congress to the League Against Imperialism, and to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, and the rejection of the proposal to hold the Asiatic Labour Conference Under these circumstances, we have to dissociate ourselves completely from the resolutions of the Executive Council and we further feel that no useful purpose will be served by continuing our participation in the proceedings of the Congress.⁵⁷

The Asiatic Labour Congress

The newly formed NTUF was now free to start organizing the Asiatic Labour Congress in earnest. But the first task at hand was domestic: representing those trade unions that had joined their side in the split – and making sure that they would not regret it – as well as enlisting new unions into the federation. This was no easy task, for two disastrous strikes among textile and railway workers had left many angry workers in no mood to join the self-designated 'moderate'

54 WBSA, Police Files, Serial no. 49, file 248/36, 'Draft propaganda thesis on the Pan-Pacific Labour Conference'.

55 On the Meerut case, see Lester Hutchinson, *Conspiracy at Meerut*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1935; D. N. Dhanagare, 'The politics of survival: peasant organizations and the left wing in India, 1925–1946', *Sociological Bulletin*, 24, 1, 1975; Pramita Gosh, *The Meerut Conspiracy case and the left-wing in India*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1978; *The Meerut prisoners and the charge against them*, London: Modern Books, 1931.

56 Gupta, *A short history*, p. 151.

57 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, Report of the 9th Session. The letter was signed by, among others, N. M. Joshi, Diwan Chamanlal, V. V. Giri, B. Shiva Rao, and S. C. Joshi. V. V. Giri became the first president of the seceding federation.

NTUF, perceived by many to overtly court a seat at the imperialists' table. Correspondence between Yonekubo and R. R. Bakhale, the Asiatic Labour Congress's organizer on behalf of the NTUF, suggests that this was one of the main causes for the Congress's delay.⁵⁸ Yonekubo, who had to account for this delay to the 92,000 members of the Japan Seamen's Union, was unappreciative. His curt reply, however, included the wish that NTUF would be able to 'overcome the reds absolutely'.⁵⁹ Tensions were further eased when Yonekubo stopped over in Bombay later that year to discuss plans for the conference. The decision was made not to hold the Congress until Chinese participation had been secured.⁶⁰

It soon turned out that an Asiatic Labour Congress was easier to conceive than to execute. First, there were many travel restrictions to consider. The fact that the Congress was not sanctioned by the ILO, even if its organizers were ILO delegates, made for uncooperative institutions, were they imperial governments or international organizations. Matters of transportation and communication presented tremendous logistical challenges; steamer timetables and routes had to be considered for all prospective participants.⁶¹ Even in issuing invitations, it was unclear to whom and where to write. Most Asian nations, and especially the dependent territories, were not represented at the ILO, and there was no central list of non-ILO affiliated trade unions. Neither the ILO nor the International Federation of Trade Unions in Amsterdam was forthcoming with contacts.⁶² The lack of a clear forum for Asian trade unionists to meet was thus perpetuated by Western-dominated institutions withholding networking possibilities.

Ceylon and China represented some hope. On receipt of the draft constitution, the Ceylon Workers' Federation and Provident Association had indicated that it would like to join the movement.⁶³ China, though it had been considered a vital participant since the Congress's inception, finally joined in 1933, when Li Yu Hosiang, the Chinese Workers' delegate at the ILO, signed a memorandum with the Indian and Japanese delegates. With Chinese participation secured, and the date for the ILO Conference of 1934 in Geneva decided upon, the plans for the first Asiatic Labour Congress could be finalized. Colombo was chosen as the most appropriate venue, as it was an easy stopover for the Japanese and Chinese delegations, as well as conveniently reached from India. Perhaps, it was also far away from possible interference from AITUC, which was especially influential in the port cities of Bombay and Calcutta. Asian workers' unity at the ILO would finally be a reality.

At the Conference, finally held in Colombo on 10 May 1934, only delegates from Japan, India, and Ceylon were present. Although the Chinese workers' representative had signed the

58 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, R. R. Bakhale to Yonekubo, 7 March 1930.

