Circles of Freedom

ALSO BY T.C.A. RAGHAVAN

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Circles of Freedom

Friendship, Love and Loyalty in the Indian National Struggle

T.C.A. Raghavan

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Introduction

I was also a note in this grand orchestration of human aspiration.

– Asaf Ali

The first half of the twentieth century in India is identified with a group of individuals who have dominated its narration long after they were gone: Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose, M.A. Jinnah, V.D. Savarkar, B.R. Ambedkar. Some may argue that this list tilts towards the later decades of the first half of the century. B.G. Tilak and G.K. Gokhale would restore that balance. If such a list privileges the political class, then the addition of Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh and Muhammad Iqbal provides some counterweight. These towering figures, these stalwarts, these founding fathers, are habitually invoked by their respective followers whenever India's struggle for freedom comes up for discussion. They provide a kind of history through biography of that tumultuous period when nationalism clashed with imperialism and in the process two nations emerged.

Alongside this gallery is a set of events that are invoked, encompassing an interface between imperialism and nationalism and between the divisions within nationalism. Certain milestones are a standard part of this narrative: the partition of Bengal in 1905; the Morley–Minto reforms of 1909; the pact between the Muslim League and the Congress in Lucknow in 1916; the limited self-government or 'dyarchy' introduced by the 1919 Montagu–Chelmsford reforms; the Motilal Nehru and Sir John Simon reports of 1928 and 1930 respectively; the Government of India Act of 1935; and finally the Independence of India Act of 1947. Constitutional

and legislative changes accompanied every stage of the national movement and the manner in which these came about provide another lens to view that half decade. Major protests such as the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movements in the aftermath of World War I, Civil Disobedience in the early 1930s and the Quit India movement of the early 1940s impart to the time its well-known characteristic of struggle, sacrifice, discipline and high endeavour. The constitutional and the agitational modes each had within them a darker underside – in the form of sectional and communal pressures. The period as a whole was therefore not a binary between nationalism and imperialism or between freedom and colonial status but a triangle with communalism and subsequently separatism. August 1947 was, tragically but perhaps fittingly enough, the culmination of each of these trends. The agitations for freedom led to the departure of the British, and India and Pakistan emerged as different entities amidst a communal bloodbath that has left a legacy of suspicion and mistrust as enduring as the ideas of freedom that the first half of the twentieth century fostered.

As the attainment of freedom itself passed its fourth and fifth decades, new schools of historiography posed alternative retellings of the Indian national movement. Emphasis shifted away from the idea of history and politics being driven by great leaders or, in other readings, by constitutional and legal change. In the more powerful of these new explanations, real history was made not by leaders or by institutions undergoing change, but by more subaltern communities and grassroots movements whose contributions had gone unrecognized by the mainstream historical record. Giving them a voice and understanding their agency required reading conventional historical sources and evidence differently – or even against the grain, so to say.

These different perspectives – whether of great leaders leading popular agitation and struggling to keep their flock together, while simultaneously wrestling with constitutional and legal issues; or masses of anonymous subalterns retaining purpose and agency – crowd our perspective and leave little room for other stories. But the Indian national movement was a vast stream made up of numerous and frequently contrarian little rivulets. Millions participated in it and there were many, many representatives, even

leaders, all well known in their time or location but who become invisible in the dazzle of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and others who monopolize the soundtrack of India's struggle for freedom. Bringing them centre stage is not an act of displacement of iconic individuals nor even one of simply reading against the grain the standard narratives they dominate. Rather, it is one of entering more deeply the same grain, and finding and reading in it other, lesser known, stories.

This book is about the veteran freedom fighter Asaf Ali (1888–1953) and also about the circle he was embedded in: those with whom he associated himself at various points of his life and for different reasons. It is reasonable to ask: why Asaf Ali? He was not someone who left behind a large corpus of private papers that would enable future intruders into his life story to construct a thick portrait. While he was a figure who would have been recognizable in an all-India context from the mid-1930s, this would only be to audiences knowledgeable about public affairs and those active in public life. Before that, in the 1920s and earlier, his arena was a smaller one. Delhi was the capital of British India from 1911 but largely a backwater compared to major intellectual and political centres such as Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Lahore and Allahabad, among others. In Delhi, his territory, he was, through the 1920s, largely in the nature of another important lieutenant, someone in the inner circles of the leaders – almost a subaltern figure in some senses if some liberties are permitted in the use of the term. However, Asaf figured in some of the seminal moments of the freedom struggle and his perspective provides much more than a tangential view to mainstream narratives.

