

Entangled Ideas: K. M Ashraf, Horst Krüger and New Indology in the German Democratic Republic

By Razak Khan

Introduction: Horst Krüger Papers

A broad survey of the documents included in the Horst Krüger Papers (now preserved in more than 90 boxes and listed online in the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) <https://www.jpberlin.de/zentrummodernerorient/biblio/index.php>) reveals the breadth and depth of Krüger's scholarship on colonial and postcolonial India. Horst Krüger (17.8.1920 - 11.3.1989) studied History and German Studies at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. From 1957 to 1959, he was a cultural consultant at the Trade Representation of the German Democratic Republic (henceforth GDR) in India. This time spent in India seems to have inspired his lifelong scholarship on his host country. From 1960, he started working on the history of India at the *Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR* /AdW (Academy of Sciences of the GDR). His main research focus was on the Indian National Movement and its relations with the international labor movement. This resulted in his multivolume work, *Die internationale Arbeiterbewegung und die indische nationale Befreiungsbewegung*, that appeared as "Indische Nationalisten und Weltproletariat", Berlin 1984, und "Anfänge sozialistischen Denkens in Indien", Berlin 1985.¹ The Krüger collection includes personal papers, documents, and correspondences as well as newspaper cuttings. The collection also houses publications on international anti-colonial networks of the Indian nationalist movement; the Congress party and its leaders; Muslim leaders and their role(s) in the education and politics of colonial India; Nehruvian state policies; Intra-Asian solidarity; Afro-Indian connections; and international politics. There are numerous papers on Africa 1958-61 (Indians in Africa, the South African Union and several countries); Afro –Asian solidarity and the Conference of Bandung, 1955; North and South Korea 1960-61; Indonesia 1954-61; and NATO 1957-61. There is also a wide range of papers now preserved on microfilms, including those from the Archive of the German Department of Foreign Affairs, Regarding British India, Issue 36 (1911-1912).

Listed below are some of the files that contain sundry threads of entangled Indo-German history. There are two possibilities to search online for the same.

Firstly, through individual name searches, that is, by looking for specific names of Indians

who had connections with Germany. Such a search leads one, for instance, to the files related to:

V.N. Chattopadhyaya
Shyamji Krishnavarma
Har Dayal
Ram Chandra
Chempakraman Pillai
K.M. Ashraf
Jabbar and Sattar Kheiri
G. Adhikari
N.M. Joshi
Ram Chandra
Rajendra Prasad
Jawaharlal Nehru
Aurobindo Ghosh

Secondly, through searches of institutions and themes, that connect Indo-German histories. Among others, some of the categories that emerge from the collection are:

The Educational System in India
The 'All India Trade Union Congress'
The 'Afro-Asiatic Conference of Women' in Cairo in January 1961
The Indian National Congress and Mass Contact)
The 'All India Congress Committee'
The Foreign Policy of Pakistan - Relations with India 1957-'61
Indian Universities and Colleges 1957-'61
Socialism and Communism in India
Board Freedom Movement Maharashtra
The 'Indian National Movement'
Secondary Schools in India
The Domestic Development of Nepal 1956 - 1961
The 'Silk Letter Conspiracy Case'
Indian-Japanese Relations 1916-19

Imperialism and the Indian national liberation movement

'Holy War' and the Pan-Islamic movement

Ninth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, 1986

Indian-German political relations before World War II

The documents were collected in various archives in India, Great Britain and Germany like for instance at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi (NMML), the National Archives of India, Delhi (NAI), the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin (PAAA; Political Archive of the German Foreign Office) or the Dimitroff-Museum, Leipzig.

This post focuses on one of the results of such a name search in the Horst Krüger collection: files related to K.M. Ashraf. These files occupy a distinct and important space in the Krüger Papers, and can be seen as a graphic illustration of entangled ideas and archives.

Kunwar Muhammad Ashraf Papers

The Marxist intellectual and cultural milieu in the GDR was deeply entangled with the growth of progressive socialist thinking and politics among Muslims in South Asia. Academic institutions like the Academy of Sciences, Berlin (*Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, and later *Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR/ AdW*) and the Indo-Oriental Seminar at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin with its emphasis on “New Indology”, opened a new chapter to initiate scholarly engagements with Islam and Muslim scholarship in India.²

In this post, I want to pursue a strand of the entangled Indo-GDR intellectual histories by following the trajectory of Kunwar Muhammad Ashraf (1903-1962)³ and his efforts to find answers to the “Muslim Question” within the context of Indian cultural integration through his engagement with “New Indology” in the GDR. His ideas and personal papers are housed in the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, Delhi, while many of his personal writings and papers are in the Horst Krüger collections in the archive of the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO). Ashraf’s thinking and writings on the “Muslim Question” were produced in dialogue with German ideas and intellectuals at the Institute of Indology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.⁴ It was a significant decision that the Institute chose a Muslim Marxist scholar as a visiting professor of Medieval Indian history and culture.