59 *Ibid.*, Yonekubo to R. R. Bakhale, 9 April 1930.

60 George Totten, *The social democratic movement in prewar Japan*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966, p. 274.

61 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, Preliminary meeting in Bombay.

62 The latter could have supplied them if they had been so inclined. For instance, Indonesian trade unions had already applied for IFTU membership. See IISH, IFTU Archives, file 91, 'Note on the demands of the PVPN', 1932. Several Indonesian unions had federated in 1919, with the communists seceding in 1921 and a workers' representatives for the Dutch East Indies had attended the ILO Conference of 1929. See R. C. Kwantes, *De ontwikkeling van de nationalistische beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië*, Groningen: Nederlands Historisch Genootschap, 1975.

63 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, Ceylon WFPA to NTUF, 10 October 1929.

memorandum, it is unlikely that his decision to do so had garnered much support back home. The Manchuria crisis of 1931, and the subsequent establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo, had not only caused a crisis in Sino-Japanese relations but had also adversely affected interaction on the level of civil society.⁶⁴ And while, after the Manchuria crisis, China moved closer to the League and sought to integrate itself more closely into the existing international order, it was unlikely to cooperate with Japan in that context.⁶⁵ The Thai delegates to the ILO, consisting of representatives of the Thai monarchy and not trade unionists, remained aloof from the plans. Thai activities in Geneva were targeted as showcasing Siam as a nation on a par with Europe, rather than as a part of Asia. The fact that only the most senior diplomats were present in Geneva is a further testament to the importance attributed to the League of Nations by political elites in Bangkok.⁶⁶ The Persian delegation at the ILO, representing the authoritarian state of Reza Shah Pahlavi, also took no part in the Congress.⁶⁷

The absence of Asian workers' representatives from outside the ILO is best explained by the delay of the conference until 1934. The Congress came to fruition at almost precisely the moment when the ideal of Asian cooperation was abandoned, with Japan leaving the League of Nations, if not the ILO. First, the lack of a strong Asian presence in IFTU meant that many of Asia's trade union federations had moved closer to the Red International by this time.⁶⁸ Moreover, the tightening hold of the government on Japanese associational life might also have made delegations wary of attending the Congress, as might the fact that, all over Asia, Japanese newspapers could be seen supporting Japan's China policy.⁶⁹ Finally, the 1930s saw multiple outbreaks of hostility against Indian workers in Southeast Asia, notably in Burma in 1930 in the wake of the global financial crisis.⁷⁰ The combination of India and Japan as the driving forces behind the Asiatic Labour Congress was not an auspicious one.

Despite limited participation, the Congress passed grand resolutions pertaining to the whole of Asia, and there seemed to be no lack of confidence that at the next session fraternal delegations from other Asian countries would indeed be present. This idea was probably fed by the relative importance of the attendees of the first session. For Japan, they included Tadao Kikukawa, Japanese Trade Union Congress leader, and Bunji Suzuki, president of the

64 NAI, Dept of Industries and Labour, Labour Branch, 1932 file no. L-1779(1), Proposal of the ILO to convene an Asiatic Labour Conference.

65 Akira Iriye, *The origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, New York: Longman, 1987, p. 10.

66 Hell, 'Siam', p. 49.

67 For Persia's international engagements in this period, see Stephanie Cronin, ed., *The making of modern Iran: state and society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941*, London: Routledge, 2003, esp. pp. 82–102.

68 On the ideological leanings of the respective Asian trade union movements, see Raman, *Political involvement*, pp. 174–191; Stan Awbery and Frederick Dalley, *Labour and trade union organization in the federation of Malaya and Singapore*, Kuala Lumpur: Government Report, 1948, p. 24.

69 Iriye, *Origins*, p. 9.

70 Robert Taylor, *The state in Myanmar*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009, p. 199; Renaud Egreteau, 'Burmese Indians in contemporary Burma: heritage, influence and perception since 1988', *Asian Ethnicity*, 12, 1, 2011, p. 38. On anti-Indian riots in Southeast Asia in this period, see S. R. Sudhamani, 'Indians in Southeast Asia: an approach paper', in I. J. Bahadur Singh, ed., *Indians in Southeast Asia*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1982, pp. 8–22; Man Mohini Kaul, 'Indians in Southeast Asia: the colonial period and its impact', in *ibid.*, pp. 23–33.