At different stages of Asaf's life we find him juxtaposed against two major figures of the first half of the twentieth century: Mohammad Ali (1878–1931) and the better known Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The former has retreated from our everyday consciousness but a century ago his infectious energy and crusading zeal for Islamist causes in India and abroad made him a model for many. Both came to provide ballast to the contrarian trend to secular and civic nationalism with which Asaf came to identify himself. Their certainties and convictions throw Asaf's frailties and doubts into relief, as also his moderation in a divided and polarized

period of our history. These very qualities also bring him closer to us and to our own times even as his period retreats further into the past. At the other end of the spectrum and perhaps closest to him in his thinking is the figure of Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958). As Muslims, Asaf and Azad strove to situate themselves in the mainstream of the freedom struggle through the Indian National Congress and also constantly struggled against the reality that views such as those of a Mohammad Ali or a Jinnah were easier than their own moderate positions.

And then as a Muslim in the Congress married to a Hindu, Asaf's was an unusual perch to view the different meanings of partition and independence in the subcontinent and the processes by which these end states were arrived at. His marriage itself moreover comprised other dimensions than the obvious Hindu–Muslim axis which made it so singular almost a century ago, much as it does now. Asaf, from quite early in his political career, marked himself as a moderate, a lawyer bent on securing his objectives through force of argument, and a gradualist on matters concerning political change. His wife Aruna (1909–96) came to chart much of her own course as a radical voice within the national movement. Hers was also a critique, a radical critique in fact, both of Gandhian nationalism and also of the incremental political change that her husband consciously adhered to. 'You are the State, I am the Revolution,' she once said to Asaf, quoting Lenin humorously but with considerable accuracy.[1] Both these diametrically opposed impulses within the marriage provide their own dramatic force to any narrative of their lives.

Yet, all of this – the tumultuous times, an unusual marriage and an even more unusual wife, and being a Muslim disagreeing with the need for a separate homeland – bestow on Asaf Ali a certain privileged position from which to view the collision of different ideas and principles by which nationhood both came to be forged and partitioned. Perhaps given the polarities of our own times, Asaf Ali's figure is instructive in other ways too. He is the archetypical attendant lord or a somewhat peripheral figure in a drama packed with larger-than-life characters, but also one who saw with clarity the dilemmas of his time and the need for moderation and compromise but was too incidental to influence the course of events.

Asaf is, however, not the only focus here, for this story is also about a circle of his particular friends. Living at a time when life was more than a search for personal happiness, fulfilment and stability, for them politics, ideology, dissent, great struggle and sacrifice contextualized the more human but equally important acts of friendship, love and loyalty. Asaf Ali was not the 'leader' of this group; nor was this a set of persons who acted together as a unit. But the lives of those in this circle – Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949), Syud Hossain (1888–1949), Syed Mahmud (1889–1971) and finally Aruna Asaf Ali – deeply touched Asaf Ali's at different times and at different stages. And, as is common in many friendships, their relationships did not remain unchanged, evolving over time, as did their personalities and their circumstances.

This small circle, however, acquires its meaning only because of the larger circle of the freedom movement: their relationships with each other were consciously embedded in that larger enterprise. They were not always a group, that is, a set of friends who regularly met; their connection, sometimes intense, sometimes dormant for years, was with each other individually. Each was also part of other informal 'circles' of freedom: Asaf Ali was often in the company of Dr Ansari, Hakim Ajmal Khan, the Ali Brothers, at certain points of time, for instance. At the same time all were part of a larger circle which was dominated by the pantheon of the major figures mentioned earlier.

What this portrayal of Asaf Ali and his circle attempts is to see events through their eyes – a certain peripheral view, if you will, of familiar milestones. It tracks the idea of India's freedom from its small nascent beginnings to its becoming an anti-colonial struggle, an organized mass movement which successfully achieved its goal. Above all, this is an attempt to understand how the huge, unwieldy enterprise that was the freedom struggle articulated its many joints and tentacles. It is not always a ringside view, but what did it look like to people, all very talented, thinking and significant individuals in their own right, just beyond the ring so to speak? What did it feel like to be engaged in this grand project, simultaneously a success and a failure, that engulfed two generations and with which we are still preoccupied seven decades later?

