

First Phase of Revolutionary Activities (1907-1917)

Why the Surge of Revolutionary Activities

The activities of revolutionary heroism started as a by-product of the growth of militant nationalism. The first phase acquired a more activist form as a fallout of the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement and continued till 1917. The second phase started as a fallout of the Non-Cooperation Movement.

After the decline of the open movement, the younger nationalists who had participated in the movement found it impossible to leave off and disappear into the background. They looked for avenues to give expression to their patriotic energies, but were disillusioned by the failure of the leadership, even the Extremists, to find new forms of struggle to bring into practice the new militant trends. The Extremist leaders, although they called upon the youth to make sacrifices, failed to create an effective organisation or find new forms of political work to tap these revolutionary energies. The youth, finding all avenues of peaceful political protest closed to them under government repression, thought that if nationalist goals of independence were to be met, the British must be expelled physically by force.

The Revolutionary Programme

The revolutionaries considered, but did not find it practical at that stage to implement, the options of creating a violent mass revolution throughout the country or of trying to subvert the loyalties of the Army. Instead, they opted to follow in the footsteps of Russian nihilists or the Irish nationalists. This methodology involved individual heroic actions, such as organising assassinations of unpopular officials and of traitors and informers among the revolutionaries themselves; conducting swadeshi dacoities to raise funds for revolutionary activities; and (during the First World War) organising military conspiracies with expectation of help from the enemies of Britain.

The idea was to strike terror in the hearts of the rulers, arouse people and remove the fear of authority from their minds. The revolutionaries intended to inspire the people by appealing to their patriotism, especially the idealistic youth who would finally drive the British out.

The Extremist leaders failed to ideologically counter the revolutionaries as they did not highlight the difference between a revolution based on activity of the masses and one based on individual violent activity, thus allowing the individualistic violent activities to take root.

A Survey of Revolutionary Activities

Following is a brief survey of revolutionary activities in different parts of India and abroad before and during the First World War.

■ Bengal

By the 1870s, Calcutta's student community was honeycombed with secret societies, but these were not very active. The first revolutionary groups were organised in 1902 in Midnapore (under Jnanendranath Basu) and in Calcutta (the **Anushilan Samiti** founded by Promotha Mitter, and including Jatindranath

Banerjee, Barindra Kumar Ghosh and others.) But their activities were limited to giving physical and moral training to the members and remained insignificant till 1907-08.

In April 1906, an inner circle within Anushilan (Barindra Kumar Ghosh, Bhupendranath Dutta) started the weekly *Yugantar* and conducted a few abortive 'actions'. By 1905-06, several newspapers had started advocating revolutionary violence. For instance, after severe police brutalities on participants of the Barisal Conference (April 1906), the *Yugantar* wrote: "The remedy lies with the people. The 30 crore people inhabiting India must raise their 60 crore hands to stop this curse of oppression. Force must be stopped by force."

Rashbehari Bose and Sachin Sanyal had organised a secret society covering far-flung areas of Punjab, Delhi and United Provinces while some others like Hemachandra Kanungo went abroad for military and political training.

In 1907, an abortive attempt was made by the *Yugantar* group on the life of a very unpopular British official, Sir Fuller (the first Lt. Governor of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, although he had resigned from the post on August 20, 1906).

In December 1907, there were attempts to derail the train on which the lieutenant-governor, Sri Andrew Fraser, was travelling

In 1908, Prafulla Chaki and Khudiram Bose threw a bomb at a carriage supposed to be carrying a particularly sadistic white judge, Kingsford, in Muzaffarpur. Kingsford was not in the carriage. Unfortunately, two British ladies, instead, got killed. Prafulla Chaki shot himself dead while Khudiram Bose was tried and hanged.