Confederation of Japanese Labour.⁷¹ N. M. Joshi attended alongside Jamnadas M. Mehta, president of the NTUF and soon to be mayor of Bombay. The Geneva veterans F. I. Ayasawa and P. P. Pillai participated unofficially, on behalf of the ILO. For Ceylon, A. E. Goonesinha, president of the Ceylon Trade Union Congress, as well as S. W. Dassenaik, member of the Ceylon Labour Party and the Legislative Council of Ceylon, were among the attendees. This placed the Ceylonese delegation firmly in the reformist camp too.

The Congress opened with the singing of the labour song in English, Sinhalese, and Japanese. N. M. Joshi gave a history of the movement for convening an Asiatic Labour Congress. Joshi's speech emphasized that the Congress was meant not to distance Asia from international machinery such as the ILO but to be more active in it.

I wish to make it clear to our comrades outside Asia that ... those of us who are meeting here today are not inspired by any spirit of separation. ... The Asiatic Labour Congress is only intended to enable the workers of Asia to come into line with the workers of the other parts of the world so that instead of being a hindrance to the progress of the world we shall be able to march hand in hand with them.⁷²

This was even more evident in the speech by Peri Sundaram, Ceylon's Minister for Labour, Industries and Commerce. He voiced the desire to have Asia considered as a full-fledged member of the international system, cooperating with the West on equal footing:

This kind of international cooperation has already been born and developed under the aegis of the League of Nations The West has already made great strides in this direction, but this is the first occasion when the nations of the East are realizing their own responsibilities in the matter of promoting concerted international action to meet common problems. ... I consider that this first Congress of yours is going to be an epoch making event in Asiatic history.⁷³

The resolutions arrived at during the conference affirmed the Asiatic Labour Congress's entrenchment in the Geneva system. But they also explicitly denounced the Western bias in world politics and economics at the time, addressing the detrimental effects of everything from tariff walls to what might today be seen as globalization on the condition of workers in Asia: 'modern economies have now transgressed the bounds of parochialism and nationalism; and in order to cope with the multitudinous and complex economic and social problems of our times and to ensure for the worker his adequate place in the sun, cooperation between the various nations is most urgently needed'.⁷⁴ The issue of transnational labour was also prominently addressed, it being an important issue for transport workers and seamen in particular, in

71 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, minutes of the first session. On Kikukawa and Suzuki, see Stephen Large, *Organized workers and socialist politics in interwar Japan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 163, 184; Janet Hunter, *Japanese economic history 1930–1960, vol. 5: industrial labour in Japan*, New York: Routledge, 2000 (reprint), p. 107; Sheldon Garon, *The state and labor in modern Japan*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987, p. 108; Vera Mackie, *Creating socialist women in Japan: gender, labour and activism, 1900–1937*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 132.

72 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, Minutes of the first session.

73 *Ibid.*, speech by the Hon. Mr. Peri Sundaram.

74 *Ibid.*

whose unions Asian colleagues tended to be unwelcome.⁷⁵ ‘In many quarters of the world – although owing to overpopulation he is superfluous at home – the Asiatic labourer is unwanted. ... He must not only be taught to rise in self-esteem but he must actually rise in the estimation of other nations. Then and not till then will the solidarity of labour become more than an empty phrase.’⁷⁶ Lastly, the issue of colonialism was explicitly addressed. The fourth resolution read: ‘This Congress records its definite opinion that the grant of political freedom and right of self-determination to such of the countries in Asia as are under foreign domination is essential in the interest of international understanding and world peace.’⁷⁷

The original objective of discussing matters pertaining to the ILO was not forgotten. The Congress called for direct representation of colonies and dependencies in the ILO, and the allocation of two Asiatic seats in the governing body. It also called for an obligation to apply ILO conventions ratified by a country to its dependent territories as well. Under the existing constitution of the ILO, this was not compulsory, and the amendment was seen as a possible solution to the longstanding problem of the ratification of conventions by Asian countries. The Congress also called for a tripartite Asiatic Labour Congress under the auspices of the ILO.⁷⁸