1

London, 1913–1914

Mohammad Asaf Ali never forgot the day he first met Sarojini Naidu. It was in London sometime in mid-1913. Writing about it some three decades later, he recalled being 'full of excitement' as he accompanied Gunnu – Mrinalini Chattopadhyay, Sarojini's younger sister – to the house of an English friend with whom Sarojini was staying. Asaf was introduced as 'Bhai' and 'a member of the family, a full-fledged Barrister, and a poet'. Sarojini 'held out her hand, smiled a bewitching smile, and a cascade of words followed'. Asaf wrote, 'I was a bit flustered and said something to disclaim the last title by which I had been introduced.' Sarojini was 'Akka', or older sister, to Gunnu and 'Akka' she would remain to Asaf too for the rest of their lives.[1]

Asaf, then twenty-five years old, was in London ostensibly to follow up on a case in the Privy Council, the highest court of appeal in the British Empire and therefore the ultimate decision-making body for all legal disputes in India too. But the case was an excuse. He had qualified as a barrister in London barely a year earlier, returned to Delhi but found himself 'homesick' for London where he had spent about three years studying law: 'England lay in my memory like a mountain of lodestone.' A 'hopeless brief' but with a client who could afford the fees of a Privy Council appeal became the means of returning, which felt 'like coming home'. Apart from his legal work, he hoped to start an Urdu literary magazine out of London and already had a title in mind: *Taj*. Some of his own poems were ready for its first issue, and he had persuaded friends

for others. He was also spending time in the British Museum collecting samples of Urdu poetry by English writers of an earlier generation. These efforts promised to be 'greatly stimulated' by Sarojini Naidu's presence in London. She was after all a poet who had already received some acclaim in England, and consequently even more in India, with her collections, *The Golden Threshold* (1905) and the recently published *The Bird of Time* (1912). The former in particular had made Sarojini into a celebrity in both England and India. In one assessment, 'never had a book of poems by an Indian caused such a stir abroad'.[2] It pre-dated Tagore's *Geetanjali*, published in 1910, by some years. The English translation came in 1912.

Sarojini's brother had been a friend of Asaf's since 1908 when Asaf had first arrived in London as a student. Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (1880–1937), or Chatto or Binnie, was the first member of Sarojini's family to become friends with Asaf, and even at the time of their initial meeting Chatto was already on the path to becoming the Indian revolutionary and dissident in permanent exile in Europe. To Asaf he was 'affectionate, brimming with humour . . . moved by lofty idealism' but also 'sentimental to a fault' and with endless 'amorous tangles'. Asaf met Chatto's younger sister Gunnu during his second sojourn in London and in the process discovered that the Chattopadhyays were an 'amazing family'. They made friends for life but there was 'a kind of rivalry among themselves in several matters including friendships'. Moreover, with friends they discussed their brothers and sisters with remarkable frankness. He had soon been enlightened about Gunnu's and Chatto's current views of Sarojini, their oldest sibling: she was 'a little too self-centred, a sort of Narcissus', he was told.

His reading of her poetry and her siblings' descriptions had led him to expect 'a wisp of a women, given to dreamy silences and observant by side glances only'. But meeting Sarojini he found wispy she was not; she was 'full figured, picturesquely dressed, heavily bejewelled'- she 'falsified my mental picture of her in every single detail'. Sarojini Naidu was, to Asaf's fascinated eyes, 'radiant and restless, full of sparkling life and laughter'. Nobody would have believed that this sophisticated woman – she was then thirty-three or thirty-four – 'so full of youthfulness' was the mother of four,

of whom the oldest was already a teenager. Sarojini was in England for an extended stay, away from her children and devoted husband, a successful physician in Hyderabad. She was in London for rest and treatment which involved surgery but her personality and her energy belied any of this. Ill health was not something Sarojini would allow to affect her. That she came from an established, even affluent background in Hyderabad was evident from the circles in which she moved in England. With her 'ceaseless stream of words', the dazzled Asaf found her to be 'all life and light, vibrant and brilliant by the mere fact of being'.

