

**Forum: Nation: A. Malik: Life histories and the nation: Lessons  
from Pakistan for history writing in the 21st century**  
*by Anushay Malik*

Quite by accident, I recently stumbled across a song from the 1958 Indian movie *Sadhana*. In a scene in that movie, a sex worker is singing to potential clients, but it was the lyrics that were the real showstopper:

„Tell me what all will you buy?  
The riches of my cultured mannerisms? The anthems of my youth [...] Everything is for sale here [...] Tell me what all will you buy?“<sup>1</sup>

This song is at once a source for historians writing on film in the 1950s, a small part of the story of the representation of sexuality in South Asian cinema and also, through the poet who wrote these lyrics, a story of progressive South Asia. Sahir Ludhianvi, the poet in question, was a member of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and along with a whole group of (mainly) men continued to produce cultural classics on both sides of the border of recently partitioned South Asia. Being part of the PWA, a progressive, self avowedly left-wing group, Ludhianvi believed that cultural production should aim to change society and have a political message. This political message was clearly connected to the left in South Asia through the links the PWA had with the Communist Party in British India and then later in independent India and Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> However, what the organisation meant by progressive was not necessarily clearly articulated. As Talat Ahmed has argued this progressive project was about pushing for fundamental change defined

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Professor Kamran Asdar Ali for drawing my attention to Saghir Ahmad's presence in British Columbia in the first place and to Professor Hugh Johnston for being so very generous with his time as I revised this piece. For the movie, see *Sadhana* 1958, (translation mine), <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052154/>> (09.09.2021).

<sup>2</sup>Carlo Coppola, Urdu poetry, 1935-1970. The progressive episode, Karachi 2017; Kamran Asdar Ali, Communism in Pakistan. Politics and Class Activism 1947-1972, London 2015.

by both an environment of anticolonialism and a dissatisfaction with South Asia's ruling elite.<sup>3</sup> Before Partition, Sahir Ludhianvi would sit with friends like Hamid Akhtar, the famous Urdu writer whose tongue in cheek book on his prison experiences quickly became a classic in Pakistan<sup>4</sup> and many other like-minded writers, artists, poets and workers sipping tea and sharing their views about the intrinsic connections between art and politics. Through their association with the Communist Party and this wider coffee culture network they were also connected to workers' movements.<sup>5</sup> After 1947, their work would continue to resonate across the border created by Partition. If we would begin the story of Pakistan in 1947, which would be the classical historiographic starting point for a national history of Pakistan, we would miss this longer story of connections. These individuals were connected by their beliefs and their opposition to colonial rule, but by the middle of the 20th century, they would become part of separate national histories.

After 1947, some of these stories would become harder to tell. Precisely because the nation, as the inheritor of boundaries drawn at the end of colonial rule, would reproduce much of the „grammar of difference“ that produced and darkened the boundaries between the ruler and the ruled thus carefully delineating the group of people who were fit to rule.<sup>6</sup> To write of Pakistan and Pakistani history as a self-contained entity located within national archives would be to simply reproduce these differences because the continuous challenge to the authority of the Muslim League, the political party credited with founding Pakistan, mounted by groups like provincial leaders and leftists, would be rendered all but invisible. Those who fought for the promises of anti-colonial movements to be delivered upon,

<sup>3</sup>Talat Ahmed, Literature and Politics in the Age of Nationalism. The Progressive Episode, New York 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Hamid Akhtar, *Kal Kothri* (Black Cell), Lahore 2009.

<sup>5</sup>Khursheed K. Aziz, *The Coffee House of Lahore*, a memoir 1942-57, Lahore 2008.

<sup>6</sup>Frederick Cooper / Ann Laura Stoler, *Between Metropole and Colony. Rethinking a Research Agenda*, in: idem (eds.), *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, Berkeley 1997, pp. 1-56, here p. 3.

for the redistribution of political and economic power and for greater autonomy for regions and provinces, were classified as dangerous troublemakers by the state who would, over time, be written out of national history. If we investigate these erasures and write them back into Pakistani history, it opens up new answers to questions that are asked in histories of the nation. Questions like how was (and is) the space that is within Pakistan imagined? How was power and resistance implicated in these imaginations of the Pakistani nation? This essay explores where some of these strands of history can be found, both within and outside Pakistan, and comments on what is to be gained if history writing in the 21st century explicitly seeks them out.