However, the proceedings are equally interesting for what was not said. The issues of child labour, debt bondage, and forced labour were not raised, although the ILO was discussing all three at this time, with explicit reference to both India and Ceylon. These issues had entered the purview of the League through Article 23 of the Covenant, which bound members to maintain fair and humane conditions of labour. The Temporary Slavery Commission was the first to address them seriously, in 1925.⁷⁹ The ILO representative Harold Grimshaw had served on this commission, and had sought to draw these matters into the ambit of the ILO rather than the League.⁸⁰ This was not achieved until 1930, when the first Forced Labour Convention was signed, albeit not by India. The proceedings of the Congress show that the participants’ concern lay with the fact that India was unable to sign such conventions, not with the actual issues that these conventions addressed. In their view, the inclusion of Asia in ILO procedure was a *conditio sine qua non*, without which such evils could not be removed.

Finally, an attempt was made to salvage the pan-Asian character of this poorly attended conference by urging all national labour organizations in Asia to invite fraternal delegates from other Asian countries to their annual conferences, and, in that way, to create a network, independently of the Geneva meetings, that could be energized for the next gathering. The goal of wider representation was to be achieved through a press offensive

75 For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Matthias van Rossem, *Hand aan hand (blank en bruin): solidariteit en de werking van globalisering, etniciteit en klasse onder zeelieden op de Nederlandse koopvaardij, 1900–1945*, Amsterdam: Aksant, 2009, esp. chs. 7–8.

76 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, speech by the Hon. Mr. Peri Sundaram.

77 *The Trade Union Record*, May and June 1934, p. 10.

78 *Ibid.*

79 On the Temporary Slavery Commission, see Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the twentieth century: the evolution of a global problem*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2003; Kevin Bales and Peter Robbins, ‘“No one shall be held in slavery or servitude”: a critical analysis of international slavery agreements and concepts of slavery’, *Human Rights Review*, 2, 2, 2001, pp. 18–45.

80 Suzanne Miers, ‘Slavery and the slave trade as international issues, 1890–1930’, in Suzanne Miers and Martin Klein, eds., *Slavery and colonial rule in Africa*, London: Frank Cass, 1990, pp. 16–37.

from the Asiatic Labour Congress's 'headquarters'.⁸¹ Great pains were taken to give it proper panache. When the Federation of Jewish Labour in Palestine joined the Congress, marking the westernmost point on the Congress's Asian map, Yonekubo and Bakhale, disregarding the unrepresentative nature of its newest affiliate, were quick to praise the Congress as a 'continental body'.⁸² However, all this threw into sharp distinction the reality of affairs: there were no funds to speak of and there were no 'headquarters'. There was not even stationery: Yonekubo continued to use the letterheads of the Japan Seamen's Union, and Chaman Lal and Bakhale those of the NTUF.

In terms of outside perception of the Asiatic Labour Congress, its press coverage in India and Ceylon was disproportionate to the size of the gathering and illustrates well the importance that was attached to international cooperation in the South Asian public sphere. The way in which the Congress was presented might be divided into twin *topoi*: 'Asia Awakened' and 'Asia Oppressed'. The two were not necessarily contradictory, as they were part of the same anti-imperialist narrative and often occurred within a single article.

