

WRITING AGAINST EMPIRE: A BLOOMSBURY MANIFESTO

RAGHAVI VISWANATH
College of Law,
SOAS University of London



Zaheer at a 1936 meeting of the Association in Lucknow (taken from the Sajjad Zaheer Digital Archive with permission): no attribution (photographer), Photograph of Sajjad Zaheer at the Progressive Writers' Association, [University of Texas Libraries Collections](#), undated.

Only a couple of streets down from Bloomsbury's Russell Square, one can find the ever-bustling Denmark Street. Also known as London's "Street for Sound" and "Tin Pan Alley", Denmark Street has historically been a hub for music shops and producers. The storied musical legacy of Denmark Street happens to be rather well documented. Nestled at the edge of Denmark Street, however, is a lesser-known chapter of its history.

Beneath the famed Regent Sound Studio stands an almost unnoticeable door, number 4, now one amongst few residential properties on the road. In 1934, this door led to the Nanking restaurant where the All-India Progressive Writers' Association was first conceived (Jalil 2014).

On 24 November 1934, leading London-based Indian socialist thinkers and writers Sajjad Zaheer, Mulk Raj Anand, Mahmud uz-Zafar, Ahmad Ali, and Jyotirmaya Ghosh huddled together in the back room of the Nanking restaurant and drew up a rather radical manifesto for the organization. They wrote:

we believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence to-day – the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness, and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and un-reason we reject as re-actionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive (Anand 1976: 6).

The Association was set up soon after the publication of an Urdu anthology titled *Angaarey* that Zaheer and colleagues had edited in 1932. The anthology—consisting of nine short stories and one play—explored themes of sexual desire, Marxism, the cultural perversions of imperial rule, and domestic abuse. Presumably because of its *avant garde* form and its scathing indictment of religious conservatism and imperial sycophancy, the book was met with violent outrage. *The Hindustan Times*—a popular national daily—lambasted the anthology for being mutinous. Religious groups convened in the towns of Lucknow and Aligarh to burn copies of the book. In 1933, four months following the book's publication, the Government of the United Provinces of India recalled all copies of the book, finding that it offended religious feelings and warranted a penalty under the Indian Penal Code 1860. The authors of the anthology remained unshaken, famously running a piece in the *Leader*, an Allahabad-based newspaper, announcing that “they refuse to apologise for it” (Mahmud 1996: 450).

The outrage caused by the book prompted socialist-Marxist writers like Zaheer to set up the All India Progressive Writers' Association. The Association's founding members saw the Association as a space where the revolutionary potential of modernist literature could be channelled to generate anti-colonial protest and critical theory. When he set up the Association, Sajjad Zaheer was studying law in Oxford; it was his father's dream that Zaheer become a barrister. Having recently relocated from India where embers of protest were only beginning to spark, Zaheer quickly found his feet in the ecosystem of critical, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial

thought in London. He joined the Communist Party of Great Britain, gaining the distinction of being one of its early South Asian members. Together with Anand, he would also frequent meetings of the Bloomsbury Group, a modernist, anti-Victorian collective of writers including Virginia Woolf and E M Forster. These cultural and political influences, as Zaheer would later acknowledge, made a progressive literary and political association for South Asia not only possible but urgent.

Bloomsbury remained a protagonist in Zaheer's work even outside of the Association. In 1935, Zaheer started writing an Urdu novella titled *London ki ek raat* (*A Night in London*). The story unfolds over one night in London and follows an intimate evening shared between a young Indian revolutionary and a British woman. Set in Bloomsbury's youth hostels and foggy streets, the novel tells a story of the disorientations of colonial subjects in the metropolises and is hailed for being a milestone in Urdu fiction. Couched in the romance is a moving account of the challenges of navigating cultural alienation, ideas of revolution, and racial shame. Zaheer had to return to India in 1936, but he completed the novella and published it in 1938 (Hashmi 2011).

The Association found a fresh lease of life upon Zaheer's return. Its first Indian meeting in Lucknow in 1936 was presided over by the eminent writer Munshi Premchand. The Association quickly shot into action, facilitating the publication of a string of subversive texts, including a translation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* ("White Man"), and Zaheer's own anthology of progressive Urdu literature, *Roshnai* ("Light") (Open University 2010), and even inspiring the founding of the Afro-Asian Writers' Association.

While at Denmark Street ...

... you could also make a short trip to the British Library where one of the copies of Zaheer's banned anthology *Angaarey* is stored (you can find it in the India Records of the Library).

About the author

Raghavi Viswanath is a postdoctoral researcher and teaching fellow at the College of Law at SOAS, University of London, and a Visiting Lecturer in Law at Université Catholique de Lille. Her work examines sensory approaches to legal meaning-making, land and cultural rights, epistemic injustice, and ethics of ethnographic research.

Email: rv13@soas.ac.uk.

References

- Anand, Mulk Raj. "The Progressive Writers' Movement in India". *Indian Literature* 19(½) (1976): 5-12.
- Hashmi, Bilal. *Sajjad Zaheer's A Night in London*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2011.
- Jalil, Rakshanda. *Liking Progress, Loving Change: A Literary History of the Progressive Writers' Movement in Urdu*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Mahmud, Shabana. "Angāre and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association." *Modern Asian Studies* 30(2) (1996): 447-467.
- Open University. 2010. "[Sajjad Zaheer. Making Britain: Discover how South Asians Shaped the Nation \(1870-1950\)](#)".
- University of Texas. "[Sajjad Zaheer Digital Archive](#)".
- Zaheer, Sajjad & Ors. *Angaarey*. Lucknow: Nizami Press, 1932.

Legislation, Regulations and Rules

Indian Penal Code 1860