K.M Ashraf had a long association with Marxist international circles as a student in University of London from 1927-32. He connected with the wider network of South Asian Communists in Germany, including Sajjad Zaheer, Virendranath Chattopadhyay and M. N. Roy. His political role as a Congress socialist party leader in charge of the Muslim mass contact programme between 1935 until 1947, and subsequent disillusionment and move to the Communist Party, is a tragic tale of missed opportunities.⁵ Ashraf was a staunch opponent of “Muslim separatism” and a firm believer in progressive international solidarity. Based on the Gangadhar Adhikari thesis, the Communist Party of India’s (CPI) decision on the “Muslim Question” was in favour of the creation of Pakistan. Despite his personal reservations, Ashraf moved to Pakistan due to party precepts. In Pakistan, he came under political suspicion and was arrested on charges of being a Communist. He was neither welcomed in Pakistan nor accepted back in India.⁶ Neither here nor there, Ashraf became emblematic of the unresolved “Muslim Question” in post-partition South Asia: he became a stateless person and was in exile in England before he was rehabilitated in Kirori Mal College, Delhi where he taught history from 1956-60.⁷ Constantly under suspicion and attack in India, he moved to Berlin on a visiting professorship. A victim of partition politics in South Asia, Ashraf’s Berlin stay was also marked by the hardening of division between the two Germanys. He witnessed the closure of the free corridor between the two German states on 13 August 1961.

Determined to use his time to engage with the issue that had affected both his academic and personal life, Ashraf started working on the theme of Muslim identity and Indian culture. As an academic and political activist in colonial India, he had written on the topic of the “Muslim Question” in India, which was subsequently published as *Historical Background of Hindu-Muslim Question in India*.⁸ He had also written on the “Muslim question” and politics in the Urdu journal *Awami Daur* and was working on revising his contributions and publishing them as a book. It eventually came out as *An Overview of Indian Muslim Politics 1920-1947*.⁹ This issue was close to his heart and fellow communist leader Sajjad Zaheer was involved in the process of materializing the book. In fact, Ashraf and Zaheer discussed it during their Berlin meeting in May 1961. Zaheer eventually also wrote the foreword for the book. As Zaheer noted, Ashraf’s work was characterized by a strong desire that the “Muslims will join revolutionary, most logical and most scientific and humane movement of India in order that Muslims must have a place of honour and dignity in the country.”¹⁰ It was this desire that impelled Ashraf to turn to progressive internationalism as an answer to the Minority Question.

The GDR was involved in building new ties with the erstwhile colonies and third-world countries and was developing what they called “Modern Orientology”.¹¹ This vision of modern Orientology was to be realised and implemented at the Institute for Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences, Berlin. ¹²The New Marxist Orientologists in the GDR, while paying homage to and “continuing the humanistic tradition of classical German Indology,” wanted to bring fundamental changes to the discipline.¹³ Modern Orientology had its origins in the writings of Karl Marx, similar to which it aimed to concentrate on the modern history and culture of India with the study of socialist ideas as the main academic concern. K. M Ashraf’s Berlin years were marked by academic vitality and activism that his German colleague Horst Krüger fondly describes in his reminiscences of Ashraf.¹⁴ Both had met in Delhi in 1957 and bonded over shared research interests and methodology. Krüger considered him not just a good friend or colleague but in his own words “Dr. Ashraf was not simply my *guru* but at the same time the living and inspiring example of the Indian people’s struggle for freedom and better life.”¹⁵ Ashraf’s visit to Berlin as a Guest Professor of Medieval History in 1960 further cemented this bond over shared academic and everyday activities in Berlin. His visit coincided with the 150 years celebrations of the Humboldt Universität and a conference on “The National Awakening of people of Asia and Africa and Task of Orientology”. Ashraf, Krüger recounts, not only actively participated in the conference but also gave an impromptu lecture on “Anti-Imperialist traditions in Urdu literature.”¹⁶ During his stay, he also gave a series of lectures on the theme of “The Muslim Question in Indian Politics”, which were based on his own political experience and scholarly writings. ¹⁷ The same year also saw him being elected the president of the Indian History Congress at its session in Aligarh, where he gave an important presidential address.¹⁸ This lecture reflected on the complex issue of “Muslim culture” and the politics of knowledge production on Indian history. Ashraf critiqued the absence of medieval history in the traditional Indologist studies of Indian culture, which focussed on Sanskrit linguistic and textual studies to define the core of Indian culture – a trend that also continued under colonial and nationalist history-writing where the medieval period became the period of cultural decadence. He did not spare the Muslim apologist history-writings of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Zakauallah.¹⁹ Instead, he advocated a Marxist historiography as developed by Muhammad Habib at Aligarh University, who critiqued Muslim communalist and separatist historiography. Remembering the violent partition of the country, Ashraf suggested a critical engagement with the history and culture of Muslims in India to rethink the issue of conflict and (re)conciliation. In this direction, he emphasized a progressive outlook and cited the example of new Indology in the socialist