Not surprisingly, for the rest of his stay in London he was part of the court that surrounded her. The group soon included Syud Hossain, another friend of Asaf from his days in London as a student. Syud was also in London to study law but Asaf had soon guessed the Bar was no more than 'the second string to his bow'; he wanted to be a journalist. On qualifying for the Bar Asaf had returned to India but Syud, having discarded any pretensions about the Bar, stayed on, in and out of debt, in love with a married Englishwoman and working as a freelance journalist.[3]

'Sarojini, Syud and I,' wrote Asaf, 'soon became a trio.' They were 'invariably together', whether at poetry readings or lectures, visits to clubs, or travelling to Oxford and Cambridge, barring those times when Sarojini 'with her much wider and higher connections was rocketed into what appeared to us was the stratosphere'. Sarojini in her letters to her children referred to Asaf and Syud as part of her 'special group of friends'.[4] She, having studied in England earlier, was in territory familiar to her. To English-educated Indians generally, London was a world capital as well as the first city of Empire. For upper-class Indians and those who aspired to that status, to travel to and stay in England was important. Apart from its obvious political significance, it was here that social, intellectual and literary recognition was generally bestowed.

When Rabindranath Tagore halted in England in April 1913, on the

return leg of his voyage back from the United States, the Indian residents in London organized a reception in his honour to which Asaf and Sarojini were invited.[5] Tagore had visited England earlier, from June to September 1912, on his way to the US, but had then been relatively unknown, except to a small set of poets and writers. But that stay led to the English translation of the *Geetanjali,* which came out in November 1912 after his arrival in the US, and his reputation as a poet had preceded him across the Atlantic. By the time he returned to London in April 1913 to take the ship back to India, 'he had become a sensation and a curiosity'.[6] During his earlier visit of 1912, the *Times of India* had commented, derisive as always given its predictably British view of India and Indians: 'Mr Tagore is discovering we fancy that Indian poets are likely to receive more honour in London than in their own country and we cannot blame him for going to a place where he will find himself not without honour and much petted.'[7]

At the reception itself, when the crowd had thinned, Sarojini took the young Asaf to the great man and introduced him as a 'fellow poet'. Asaf was a lifelong admirer of Tagore, but found a series of lectures later delivered by the poet on sadhana, or his philosophy of life, falling 'flat'. He and Syud had purchased the highly priced tickets for the event; Sarojini was probably a special invitee. Asaf thought Tagore's 'fascinating face and saintly personality' a great asset but that his voice, 'shrill, pitched in a high key and almost metallic was a disadvantage; it belied the gravity and calm of his personality'. Sarojini agreed, 'a poet should not stand forth as a philosopher in prose', and was also at odds with Ananda Coomaraswamy's position at a talk he gave at the London Indian Association. The lecture of this famous Ceylonese metaphysician and historian of Indian art was on the 'History of Hindu Art' which all three attended. In it, after a survey of Buddhist and Hindu art, Coomaraswamy 'suggested with regret that elements of true art inspiration were wanting in modern Indian activities and thought'.[8] He also said, 'The *Bande Matrum* was a war cry rather than an art inspiration and so too were other songs of Bharata.' A report mentions Sarojini disagreeing: 'she felt that India was coming in for a new art life of which even Dr Coomaraswami [*sic*] would sing the praise [of], and which would add to the lustre and towering grandeur of the past'.[9]

Sarojini had been associated with the Indian national movement for some years, had addressed nationalist public meetings and ably demonstrated her powers of oratory. To her, India's emergent nationalism was a renaissance of the nation to be, no less.

Being in Sarojini's inner circle therefore went beyond the literary and the aesthetic. In particular, this led to a closer acquaintance with another star of the Indian diaspora in England who was also already a leading figure in India, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Asaf had first met Jinnah at around this time in 1913 or early 1914 at the National Liberal Club, a favourite haunt of both. Asaf later recalled that Jinnah's reserve then was 'not a thousandth part as freezing as it has now become. He was a stickler for principles, transparently honourable and genial.'