The whole Anushilan group was arrested including the Ghosh brothers, Aurobindo and Barindra, who were tried in the **Alipore conspiracy case**, variously called Manicktolla bomb conspiracy or Muraripukur conspiracy. (Barindra Ghosh's house was on Muraripukur Road in the Manicktolla

suburb of Calcutta.) The Ghosh brothers were charged with 'conspiracy' or 'waging war against the King' – the equivalent of high treason and punishable with death by hanging. Chittaranjan Das defended Aurobindo. Aurobindo was acquitted of all charges with the judge condemning the flimsy nature of the evidence against him. Barindra Ghosh, as the head of the secret society of revolutionaries and Ullaskar Dutt, as the maker of bombs, were given the death penalty which was later commuted to life in prison. During the trial, Narendra Gosain (or Goswami), who had turned approver and Crown witness, was shot dead by two co-accused, Satyendranath Bose and Kanailal Dutta in jail.

In February 1909, the public prosecutor was shot dead in Calcutta and in February 1910, a deputy superintendent of police met the same fate while leaving the Calcutta High Court. In 1908, Barrah dacoity was organised by Dacca Anushilan under Pulin Das to raise funds for revolutionary activities. Rashbehari Bose and Sachin Sanyal staged a spectacular bomb attack on Viceroy Hardinge while he was making his official entry into the new capital of Delhi in a procession through Chandni Chowk in December 1912. (Hardinge was injured, but not killed.)

Investigations following the assassination attempt led to the Delhi Conspiracy trial. At the end of the trial, Basant Kumar Biswas, Amir Chand and Avadh Behari were convicted and executed for their roles in the conspiracy. Rashbehari Bose was known as the person behind the plan but he evaded arrest because, it is said, he escaped donning a disguise.

The western Anushilan Samiti found a good leader in Jatindranath Mukherjee or Bagha Jatin and emerged as the Jugantar (or Yugantar). Jatin revitalised links between the central organisation in Calcutta and other places in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

During the First World War, the Jugantar party arranged to import German arms and ammunition through sympathisers and revolutionaries abroad. Jatin asked Rashbehari Bose to

take charge of Upper India, aiming to bring about an all-India insurrection in what has come to be called the 'German Plot' or the 'Zimmerman Plan'. The Jugantar party raised funds through a series of dacoities which came to be known as taxicab dacoities and boat dacoities, so as to work out the Indo-German conspiracy. It was planned that a guerrilla force would be organised to start an uprising in the country, with a seizure of Fort William and a mutiny by armed forces. Unfortunately for the revolutionaries, the plot was leaked out by a traitor. Police came to know that Bagha Jatin was in Balasore waiting for the delivery of German arms. Jatin and his associates were located by the police. There was a gunfight as a result of which the revolutionaries were either killed or arrested. The German plot thus failed. Jatin Mukherjee was shot and died a hero's death in Balasore on the Orissa coast in September 1915.

"We shall die to awaken the nation", was the call of Bagha Jatin.

The newspapers and journals advocating revolutionary activity included *Sandhya* and *Yugantar* in Bengal, and *Kal* in Maharashtra.

In the end, revolutionary activity emerged as the most substantial legacy of swadeshi Bengal which had an impact on educated youth for a generation or more. But, an overemphasis on Hindu religion kept the Muslims aloof. Moreover, it encouraged quixotic heroism. No involvement of the masses was envisaged, which, coupled with the narrow upper caste social base of the movement in Bengal, severely limited the scope of the revolutionary activity. In the end, it failed to withstand the weight of State repression.

■ Maharashtra

The first of the revolutionary activities in Maharashtra was the organisation of the **Ramosi Peasant Force** by Vasudev Balwant Phadke in 1879, which aimed to rid the country of the British by instigating an armed revolt by disrupting

communication lines. It hoped to raise funds for its activities through dacoities. It was suppressed prematurely.

During the 1890s, Tilak propagated a spirit of militant nationalism, including use of violence, through Ganapati and Shivaji festivals and his journals *Kesari* and *Maharatta*. Two of his disciples—the Chapekar brothers, Damodar and Balkrishna—murdered the Plague Commissioner of Poona, Rand, and one Lt. Ayerst in 1897.