world, which was “more holistic and diverse in its approach” and provided new orientations in the study of Indian history.²⁰ He highlighted the new initiative at the Oriental institutes in Berlin, Halle and Leipzig in their study of Muslim culture in India.²¹ The problem of Muslim culture in medieval and modern India and its continuities and transformation remained a recurring research theme in his work. Unfortunately, he could not attain his vision, dying suddenly on 7 June, 1962 in Berlin due to a heart attack. He was buried at the Zentralfriedhof in Berlin Friedrichsfelde, also known as Sozialistenfriedhof (Cemetery of the Socialists).²²

Ashraf was an important actor in forging an entangled history of progressive ideas among Marxist intellectuals in GDR and India. His engagement with the new Indology project in East Berlin allowed him to rethink his own work on Muslims and nationalism. Further, it threw new light on the policy followed by the Communist Party on Pakistan, supporting the movement in the looming Cold War context. The failure to come to terms with minorities and the inability to resolve the question of “national culture” remained a fraught subject, which was seldom discussed openly. Ashraf revisited the “Muslim Question” not as a religious but as a political and cultural question of minorities to analyse the categories of religion and history writing in GDR and India. He engaged with and promoted new ways of studying Muslim and Indian history to not only emphasize the historical construction and transformation of “Muslim and Indian culture” but also to demonstrate them as mutually constituting, and not separate, categories. The progressive and international scholarly milieu of East Berlin provided a space and furnished him with resources to articulate some of these unresolved questions from the past and imagine new futures.

Entangled Ideas and Archives

This entangled history of intellectual exchange and the transformation of ideas shared between Ashraf and FRG scholars is preserved as Ashraf files in the Krüger collections at the ZMO archive (for details about the files related to Ashraf see the appendix). The making and remaking of this archive is in itself a subject worthy of study.²³ Due to Ashraf’s sudden death in East Berlin, it seemed that his papers and other documents including photographs were given to the Academy of Sciences of the DGR, Berlin, most likely by his wife Phyllis Mary Kemp Ashraf, a socialist activist scholar, who had accompanied him to East Berlin in 1960.

Sept. 1969

unclassified

P. M. ASHRAF.

- Born 1905 in Lancashire.
- Educated at London. Secondary School and University.
- 1924. B.A. 1st Class Honours. University of London in Comparative Philology.
- 1924-27 Travelling Fellowship.
- 1927-29 Teaching.
- 1929-33 Welcome Historical-Medical Museum. Dept. of Etymology - Research, fieldwork and collecting.
- 1932-5 Post graduate course in Anthropology - University of London. Research grant. Research assistant to Sir James Frazer ("Golden Bough")
- 1935- 36 Scholarship of British Federation of University Women held at Vienna University.
- 1937-40 Legal Secretary and Research Secretary. Unemployed workers movement. H.Q. - member of N.A.C., etc. Delegate to London Trades Council. Compiled handbooks on unemployment insurance etc.
- 1939-1940 Parttime teaching at Soviet Trade Delegation, London.
- 1940-43 Dilutee skilled aircraft fitter and inspector. Secretary Ships Stewards Committee at Coventry and London. D. C. member of T. & G. W. Union etc.
- 1943-48 Asst. Investigator Industrial Health Research Board of British Medical Council for investigation of methods of work and work effort in factories, etc. Then as a research worker in R. Eye Hospital, Southwork (under Prof. A. Sorsly) for investigation of the causes of industrial eye injuries and in industrial clinic to advise on accident prevention.
- 1948-1949 University of Allahabad. Lecturer in Russian.
- 1949-52 After marriage lived at London from hand to mouth and continued own researches.
- 1952-53 Fellowship of Leverhulm Research Fellowships for Ethnographical Fieldwork in Kashmir and Nemat.
- 1954. Came to Delhi. About 3 years part time English teaching at Soviet Embassy.