Jinnah was already friends with Sarojini, an 'enviably close friendship', Asaf called it. They had met in 1906 at the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress which had as its backdrop the 1905 partition of Bengal that revived the organization but also led to its first great split. Sarojini was to describe Jinnah as being then 'a rising lawyer and a coming politician' and one who, fired by 'virile patriotism', had long been part of the National Congress and regularly attended its annual gatherings.[10] Perhaps Asaf saw Jinnah then, as no doubt many other young men would have, as a model for a career path. Jinnah was at home in both England and India; he was a polished speaker, someone with a formidable reputation at the Bar; he was a liberal, not wedded to religious dogma and above the Hindu–Muslim compartments into which many others divided their public lives. Finally, he was someone who spoke his mind without equivocation.

While Jinnah and Syud were important in Asaf's life at this point, Sarojini was more significant. Asaf Ali had never met a woman like her before and nothing in his social experience in Delhi or London had prepared him for the encounter. His life in Delhi was socially restricted when it came to interacting with women not closely related. London was obviously different but here the novelty was to occasionally meet

young Englishwomen. An Indian woman at ease with the opposite sex – both among her compatriots and the English – was something new and unusual. Moreover, if Sarojini also realized how very unusual she was, she carried this knowledge lightly.

Sarojini, Asaf wrote, 'quoted your favourite poets for you in her lyrical voice and with a tilt and rhythm which sounded pleasant to the ear even if somewhat un-English'. She was like 'a breathing anthology . . . Anecdotes and humorous stories dovetailed into one another . . .' Sarojini was moreover more than just a literary person. She was active in public life in India; she had a large circle of friends and acquaintances, and finally, she was genuinely interested in him as a person. These were reactions she evoked through most of her life in most people she came in contact with.

Syud, Sarojini, Jinnah and Asaf sometimes formed a quartet. In the recollection of a younger contemporary, Hosain Ali Khan, a student in Oxford from Hyderabad and therefore well known to Sarojini, the four would meet at the National Liberal Club and then 'would go for an aperitif to the Café Royal, and thence to the Monico nearby but more usually to some Soho restaurant for dinner . . .' These evenings would end at 'either Syud Hossain's rooms at Holborn or Asaf Ali's in West Kensington talking till the small hours of the morning'.[11]

Sarojini was at the centre of such gatherings and she certainly liked being surrounded by a court. The picture that emerges of the young Asaf is of someone trying hard to fit into the cosmopolitan set he found himself in, a universe away from the Old Delhi haveli he grew up in. He was trying to be at ease in a set to which he aspired but in which he still felt he was an outsider. Perhaps meeting Sarojini gave him the first sense of life on a larger stage. But others saw it differently. On one occasion Sarojini was invited to Oxford, and Syud and Asaf went with her. Hosain Ali Khan as a student of the university was tasked to show them around and he remembered being embarrassed as a young undergraduate 'walking the streets of Oxford with two sophisticated gentlemen from London, dressed in the height of fashion – well cut, well pressed lounge suits, fancy waistcoats, butterfly collars, foulard bow ties and bandana silk handkerchiefs shyly peeping out of breast pockets'.[12]

Wikipedia

Asaf Ali as a young man in London

Asaf was so grateful for all the horizons Sarojini had opened up for him in London that he decided to hold a reception in her honour, organizing it with the help of Syud and others. Needing a main speaker, he wrote to a number of prominent British poets. W.B. Yeats agreed and after that it was plain sailing. Including the Indian guests, 'covers were laid for more than 250', he noted happily. Asaf's only disappointment was the meagre coverage in the mainstream British press, which he attributed to not enough champagne being served to the journalists present. Nevertheless, for him, 'the flashlight photograph of the dinner, our table plan and menu with the toast list and the letters and autographs of literary personalities of the day are among my treasure of mementos'.

Sarojini's health was always a factor through her stay; she was soon run down given the hectic pace she maintained. Admitted to a nursing home, in no time she was receiving her countless friends, and Asaf found the 'nurses on a verge of a breakdown, carrying flowers sent or brought by friends, guiding visitors, finding vases for flowers and looking after them no less than their ungovernable patient'. Her room, noted Asaf, was like a florist's shop, with the same strong scents, and the 'doctor's instructions had been flouted to extinction'.