In order to write these lesser-known histories of Pakistan, two wider connections need to be kept in mind. Firstly, the history of progressives and wider movements of resistance cannot be disconnected from a longer history of opposition to colonial rule and the erasure of this oppositional anti-colonial strand of politics in the context of Pakistan. This erasure has involved stressing the building of Pakistan as an Islamic republic in opposition to a Hindu India over and above the discussion of colonial rule. This is by no means an original observation. Historians have studied and criticised in detail the Pakistan Studies textbook narrative for presenting a myopic and strongly ideological history that makes almost no mention of regional, minority and women's histories.<sup>7</sup> Ali Qasmi traces back the ideological origins of this to Muslim nationalist writing in the colonial period and finds that when it was taken up by the Pakistani state to put together Pakistan Studies, the history course that all school and university children in Pakistan have to take, this official history excluded peasant and labour movements and was uncritical of British rule.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Ayesha Jalal, *Conjuring Pakistan. History as official imagining*, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27 (1995), 1, pp. 73-89; Rubina Saigol, *Enemies within and enemies without. The besieged self in Pakistani textbooks*, in: *Futures* 37 (2009), 9, pp. 1005-1035.

<sup>8</sup>Ali Qasmi, *A Master Narrative for the History of Pakistan. Tracing the origins of an ideological agenda*, in: *Modern Asian Studies* 53 (2019), 4, pp. 1066-1105, here pp.

Secondly, the physical creation of Pakistan as a separate entity in 1947 imposed a rigid separation in archives and their descriptive catalogues (even outside Pakistan) that did not match up to the historical reality of how Partition and the beginning of a new country was experienced. On the most obvious level if you were to search for Pakistan and its history without any more specific keyword in say, the British Library, you would only get results for 1947 and after. This artificial beginning point of 1947 misses out on the fact that the areas that became Pakistan did not come into existence in 1947. Railways, industries, economic activities, artisanal centres, places with memory were all old spaces with a longer history that, in 1947, became part of a new country, and thus of the Pakistani nation. It is the work of historians in the 21st century, work that has already begun in recent publications (as discussed below), to tell the stories of connections, of resistance to colonial rule and commitment to social justice that have been squashed under the weight of Pakistan's state sponsored ideology.

Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot, sources of history may exist in various forms, but the weight given to each form, to each site of historical production is not the same.<sup>9</sup> The story of progressive South Asia, particularly the story of progressive politics within Pakistan, is simply unimportant for the national archive. National archives, by constructing the story of the nation are also telling us what subjects are worthy of serious investigation and what stories are marginal, small, and unimportant. The Pakistan National Archives collection located in Islamabad, for instance, is heavily biased toward its private papers collection which consist almost entirely of the papers of various figures involved in the Pakistan movement. Archives like this direct the historian's gaze to skim over things that do not, on the surface, connect to the national story of the country. This, according to Trouillot, is „archival power at its strongest, the power to define what is and

1085-1086.

<sup>9</sup>Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*, Boston 2015, p. 22.

what is not a serious object of research and, therefore, of mention".<sup>10</sup> The archive in this understanding is a place that helps „select the stories that matter".<sup>11</sup>

### ***Tracing Progressive Pakistani Histories***

So how is it possible to trace histories of progressive organisations and labour movements if both the archive and Pakistan's official textbook history is so ideologically strait jacketed? I think part of the answer has already been provided to us by the powerful call that Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler gave to historians, now some time back, to trace circuits of capital and movements of people in order to break apart the binary between metropole and colony and thereby see how empire actually functioned.<sup>12</sup> One of the ways in which this call has been taken up can be seen in Clare Anderson's work tracing the life histories of individuals who travelled across empire.<sup>13</sup> Tracing life histories opens up the questions that can be asked of the nation and its imagined possibilities. For instance, 1947 may have culminated in the formation of two countries, but were other possibilities imagined? Were there other desires and other world views that did not fit into a state being made for Muslims in 1947? If we begin history writing in our times with the teleological assumption that the formation of the nation was the end goal of anticolonial resistance, we miss that anticolonial movements were not all strengthened by the creation of two countries. For instance, the PWA was weakened when its networks were separated by Partition. Similarly, railway workers in pre-Partition India were able to coordinate large protests using the massive threat of disrupting an all-India railway network. This threat after Partition simply did not carry the same weight as their protest

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>12</sup>Cooper / Stoler (eds.), *Tensions*.