7383+ in Berlin

1958-60

Head of the Department of European and Foreign Languages, Delhi University. *on page 2.*

Figure 1: P.M. Ashraf's Bio data. Box No.38. Krüger Nachlass, ZMO Library & Archives.

Also found in the Krüger Papers are photos that young Ashraf sent to her. A tender private moment of love appears amidst public and political papers that are concerned with communist and revolutionary work and writings.

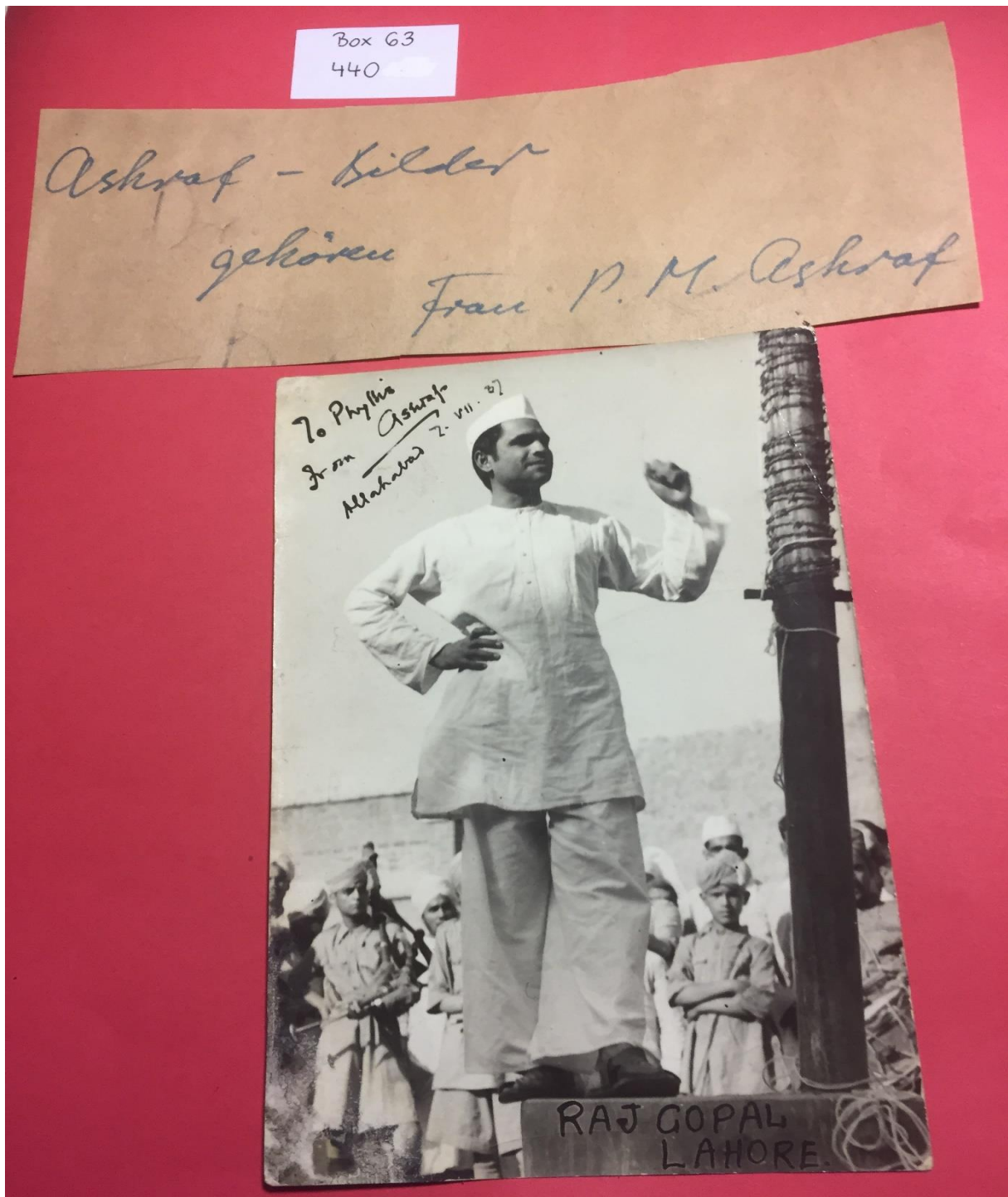


Figure 2: K. M. Ashraf in Lahore 1937: Box.No. 3, Krüger Nachlass, ZMO Library & Archives.