'Asia Awakened' is well represented by, among others, the *Bombay Chronicle*. This nationalist daily featured a series of articles with headlines such as 'Bright outlook for Asiatic Labour Congress: Colombo session inaugurates new era of cooperation among Eastern countries',⁸³ praising it as 'the first fruit' of the 'devoted and arduous work' of N. M. Joshi and his Japanese colleagues. While conceding that the Congress's 'potentialities and possibilities were not yet fully appreciated', it concluded that 'till now all international labour alliances and combinations originated from the West. Renascent Asia is now making her experimental efforts in this direction and that is why I consider that this Congress sets up a new landmark in Asiatic history.'⁸⁴ The *Times of India* was equally enthusiastic, captioning an article 'Asiatic Labour Congress: workers unity', calling the first session a 'good beginning', and declaring the Congress 'likely to grow'.⁸⁵ The *Hindu* euphemistically called the Congress a 'momentous gathering whose potentialities it would be wrong to measure by its comparatively humble beginnings'.⁸⁶

The *Hindu* also reminded the public that 'it should be remembered that India and Japan between them, representing as they do the two great divisions of Asiatic races, the Aryan and the Mongolian, may well claim to speak for Asia on large questions of policy'.⁸⁷ This last view is especially indicative of the widespread sentiment in India in the early 1930s that Japan and India were to lead the reawakening of Asia.⁸⁸ This view was not absent among the Congress's participants either. The Japanese delegates at Colombo, while proceeding to

81 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, 'To the editors of newspapers', 20 May 1935.

82 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, Dov Hos, Secretary of the General Federation of Jewish Labour, to Bakhale, 27 January 1935; Bakhale to Dov Hos, 4 July 1935.

83 *Bombay Chronicle*, 25 May 1934.

84 *Ibid.*

85 *Times of India*, 19 May 1934.

86 *The Hindu*, 12 May 1934.

87 *Ibid.*

88 Irving Friedman, 'Indian nationalism and the Far East', *Pacific Affairs*, 13, 1, 1940, p. 18; Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, 'Imagining Asia'.

Geneva, had hardly arrived in Aden before they wrote to N. M. Joshi: 'We look back on that historic meeting with pleasure and look forward to our future collaboration with the firm conviction that by the united efforts we workers of Asia shall be able to demonstrate our strength, free ourselves from old bondage and contribute to ... social justice and peace.'⁸⁹

The topos of 'Asia Oppressed' was equally well represented. The most poignant examples may be taken from the *Times of Ceylon*, which published many of the speeches delivered at the Congress. One editorial maintained that the Congress 'would ultimately serve as the panacea for the evils that the Asiatic Worker is subjected to'.⁹⁰ It cited Goonesinha as saying that 'the most unhappy working man in the world today is the Asiatic, because of the heartless exploitation and ruthless tyranny that he has to labour under'.⁹¹

The Asiatic Labour Congress itself sought to remain close to Geneva, but this particular article went on to criticize the ILO for passing grand resolutions and mapping out programmes for the benefit of the worker, 'presented to us as a hollow mockery, always reminding us of our helpless position; for those nice things are not for us'.⁹² Such a negative image of the ILO was not at all evident from the proceedings of the Congress, but it is likely that the Congress's otherwise anti-imperialist idiom may have bred some confusion in the attending press. The Asiatic Labour Congress was indeed intended to provide the 'Asiatic worker' with a new mouthpiece to voice his concerns, but the intention was to achieve 'those nice things' for Asia through the existing international framework of the ILO. The Congress's position was indicative of the widespread sentiment in the interwar period that inclusion in the international community would lead to progress, and that progress would be achieved only with the assent of that community.⁹³ In this case, it was felt that the agenda for labour reforms in Asia could only be rendered legitimate to the international world through the ILO.

The rest of Asia, however, did not feel that this route to international inclusion led through the Asiatic Labour Congress, of which the second session was finally held in May 1937, at the Sōdōmei's Labour Hall in Tokyo. Only Indian and Japanese trade unionists were present. The other members of the Asiatic Labour Congress, the reformist trade union federations of Ceylon and Palestine, did not attend. The Congress still professed its determination to work with the ILO, and to secure wider Asian representation at that body. The Indian delegates also emphasized this feature in their reports to the press, along with the Congress's anti-imperialist rhetoric and the fact that China's absence was publicly lamented.⁹⁴ In his opening address, the president of the Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Kaigi (Congress of Japanese Labour Unions) stated of the Congress's intentions:

We must strive to effect a speedy realization of what is laid down in the 'Magna Carta' of the ILO in Asiatic Countries ... Asiatic nations need not follow in the wake of the

89 NMML, AITUC Archive, Asiatic Labour Congress, S. S. Fushimi Maru to N. M. Joshi, 17 May 1934.

90 *Times of Ceylon*, 10 May 1934.

