

Kuracina, William F.: *Politics and Left Unity in India. The United Front in Late Colonial India*. Abingdon: Routledge 2017. ISBN: 9781138055049; 252 S.

**Rezensioniert von:** Michele Louro, Department of History, Salem State University

In *Politics and Left Unity in India*, William F. Kuracina revisits the history of the united front between socialists and communists in late colonial India. Much of the existing scholarship on the Indian left in the 1930s tends to assume that communists conspired to infiltrate and destroy the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) and that unity was never an authentic and sincere project on either side of the movement. Instead, Kuracina offers a fresh reading of well-known communist and socialist sources of the period and suggests that a genuine commitment to leftist unity existed, although he contends that this solidarity was flawed and ultimately untenable.

The book concentrates on the period between 1934 and 1939. Kuracina contends that members of the CSP and the Communist Party of India (CPI) sought unity and common cause around three major agendas: the mass mobilization of peasants and workers, the radicalization of the Indian National Congress (INC) leadership, and anti-constitutionalism in the context of the Government of India Act of 1935. He argues that these united front programs emphasized „vague and ill-defined concepts,“ and the failure of communists and socialists to develop specific goals, policies, and practices undermined their solidarity. (p. 43) Once their mobilization against the Government of India Act failed to prevent the INC from joining provincial ministries in 1937, the socialist and communist alliance fractured over attempts to outline further common platforms and goals for the united front. By 1937, the CSP continued to work for the radicalization of the INC, while the CPI began a campaign against socialists for their flawed logic in relation to communist doctrine and theory. A final opportunity for unity emerged in the anti-war campaign in 1939, however, mutual mistrust and failure to agree on the particulars of their solidarity led to the ultimate dissolution

of the united front.

Kuracina's book is significant in that it reminds us that the interwar and late colonial moment must be examined on its own terms. Retrospective or teleological readings of the interwar years from the vantage point of the Cold War have obscured the potential for different political parties to transcend ideological boundaries in ways that were no longer possible after the Second World War. According to Kuracina, most South Asian scholars read the attempted unity between leftists and their eventual break as a product of a „communist conspiracy“ in which party members sought to infiltrate and takeover the CSP. Instead, Kuracina argues that the united front should be read as „a product of ideological evolution and as an essential byproduct of the circulation of radical ideas“ in India during the 1930s. (p. 9)

*Politics and Left Unity in India* makes some compelling assertions, but it misses some opportunities to expand and enrich the historiography on the Indian left. Kuracina situates his intervention in relation to a much older historiography and especially the classic text by Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, which was published in 1959.<sup>1</sup> While classic texts are important, a wider engagement with more recent scholarship on Indian anti-imperialism and communism in the 1920s and 1930s would strengthen Kuracina's arguments, although this engagement also might demonstrate that his thesis is not entirely original. Newer scholarship already has characterized the 1920s and 1930s as a critical milieu in which the distinction between socialism, communism, and nationalism was not so clear and far more complicated than we have recognized. By situating the book as a revision to older historiography, without accounting for more recent scholarship, Kuracina limits the impact of his research on the Indian left.

Kuracina's ambitious interventions also might have been more powerful if he had engaged with new sources rather than more conventional ones. A more complete picture of Indian leftist history might account for the recently released papers of the Communist In-

<sup>1</sup> Gene D. Overstreet / Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India*. Berkeley 1959.

---

ternational and CPI, held in Moscow and digitally available in a number of repositories worldwide. The opening and digitization of the Comintern archive has prompted exciting and innovative scholarship on communism in India like Sobhanlal Datta Gupta's *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India: 1919–1943*.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Kuracina's book depends on published periodicals, pamphlets, and publications of the CSP and CPI, which unfortunately stops short of taking into account the important and recently accessible documents collected in Moscow in the 1930s.

Shortcomings aside, this book advances our thinking about Indian leftist politics and the 1930s. Kuracina offers a compelling account of the possibilities for unity across the left at a moment when radical politics were more fluid than we have recognized as scholars. His rereading of classic sources by socialists and communists in the 1930s will no doubt encourage further research and debate over this critical moment in India's colonial history.

HistLit 2018-2-054 / Michele Louro über Kuracina, William F.: *Politics and Left Unity in India. The United Front in Late Colonial India*. Abingdon 2017, in: H-Soz-Kult 27.04.2018.

---

<sup>2</sup>Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India: 1919–1943*. Dialectics of real and a possible history. Bakhrahat 2006.