Another surviving specimen of his personal archive is the hand-written autobiographical note in which Ashraf recounts his extraordinary journey from being a devout Muslim in Mewat to becoming a committed communist in East Berlin. These were apparently transferred to NMML, Delhi due to the efforts of his son Mohammad Jaweed Ashraf. However, it seems Krüger also had additional copies as some original documents and photos remained with him

for his work on the Ashraf Festschrift volume and found their way into the archive of the Leibniz- Zentrum Moderner Orient within the Krüger collection.

Along with Ashraf's own intellectual work and writings, the Ashraf Files also provide us with an insight into the making of his Festschrift volume and the numerous letters of condolence and affection that arrived on his untimely death, including one personally signed by Jawaharlal Nehru to commemorate Ashraf's life and works. Several of these letters and essays were incorporated in the felicitation volume and many others now survive as letters in the Ashraf Files within the Horst Krüger Papers. Krüger also collected all the publicity materials generated for the book, including brochures and the reviews that appeared afterwards, irrespective of whether they were critical of or glorifying Ashraf. The Ashraf Files in the Krüger collection show that the protagonists did not merely share an academic or intellectual connection but a bond that was rooted in mutual admiration and affection. Ashraf seems to have left a lasting impression on Krüger's intellectual and personal career. The Krüger collection provides an archive of this entangled history of ideas.



Figure 3: Boxes containing files related to Ashraf: photographed by the author, ZMO Library & Archives.

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- ¹ See ZMO Webpage Bestände / Nachlass Dr. Horst Krüger.
https://www.zmo.de/biblio/sammlung_krueger.html
- ² On the larger history and scholarly activities at the *Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Adw) zu Berlin* see: Annemarie Hafner, „Indologie/Südasienswissenschaften an der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften (AdW) zu Berlin bzw. der Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR zwischen 1947 und 1991.“ In Maria Framke, Hannelore Lötze, Ingo Strauch (eds.). *Indologie und Südasiensstudien in Berlin: Geschichte und Positionsbestimmung. Studien zur Geschichte und Gegenwart Asiens*. Vol. 4, 2014. pp. 259-284.
- ³ For the biographical details, including his political career in Congress Socialist Part and Communist Party in India, see, Khizar Humayun Ansari. *The Emergence of Socialist Thought Among North Indian Muslims (1917-1947)*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- ⁴ On the emergence of and affinities between the “Jewish Question” in Germany and the “Muslim Question” in South Asia see, Aamir Mufti. *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- ⁵ Chowdhury, Abdul Haye, “The Freedom Movement in Mewat and Dr. K. M. Ashraf”, in: Horst Krüger, (ed.). *Kunwar Mohammed Ashraf: An Indian Scholar and Revolutionary 1903–1962*. Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969, pp. 291 – 340, here pp. 330-333.
- ⁶ On Ashraf's role in Muslim mass contact programme see: Venkat Dhulipala. *Creating A New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- ⁷ Chowdhury, Abdul Haye, “The Freedom Movement in Mewat”, pp. 331-333.
- ⁸ Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf. *Hindu-Muslim Question And Our Freedom Struggle*. Two Vols. New Delhi: Sunrise Publications, 2005.
- ⁹ Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf. *An Overview of Indian Muslim Politics 1920-1947. Translated by Jaweed Ashraf*. New Delhi: Manak Publishers, 2001. The Urdu version was originally published in 1963 and has been translated by Jaweed Ashraf.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 7.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Michael Maschke & Jana Tschurennev. “Von der Philologie Zur Gesellschaftswissenschaft: Berliner Südasiensforschung in der Zeit der DDR.“ In Maria Framke, Hannelore Lötze, Ingo Strauch (eds.). *Indologie und Südasiensstudien in Berlin: Geschichte und Positionsbestimmung. Studien zur Geschichte und Gegenwart Asiens*. Vol. 4, 2014. pp. 165-203.
- ¹³ Krüger (ed.), *Kunwar Mohammed Ashraf*. On Krüger and his personal papers see, https://www.zmo.de/biblio/sammlung_Krueger.html
- ¹⁴ Horst Krüger on K.M. Ashraf, in: Krüger (ed.), *Kunwar Mohammed Ashraf*, p. 380.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 380-381.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ K. M Ashraf. “Presidential Address to the Medieval History Section of the Indian History Congress, Aligarh 1960.” Cited in Horst Krüger (ed.). *Kunwar Mohammed Ashraf: An Indian Scholar and Revolutionary 1903–1962*. Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1966, pp. 403-411.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 405.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 408.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid., 384.
- ²³ See also the post by Anandita Bajpai. “Tracing India in a Berlin Archive: Reflections on the Joachim and Petra Heidrich papers in the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient Archive.” MIDA Website Post.