<sup>13</sup>Clare Anderson, Introduction to *Marginal Centers*. Writing life histories in the Indian Ocean world, in: *Journal of Social History* 45 (2011), 2, pp. 335-344; idem, *Subaltern lives*. History, identity and memory in the Indian ocean world, in: *History Compass* 11 (2013), 7, pp. 503-507.

could no longer cover the same area.<sup>14</sup> These stories of progressive organisations and labour movements are important precisely because they disrupt the linear history of the nation as the inheritor of a struggle for freedom from colonial rule.

Recent work done on Pakistan has already begun to show the way forward for how to critically write about the nation in history writing in the 21st century. Newer Pakistani historical research has amended older scholarly work on the Pakistani state, its military establishment, and their origins. To take into account different voices and 'subaltern' narratives, it has made use of diverse source material such as oral histories, documents written in the vernaculars and produced by local communities as well as newspaper accounts. Perhaps one of the most exciting of these is Ilyas Chattha's forthcoming work on the Punjab borderlands which shows how the formation of the Punjab border was not consolidated overnight or determined from above by relations between India and Pakistan, but was formed incrementally and remained—through bonds of friendship and community linkages—porous for some time.<sup>15</sup> Mubbashir Rizvi's book on the Okara peasant movement and Nosheen Ali's emotionally evocative book on Gilgit-Baltistan also rely heavily on access that was possible through activist networks.<sup>16</sup> Their work is not historical in the first instance, but both complement their ethnographic work with archival sources to tell stories of property ownership and the relationship of individuals in these communities to state institutions that would not have been possible without this interdisciplinary methodology. Kamran Asdar Ali's recent book on the communist movement in Pakistan and Ali Raza's book on the communist movement in Punjab are two clear examples of telling progressive histories of Pakistan that manage to do

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<sup>14</sup>Ahmad Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*. Trade-Unionism in Lahore, c. 1920-70. New Delhi 2019.

<sup>15</sup>Ilyas Chattha, *The Punjab Borderland*. Mobility, Materiality, and Militancy, 1947-1987. Cambridge 2022 forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup>Mubbashir Rizvi, *The ethics of staying*. Social movements and land rights politics in Pakistan, Stanford 2020; Nosheen Ali, *Delusional States*. Feeling rule and development in Pakistan's Northern Frontier, Cambridge 2019.

so without centring them as an exclusively Pakistani story.<sup>17</sup> Ali Raza's work weaves in the story of Pakistan's emergence towards the end of the book by which time the life histories of the people involved and the predilections of the Communist Party have already been laid out. Therefore, when he talks of the Communist Party trying to „clumsily infiltrate“ the main political party demanding Pakistan, the Muslim League, we know that this was not unique to the emergence of Pakistan, it was because this is what the party had done before.<sup>18</sup>

What these histories have in common is that they all make use of community and individual life histories by using oral accounts and autobiographies as sources. Illustrating the tenuousness of national history and highlighting the stories rendered invisible by a focus on the national narrative does not mean simply looking *beyond* the nation but seeing it as part of a crisscrossing network of power relations that touch, geographically at least, the neighbourhood, the locality as well as transnational spaces. In that sense, the role of the nation in history writing in our times needs to change from being the main organising principle to becoming one part of a much larger „web of stories“.<sup>19</sup>

Listening to community histories and how they are told may be able to help historians see a different sort of organisation within the national archive. If we use these stories as an organising principle, analyse our interviews, oral histories, autobiographies, and personal documents to put together a chronology that we then use to search for material in the archive, our archival reading may allow us to look beyond the nation even if the boxes we look through are labelled „Pakistan in x year“. In this respect the way Stoler approached the study

<sup>17</sup> Ali, *Communism in Pakistan*; Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts. Communist internationalism in colonial India*, Cambridge 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts*, p. 228.

<sup>19</sup> This is drawn from Tony Ballantyne's discussion of how the relationship between the nation state and history can be opened up by studying metropole and the periphery (colonial state) as part of a network instead of a binary. The term he uses is „webs of empire“ in: Tony Ballantyne, *Rereading the Archive and Opening up the Nation-State. Colonial Knowledge in South Asia (and Beyond)*, in: Antoinette Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn. Thinking with and through the Nation*, Durham 2003, pp. 102-124, here p. 104.