But literary soirees and frantic socializing were not the only aspects of Asaf's life in London that were galvanized by Sarojini's presence.

Inevitably, perhaps, Asaf's bachelor status would crop up and he writes about how a 'potentially big event of my life suddenly crystallized out of the transparent air like mountain dew'. Sarojini announced the arrival of Liaq, a beautiful girl from one of the elite families of her home town, Hyderabad, who was in London under her chaperonage and on the lookout for a possible groom. 'Sarojini was full of praises of the girl's looks, training and family background and told me that she had a receptive mind still awaiting formation. Why should I not take my chance, if I was not wedded to bachelorhood?'

The idea of Liaq as a potential bride 'was a stimulating suggestion'. This was as romantic as he could hope for, 'if I was to marry an Indian girl; in the Muslim society of that time in India I could not hope even to catch sight of one prior to marriage'. His family's background in Kucha Chelan in Darya Ganj in Old Delhi would certainly rule out even the remote possibility of meeting and getting to know someone before a marriage was contemplated. Other suitors for Liaq (or so some of her relatives hoped) also included M.A. Jinnah. The formidable Sarojini would engineer a meeting with Jinnah as well, although, in Asaf's recollection, she did not think that Jinnah's being interested in Liaq was a feasible idea.

A meeting between Asaf and Liaq was arranged. The occasion was to be a large gathering but Asaf was to have opportunity for conversation both before the other guests arrived and afterwards. Sarojini was 'dressed to kill' but it was Gunnu who would adroitly 'manoeuvre' Liaq and Asaf into sitting next to each other. Sarojini was of course the star of the party with all the conversation in her hands. 'She sparkled and drew ripples of admiring laughter all round, coaxing some, bullying others, and generally radiating dazzling brightness.' Liaq, who had just arrived in London, was daunted. Asaf, sensitive to her insecurity, noted it was 'a new experience for poor unsophisticated Liaq'. Jinnah, 'too high and aloof in his dignity', ruled himself out, and Asaf found that his 'neighbour found in me a natural refuge' amidst the wit and sophistication of the evening which had clearly overwhelmed her.

The initial meeting went well and others arranged by Gunnu followed. Thereafter, Asaf sent a formal proposal to Liaq's parents in Hyderabad

along with 'Mrs Naidu's recommendation in words of which I can be proud'. He wrote to Liaq regularly during her stay in England. 'I wrote letters in my perfervid style' till Gunnu advised him, 'You are frightening that child out of her wits with your poetry and intellectual stuff.'

By mid-1914 as war, which would become a world war, broke out in Europe Asaf was a changed young man in at least two significant ways. First, the desire to live in England, once so overwhelming, had evaporated. For one, he was now certain that he would never marry an Englishwoman because if 'one married in England one must stay there'. When the possibility of marrying Liaq was broached, he had closely examined his feelings and found he had had enough of England, his 'maturing mind now turning homeward'. This was a complete reversal for someone who had felt 'homesick' for England, had sought the company of English people in India and even manufactured a brief to come to London. It was almost as if the second stay in England had been an exorcism. One day Asaf found that the 'the fragrance of a jasmine flower . . . wrung from the depth of my heart a paroxysm of nostalgia'. Now eager to go back to India and to Delhi, he therefore 'plucked this emblem of purity of its stalk and put it into my button hole as a symbol of the new life'.

As his world view with regard to England shifted, India came to the fore. Amidst all the hectic social activity and his own budding romance, Asaf was conscious of all that was happening around him. Both during his student life in Delhi and even more so after arriving in London as a law student, he had been exposed to the different nationalist currents then at work. But he had hitherto been more an interested observer than a committed participant. What perhaps triggered a change was the outbreak of war between Britain and the Ottoman empire as part of the general breakdown of the European security order that heralded the start of World War I. This catalyzed a latent sympathy and admiration for the embattled Muslim Ottoman empire into something more definite.