91 *Ibid.*

92 *Ibid.*

93 See Manela, *The Wilsonian moment*; Jay Winter, *Dreams of peace and freedom: utopian moments in the twentieth century*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006; also the editorial and contributions to this special issue.

94 *Indian Labour Journal*, 1 August 1937.

leading capitalistic nations of the world and enter into competition with them. Our Congress aims to remove the racial inequalities and the capitalistic and imperialistic domination under which the working classes of Asia are placed.⁹⁵

Despite the presence of an Indian delegation, the second Congress had become an exclusively Japanese affair. The principal sponsors of the 1937 Congress, the Sōdōmei and its labour bloc in the Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Kaigi, tried their best to portray the convention as an important milestone in 'Asian' labour history, and retrospectively claimed the movement as a Japanese initiative.⁹⁶

The only Indian delegate who had also been present at the first Asiatic Labour Congress was R. R. Bakhale, the Congress's secretary. After the Congress, he accepted – somewhat naively, perhaps – an invitation to tour Manchukuo and Korea, visiting factories and 'studying the conditions of the industrial workers'.⁹⁷ He proceeded to China to win affiliations for the Asiatic Labour Congress, but finally had to admit that 'strained political relations between Japan and China have made the entire Chinese population highly suspicious of anything international with which Japan is associated'.⁹⁸ He left China just four weeks before the start of the Sino-Japanese war, 'with a confident hope that by the time the Asiatic Labour Congress meets in India in 1939, we shall have China affiliated to it'.⁹⁹

Although a third session was indeed scheduled for 1939, the Congress would not meet again, because the Sino-Japanese war eclipsed any possibilities for the movement's survival. Much like the NTUF itself, both the Japan Seamen's Union and the Japanese Federation of Labour had been considered moderate parliamentary-reformist unions.¹⁰⁰ Bunji Suzuki had been a member of the central committee of the Social Democratic Party (1926–32), which opposed Japan's China policy.¹⁰¹ He remained involved with the party, which fused with the National Labour-Farmer Masses Party, forming the Social Masses Party from 1932 onwards. After 1937, however, cooperation with Japanese organizations in the name of Asian labour, regardless of those organizations' politics, had become impossible. On the Japanese side, trade unionism had rapidly become too restricted and too small to survive.¹⁰² On the Indian side, Japanese imperialism, particularly in relation to China, was condemned in strong terms throughout the political spectrum, and further association with Japanese bodies would have been too damaging to the NTUF. Although the NTUF was slow to catch up with the general trend in Indian associational life, which saw a decline in relations with Japanese organizations from the early 1930s,¹⁰³ Labour Asianism, too, had become tainted.

95 *Ibid.*

96 Large, *Organized workers*, p. 184.

97 *Indian Labour Journal*, 1 August 1937.

98 *Ibid.*

99 *Ibid.*

100 Garon, *The state*, p. 108.

101 Mackie, *Creating socialist women*, p. 132.

102 Large, *Organized workers*, p. 164.

103 Prasad, *Indian nationalism*, pp. 150–8.

Eclipse and resurrection: the legacy of the Asiatic Labour Congress

After the debacle of the 1937 Asiatic Labour Congress, the Indian delegates redirected their efforts towards international recognition of Asian labour issues at the ILO. One of the most important problems, the ratification of labour conventions, was finally addressed, if not solved. A committee of experts was formed, including Atul Chatterjee, whose report stated:

The ILO lays down the general principle that any convention ratified by any country should also be applied as far as possible, to that country's colonies, protectorates or other areas which are within its political jurisdiction. This clause is of special importance to Asia, large slices of which are owned by Imperial Powers It would therefore be interesting to note the methods by which the ILO seeks to bring these ... territories also within the orbit of its beneficent influence.¹⁰⁴