of sentiment in Dutch Indonesian archives is particularly instructive. Part of the problem she outlined in her by now seminal study is that because sentiment is seen as the opposite of what is rational, sentimentality is assumed not to exist in the colonial archive, it was supposed to have withered away. In fact, Stoler argued, sentiment and the policing of what was an acceptable way of showing emotion, continued to be an important way in which colonial officials could discipline and differentiate between themselves and their subject populations in their written reports. Stoler's key point for my argument is that the archive already had the information that made it possible to trace the history of sentiments: „It was not official archives that bracketed sentiment from their cultures of evidence and documentation, but our pre-emptive readings of them“.<sup>20</sup>

This is the point this essay turns to next: That the reader of the archive and their assumptions are what can allow for specific types of information to jump out at them. In other words, the ability to read in a particular way, to find these progressive histories, you would need some lived experience that already attuned you to their existence. Progressive histories may indeed be more visible to the „affect aliens“<sup>21</sup> searching for those who thought like them in the past. This may sound like a minor point, an obvious generalization, but I argue that it is this point that is the crucial one for history writing in the 21st century. For certain communities, the stakes of telling such histories are higher. These communities look for stories below and above the nation because it matters to them that they are told.<sup>22</sup>

Let's turn back for a moment to Trouillot who at the beginning of *Silencing the Past* provides the context for why he wrote the book that he did. His first exposure to history was through his family who were presenting lesser-known histories on television, while working

<sup>20</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain. Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*, Princeton 2009, p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Happy Objects*, in: Melissa Gregg / Gregory J. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham, 2010, pp. 29-51, here p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, p. 11.

for the National Archives (his uncle was the director). The discovery of these histories, the desire to search for it in the archive, predated his academic training. When he arrived at the archive, he carried this lived experience with him. This is not so much a call for reading against the grain as it is for employing different ways of reading, paying attention to the multiple stories that intersect with the histories of the nation.

***Saghir Ahmad: Class and Power between a Punjabi Village and the Interior of British Columbia***

This aspect of accessing individual and community histories to read the available archives differently is what the essay will now turn to. It does so through a very specific story of a Pakistani scholar, Saghir Ahmad. A leftist, perhaps best known now as the brother of academic and pacifist Iqbal Ahmad, he went to British Columbia in the late 1960s when he was offered an Assistant Professor position in the Politics, Sociology and Anthropology (PSA) department at the Simon Fraser University (SFU). Very soon after being hired he was suspended and later fired for having supported a student strike on campus. In 1971 he drowned in a tragic accident. By tracing his politics and connecting his research work and political activities to a global network in which Pakistan is just one part, we zoom in in one case to illustrate the problems and promises of reimagining the relationship between power, nation and history writing in our time.

So far the essay has focused on the need to write the story of individuals particularly those who were part of networks of progressives or activists as their life histories tell us stories of connections beyond the biography of the nation. Saghir Ahmad's story is illustrative of how the material needed to build connections between life histories is not contained in a singular archive or community of memory. In Ahmad's case, if we were to explore the recollections of friends (in sources like obituaries), events that have been the focus of scholarly attention (such as the famous student strike at SFU in 1969) and archival sources, historians still must be wary of how these pockets of memory,

divided across different geographical spaces, can be selective in the information they hold. The assumption of where the individual is from also forms a powerful pre-emptive reading of the sources.

Saghir Ahmad was an academic very well known to a generation of scholars who worked on one very specific field in Pakistan, the study of rural Punjab. This generation built on his work because Ahmad was the first to conduct a detailed ethnographic study of a Punjabi village. Subsequent scholars drew on his initial findings to research the relationship between patronage, voting behaviour and the continued influence of colonial legislation and social engineering on the rural landscape of Punjab.<sup>23</sup> Being a Marxist and committed to the peasantry, contributed to Ahmad's decision to write his PhD dissertation on a village in Sargodha.

What we know about his early life can be gleaned from his obituaries; one written by a colleague at SFU, Kathleen Gough, and another published in the *Pakistan Forum*.<sup>24</sup> Turning to sources such as the *Pakistan Forum* and thus to a platform that strove to make information available in times of heightened censorship, allows us to foreground lesser told histories in the Pakistani context. In the early 1970s, Pakistan faced Bangladesh's war of liberation, a military operation against Baluchistan and the suppression of the largest labour strikes seen since the formation of the country. The *Pakistan Forum*, published in the U.S., was one of the very few platforms providing information on these events. It did so as its editors felt that the journal should be an (imagined) corrective to those seen at the helm of national ideals in Pakistan, namely the „feudal politicians, medieval mullahs, self-

<sup>23</sup>Saghir Ahmad's book was published posthumously. Saghir Ahmad, *Class and Power in a Punjabi Village*, New York 1977. Scholars of rural Punjab who built on this work are, for instance, Hassan Javid, *Class, power and patronage. Landowners and politics in Punjab*, in: *History and Anthropology* 22 (2011), 3, pp. 337-369; Shandana Khan Mohmand, *Crafty Oligarchs, savvy voters. Democracy under inequality in rural Pakistan*, Cambridge 2019; Shahnaz J Rouse, *Agrarian Transformation in a Punjabi village. Structural change and its consequences*, Madison 1988.