That it was so is not surprising. A young Asaf growing up in the

alleys of Old Delhi where the spirit of the great Mughals still ruled – although they and their power were long gone – would have been inclined to identify with the Ottoman empire of the Turks centred in Istanbul. Through the nineteenth century a consciousness among Muslim intellectuals in India had grown that the Ottomans were the last empire standing of the trio of great Islamic powers, with the Mughals in India and the Safavids in Persia weakening and disintegrating amidst an expansion of British power. With the final disappearance of the Mughals in India after 1857, an overwhelming sense of loss spread amongst many Muslim clerics, intellectuals and public figures, and this fed a growing sentimental attachment to the Ottomans as the leader of the Islamic world.

Over the second half of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth, the increasing fragility of the Ottomans and their shrinking footprint was evident as their former subjects – the Serbs, the Greeks and the Bulgarians – progressively gained independence. During 1912–13 the Italians, keen to found their own empire in Africa, found the Ottoman territories in present-day Libya a convenient area to expand into. In most of these conflicts Britain had not formally been a player, and sympathy and support for the Ottomans did not mean disloyalty to the British for Muslims in India. There remained a sense of unease, and sometimes more, for many Muslims in India that an alliance of Christian powers – the Russians, the Italians, the Greeks, the new Balkan states of Serbia and Bulgaria – were in concert to weaken and erode the Ottomans.

By the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, however, the European balance of power system was in flux: Britain was tied to Russia and France in alliance, and the Ottomans were in concert with Germany. As World War I broke out it was a matter of time before the Ottomans would become a party to it on Germany's side and ranged against Britain. The outbreak of the Ottoman–British war in November 1914 made Asaf realize that he 'was more pro Turkey than I knew' and that his 'home influence of sentimental attachment to the Turks sprang into the saddle of my reason'.

This leap in political consciousness and anti-British feeling resulted in action on a more personal matter that had been weighing on young Asaf's conscience for some time. It related to a friend of the family, a former colleague of his father, someone he does not name and only identifies as 'Uncle'. Not for the only time in Asaf's life, the personal and the political would be indistinguishable. As a fatherless boy Asaf had tried to trace his father's old colleagues in the police to learn more about his parent and perhaps seek guidance and help for his own future: 'These friends had been at the same level as my father but had risen high in the police force in the years since his death.' 'Uncle' in particular stood out and Asaf had made his acquaintance in his last year of school in 1906: 'A fine, dignified person with a powerful but kindly presence.' Towards the end of his second year in St Stephen's College in Delhi around 1908, 'Uncle' had encouraged Asaf to write to him regularly about public meetings and other gatherings he attended and what transpired at these; he was also told to keep these letters secret and confine himself to stating facts and not his opinions. In return 'Uncle' paid him an allowance which was gradually increased, and in fact his studies in England, to some extent at least, were financed from this source.

Gradually Asaf had discovered 'Uncle's' real identity as a senior officer of the Government of India's intelligence department who was keeping tabs on dissident and nationalist opinion, and he correctly surmised he was therefore a source. 'This came', he recollected later, 'as a shock to my awakening conscience' but he was also 'hypnotized by "Uncle", who had become an awe inspiring father figure' and breaking with him 'seemed (like) all but suicide'. Asaf writes that through his college days in Delhi, then later as a law student in London, he squared this role as an informant with his conscience by deciding 'as a compromise to be no more than a journalist reporting events and speeches. Only such persons as were known to hold certain views would be identified in my correspondence . . .'

But the truth could not be sugar-coated. Undeniably, in this formative period of some five years of Asaf's life, he was a part-time but paid police informant reporting on such nationalist activity as he encountered amongst other students, and later amongst friends and associates.

This 'nightmare' – as Asaf later termed the clandestine reporting of nationalism-related activity – ended with the dramatic turnaround in the evolution of his political consciousness, the British–Ottoman Turkey war providing the obvious tipping point. His anguish over the fate of the Ottomans was inseparable from his opposition to British rule in India. But this was perhaps part of a longer incremental process, including moving in a circle such as Sarojini's, that uplifted him, making him conscious of public life alongside the personal. It made him begin, he was later to write, 'the reclamation of my soul, redeeming it by serving the cause of the country's freedom'. He sent a telegram to 'Uncle' terminating the arrangement. For the young but now politically conscious Asaf, this cable to 'Uncle' was, as he later wrote, 'an act of noncooperation at a time when it was not yet known by that name in India'. But if the young Asaf imagined this was the end of the matter, he was mistaken.