That year, the ILO discussed the application of the Minimum Age Convention to Asiatic countries at its annual conference; the fact that the *Indian Labour Journal* carried this news on its front page indicates that this was perceived as a considerable victory.¹⁰⁵ As it seemed that favourable winds were blowing through the halls of the ILO conference that year, the Indian delegate Satis Chandra Sen decided that perhaps the time was ripe to revisit the issue of an Asiatic Labour Congress under the auspices of the ILO: 'The Organisation could not fulfill its function if America and Asia always came to Europe and if Europe never had the opportunity of seeing America or Asia. It is essential that the ILO should have closer knowledge of Asia, and should make the affairs of countries such as India its especial concern.'¹⁰⁶ However, not only did the larger ILO conference reject his motion but the Indian and Japanese government representatives also failed to lend their support.¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, not all was lost, as the ILO Director, Harold Butler, travelled to India to attend a session of the NTUF. This was the Federation's chance to showcase its suitability to organize an official regional ILO conference, even if the Federation itself was still busy disentangling the Asiatic Labour Congress from its Japanese ties. It is very revealing that, in the presence of Butler, Shiva Rao tried to water down the fact that the second Asiatic Labour Congress had been an exclusively Indo-Japanese affair, by saying that it had been an opportunity to 'make contact with workers from some other Asiatic countries', and that problems particular to Asiatic workers had received attention 'in a setting more congenial to such consideration than is afforded by Geneva'. Shiva Rao continued by stating publicly that Butler's presence in India fed the hope that the Indian suggestion of an Asiatic Labour Conference under the ILO would be implemented soon, but hopefully 'under more favourable circumstances than unfortunately obtain in the Far East today'. It is an indication of the predicament in which the movement for an Asiatic Labour Congress found itself, owing to its association with Japan, that Shiva Rao, in the remainder of his speech, retreated

104 *Indian Labour Journal*, 10 May 1937, 2, 'The ILO and colonial territories'.

105 *Indian Labour Journal*, 27 June 1937, 1, 'Comrade Naidu champions Indian workers in Geneva'.

106 *Indian Labour Journal*, 11 July 1937, 5, Plea for Asiatic Labour Conference; Indian workers' delegate's speech at the ILO Conference.

107 *Ibid.*

into the well-worn rhetoric of the historic bonds between India and China, and emphasized that the NTUF unequivocally condemned Japan's aggression:

I have no hesitation in saying that we, as much as any other section of the Indian people, view with abhorrence and disgust the ruthless aggression of Japan China and India have much in common, and it is my firm conviction that the culture and the spiritual outlook of these two ancient countries must hasten the dawn of the day when righteousness shall again prevail on the earth.¹⁰⁸

With Europe on the brink of war, and Japan's resignation from the ILO looming, plans for an Asiatic Labour Congress under the auspices of the ILO were put on hold once more. On the Indian side, disillusion with Japan, as well as the lull in contacts with China as the result of the Sino-Japanese war, eclipsed any talk of Asian cooperation, within or without the labour movement.

After the interruption of the Second World War, however, the Asianist rhetoric that had led to the foundation of the Asiatic Labour Congress resurfaced. The four Asian member states of the ILO at this time were China, India, Persia and Siam. Japan would not re-join until 1951. Nevertheless, the temporary enthusiasm produced by the fact that the ILO had been the only Wilsonian institution to survive the war, and the inclusion of several Asian delegates at the San Francisco negotiations that founded the United Nations, refocused attempts to demand an Asian share in the international system that was taking shape. The ILO was still considered by many as the principal platform for the cause of Asian labour. The same arguments that had disquieted the imperial powers in the interwar period now propelled the plan forward. The very fact that the war had encompassed large parts of Asia led to the assertion that the problems of Asian countries should be studied with particular care, and that a regional approach would be most fruitful. A preparatory Asian Regional Conference was planned for New Delhi in 1947.¹⁰⁹ But the true break in the ILO's approach towards Asia was marked by the decision that non-sovereign nations should be represented individually, rather than merged into metropolitan delegations. As a result, separate invitations were sent to Burma, Ceylon, the Malayan Union, and Singapore.¹¹⁰