<sup>24</sup>Obituary. Saghir Ahmad in: *Pakistan Forum* 2 (1971), 1, p. 2; Kathleen Gough, Saghir Ahmad, in: *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 4 (1971), 1, pp. 72-76; Saghir Ahmad (1936-1971), <<http://pastandfuturepresents.blogspot.com/2021/06/>> (09.09.2021).

seeking soldiers, and bureaucrats".<sup>25</sup> In its founding statement there was a visible diasporic lament of being distanced from Pakistan, but also wanting to remain connected. The work collected and published by the journal's editors can now be used as source material for writing a social history of Pakistan in the 1960s and 1970s. Besides, the *Pakistan Forum* provides us with important insights for tracing the networks and life histories of individuals like Saghir Ahmad.

We can use the information in his obituaries to trace out his life story. Ahmad was born in Bihar in British India in 1936, and thus more than ten years before Pakistan would even be drawn out on a map. Fast forward 30 years and a young Ahmad was doing an MA in Sociology from Punjab University which meant he was in Lahore (Pakistan) far away from his place of birth. From there he went to Michigan State University (USA) where he did his PhD and in 1969 was hired as an Assistant Professor at the SFU in Canada. Barely a few weeks after his appointment he would be fired for supporting the local student strikes.<sup>26</sup> His leftist beliefs and his support for labour and radical politics was very much a product of the times. However, Saghir Ahmad's obituary in the *Pakistan Forum* clearly locates his politics within a concern for country and nation as the editors stressed that „all the attractions of the Western academic world seemed unreal to him in the face of the misery, exploitation and oppression of his countrymen".<sup>27</sup>

This sort of statement is precisely the problem with national history because it can potentially limit the historian's gaze. You may not dig further in the archives for more complex connections assuming that the concerns of the Pakistani person under study are circumscribed within the boundaries of what is happening within Pakistan. However, if one digs a little further, we get to know that a Pakistani and an Indian academic at SFU, Saghir Ahmad and Hari Sharma, not only knew

one another, but coordinated efforts to research and gather material on racism experienced by South Asians in British Columbia. A professor in the same department as Saghir Ahmad, Hari Sharma was a communist who would become a pillar of the community supporting labour movement of South Asian farmworkers. He also was influential in the formation of an important anti-racist group, the British Columbian (BC) Organization to Fight Racism, that was run entirely by South Asians. But if one looks into the SFU archives, Saghir Ahmad is only mentioned on two occasions: for his appointment in the academic calendar of 1969, and there is one audio recording of him being questioned by the SFU administration after the events of the PSA strike. Therefore objectively, there is no connection between Saghir Ahmad, the Pakistani national, and Hari Sharma, the Indian national. Or so I had assumed until I stumbled across Saghir Ahmad's work in Hari Sharma's personal papers.

Shortly before his death, Saghir Ahmad along with a few other scholars, published a piece in a newspaper on „Racial Conflict in Quesnel".<sup>28</sup> Ahmad had been interested in the longer story behind racial attacks that had taken place in Quesnel in the interior of British Columbia and found that South Asians felt consistently discriminated, particularly in non-unionized mills. The article was cited by Hari Sharma when he was trying to prove the continued existence of racism in British Columbia in the wake of BC Organization to Fight Racism's formation.<sup>29</sup> Although the sources made it clear that both men (Ahmad and Sharma) knew of one another, were in the same department, and were both communist, it seemed that they did not share the same politics during the PSA strike in late 1960s, at least when one looks at *Radical Campus*, the written account of the strike. Recently, however, I spoke to Professor Hugh Johnston, the author of *Radical Campus* and asked him about this conundrum. He recalled that Hari Sharma had given him an entire box of statements and letters he wrote supporting

<sup>25</sup>Forum for Free Speech, in: Pakistan Forum 1 (1970), 1, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup>For a fuller account of the PSA strike see Hugh Johnston, *Radical Campus*. Making Simon Fraser University, Vancouver 2005.

<sup>27</sup>Obituary. Saghir Ahmad, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup>Saghir Ahmed et al., *Racial Conflict in Quesnel* in: Vancouver Free Press Georgia Straight, 1971, pp. 12-13.

<sup>29</sup>Indians in Vancouver, 1973-1980 in: F-251-3-1-0-1, Hari Sharma Fonds, SFU Archive.

the PSA strikers. However, Sharma was on study leave and away from campus and so his story was, obviously enough, less relevant for the book. Johnston recalled in our conversation that Sharma was upset that none of his letters had been mentioned in his monograph.

### **Conclusion**

This is not the place to go into the details of these local developments, but the story of Saghir Ahmad does provide a small cautionary tale for how our assumptions about national belonging may guide our search for histories in the archive. Saghir Ahmad was Pakistani, but his work was defined by an interest in rural communities, by the study of exploitation and inequality. This ideological bent may also have influenced his desire to take on the risk of supporting students strikes at SFU when he had only just been hired. This is not entirely surprising when turning to Saghir Ahmad's brother, Eqbal Ahmad, who was a professor in the U.S. Eqbal Ahmad belonged to the original Harrison Seven group of anti-war radicals who hatched a plot to kidnap Henry Kissinger while he was Richard Nixon's security advisor.<sup>30</sup>

Still I end this essay with one final observation about the scattered nature of this evidence of overlaps and relationships between colleagues. When I was an undergraduate, one of the books on Pakistan that all social science students were aware of by their senior year was *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*.<sup>31</sup> Edited by Kathleen Gough and Hari Sharma, this book was (for its time) a radical analysis of the making of post-colonial states in South Asia. Back then, I was unaware of their connection to Saghir Ahmad. Through my research on him, one of the reviews of this book suddenly made more sense: „The work was planned and contributions solicited by Saghir Ahmad, Kathleen Gough, and Hari Sharma. Ahmad died in 1971 and the work

<sup>30</sup>Justin Jackson, Kissinger's Kidnapper. Eqbal Ahmad, the US New Left, and the Transnational Romance of Revolutionary War, in: *Journal of the Study of Radicalism* 4 (2010), pp. 75-119.

<sup>31</sup>Kathleen Gough / Hari P. Sharma (eds.), *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*, New York 1973.

was completed by Gough and Sharma“.<sup>32</sup>

The way in which the information about people like Eqbal Ahmad, Hari Sharma and Saghir Ahmad is left behind tends to be organised in ways that make sense from the outside. If you look for „Indo-Canadian“ histories at SFU, you will come across the Hari Sharma collection. Unless the historian knows who Saghir Ahmad was, they would not notice that both Saghir Ahmad and Hari Sharma were at SFU at the same time, in the same department and yet, except for an article catalogued in the Hari Sharma collection, there is no documentary evidence that they even knew each other or shared interests. These overlaps are rendered invisible when archival organisations centre the nation such that Indian migrants and Pakistani migrants have separate document collections dedicated to them. Being aware of these silences and the way in which they are created is an important task for the historian who wants to write connected global histories in the 21st century.

The focus on a life history approach and on the connections between individuals based on their activism and networks, as opposed to assumed linkages based on their national identity, may be a more useful way to think about the relationship between the individual and the nation. Firstly, the nation and its' narrative sources are one part of a much larger universe of stories. However, as national narratives continue to be told in textbooks and are organised in official archives, historians might find it easier to follow their trajectory. Secondly (and overlapping with the first) we need to pay attention to the individual stories and to the accounts written by people with varied lived experiences. It is possible, as this piece has argued, for groups who have been historically marginalized to have access to narratives that may not be visible to everyone outside their community. History writing in our times needs to take such accounts seriously and build on them. Thirdly, non-national histories are not part of an „alternative“ writing

<sup>32</sup>Louis D. Hayes, Review of Kathleen Gough / Hari P. Sharma (eds.), *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*, in: *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 10 (1975), 3-4, pp. 220-221, here 220.

of history. They take place alongside the main narratives and often overlap with them. To delegate them to the space of an alternative is to assume that there are two narratives, and one needs recovery. This is the suggestion I want to end with. That to view these stories as part of a network that traverses local and transnational spaces, and in which the nation is but one node among many others, may yield much more interesting, interconnected histories and allow for a deeper understanding of what moved people who came before us.