The Asian Regional Conference, convened in New Delhi from 27 October to 8 November 1947, brought together the ILO Governing Body and delegates from eighteen different countries and territories. All included workers' representatives in their delegations. Several of the issues that had been addressed prominently at the Asiatic Labour Congress were now discussed under the auspices of the ILO. In terms of social security, wages, and protection of workers, the conference took preliminary steps to abolish the double standard that had existed in the ratification of ILO conventions between Asia and the West.¹¹¹ The conference concluded with a list of recommendations for ILO reform, several of which had long been desired by its Asian delegations: regular meetings in Asia, branch offices and

108 *Indian Labour Journal*, 26 December 1937, 1, 'Presidential address at the third session of NTUF'.

109 Labour Forum New Delhi, *Planning for labour: a symposium on the occasion of the Preparatory Asian Regional Conference of the ILO held in New Delhi, October–November 1947*, Bangalore: Labour Publications Trust, 1947, p. xvi.

110 *Ibid.*, p. xvii. India, a non-sovereign member since 1919, was the longstanding exception.

111 International Labour Office, *The ILO and Asia: the work of the Preparatory Asian Regional Conference (New Delhi, October–November 1947)*, Geneva: ILO, 1948, p. 11.

correspondents in Asia, more office publications in Asian languages, and Asians to be more widely recruited for the office staff.¹¹²

Conclusion

It has been said that ‘the history of labor internationalism is a history of failure, of dreams disappointed, ideals compromised, and initiatives corrupted’.¹¹³ At first sight, the long and difficult road towards Asian trade union cooperation in the interwar period – and, ultimately, its fragmentation between the worlds of Geneva and Moscow – would support that conclusion.

The short-lived Asiatic Labour Congress, as an organization intended to represent the whole of Asian labour, was not a success. However, that statement is a rather instrumentalist reading of events. The tripartite structure of the ILO, which included workers’ representatives chosen by India’s trade unions rather than by the government, was actively employed as an arena where the Asian voice could be heard. Moreover, there was sufficient Asianist momentum to use it as a springboard to convene an independent conference. The Asiatic Labour Congress, and the insistence by the various Asian delegations that Asia deserved due attention at the ILO, should be regarded as an important stepping stone towards wider representation in that body, as well as towards the ILO Asian Regional Organization, which has proven durable.

The first Asian Regional Conference of 1947 was presided over by Nehru himself, retrospectively crowned by historians as the father of Indian Asianism.¹¹⁴ However, the foundations of this Asianism must be located in a much wider Indian arena, hotly debated and carefully shaped by many. The involvement of individual trade unions in the selection process of delegates for Geneva, the discussions on different modes of Asian engagement in the trade union meetings of Bombay and Nagpur, in particular, and the public debate surrounding both brought the global and the regional to the local level. The interwar period saw Indian trade unionists participate in a myriad of transnational networks, using them to implement their visions of Asian cooperation. Faced with several choices for Asian engagement to strengthen the cause of Indian labour, this contested space of cooperation was the main cause of the Indian Trade Union Congress’s split into two rival organizations. After the split, AITUC and NTUF continued on divergent Asian paths in the context of the PPTUS and the Asiatic Labour Congress, in spite of travel restrictions and censorship of communications. Their respective visions of Asia – as a red continent or as a fully fledged participant in the Geneva system – were very different. Both, however, represent a moment in Indian associational life when organizations actively exploited regional platforms to assert themselves on the international stage, and when Asianist discourse and practice were an inextricable part of the public sphere.

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¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

¹¹³ Victor Silverman, *Imagining internationalism in American and British labor, 1939–49*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ Sobhag Mathur, *Spectrum of Nehru’s thought*, New Delhi: Mitthal Publications, 1994; Christophe Jaffrelot, ‘India’s look-East policy: an Asianist strategy in perspective’, *India Review*, 2, 2, 2003, pp. 35–68; and most recently Sinderpal Singh, ‘From Delhi to Bandung: Nehru, “Indian-ness” and “Pan-Asian-ness”’, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 30, 1, 2011, pp. 51–64.