Savarkar and his brother organised **Mitra Mela**, a secret society, in 1899 which merged with **Abhinav Bharat** (after Mazzinni's 'Young Italy') in 1904. Soon Nasik, Poona and Bombay emerged as centres of bomb manufacture. In 1909, A.M.T. Jackson, the Collector of Nasik, who was also a well-known indologist, was killed by Anant Lakshman Kanhere, a member of Abhinav Bharat.

It was found that the killing was part of a conspiracy to overthrow the British government in India by means of armed revolution. Thirty-eight people were arrested. Among these, it was found that Savarkar (with his two brothers,) was the brain, leader, and moving spirit of the conspiracy. At the trial, Savarkar as the soul, inspiration, and moving spirit of the conspiracy extending over a number of years, was sentenced to transportation for life and forfeiture of all his property.

■ Punjab

The Punjab extremism was fuelled by issues such as frequent famines coupled with rise in land revenue and irrigation tax, practice of 'begar' by zamindars and by the events in Bengal. Among those active here were Lala Lajpat Rai who brought out *Punjabee* (with its motto of self-help at any cost) and Ajit Singh (Bhagat Singh's uncle) who organised the extremist **Anjuman-i-Mohisban-i-Watan** in Lahore with its journal, *Bharat Mata*. Before Ajit Singh's group turned to extremism, it was active in urging non-payment of revenue and water rates among Chenab colonists and Bari Doab peasants. Other

leaders included Aga Haidar, Syed Haider Raza, Bhai Parmanand and the radical Urdu poet, Lalchand 'Falak'.

Extremism in the Punjab died down quickly after the government struck in May 1907 with a ban on political meetings and the deportation of Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh. After this, Ajit Singh and a few other associates—Sufi Ambaprasad, Lalchand, Bhai Parmanand, Lala Hardayal—developed into full-scale revolutionaries.

During the First World War, Rashbehari Bose was involved as one of the leading figures of the Ghadr Revolution. At the close of 1913, Bose met Jatin to discuss the possibilities of an all-India armed rising of 1857 type. Then, he worked in cooperation with Bagha Jatin, extending the Bengal plan to Punjab and the upper provinces. As the plan for revolution did not succeed, Rashbehari Bose escaped to Japan in 1915. Much later, he was to play an important part in the founding of the Indian National Army.

■ Revolutionary Activities Abroad

The need for shelter, the possibility of bringing out revolutionary literature that would be immune from the Press Acts and the quest for arms took Indian revolutionaries abroad.

Shyamji Krishnavarma had started in London in 1905 an Indian Home Rule Society—'India House'—as a centre for Indian students, a scholarship scheme to bring radical youth from India, and a journal *The Indian Sociologist*. Revolutionaries such as Savarkar and Hardayal became the members of India House.

Madanlal Dhingra from this circle assassinated the India office bureaucrat Curzon-Wyllie in 1909. Soon, London became too dangerous for the revolutionaries, particularly after Savarkar had been extradited in 1910 and transported for life in the Nasik conspiracy case.

New centres emerged on the continent—Paris and Geneva—from where Madam Bhikaji Cama, a Parsi

Views

The ultimate object of the revolutionaries is not terrorism but revolution and the purpose of the revolution is to install a national government.

Subhash Chandra Bose

Will you not see the writing that these terrorists are writing with their blood?

M.K. Gandhi

Neither rich nor able, a poor son like myself can offer nothing but his blood on the altar of mother's deliverance... may I be reborn of the same mother and may I redie in the same sacred cause, till my mission is done and she stands free for the good of humanity and to the glory of God.

Madanlal Dhingra

God has not conferred upon the foreigners the grant inscribed on a copper plate of the kingdom of Hindustan... Do not circumscribe your vision like a frog in a well; get out of the Penal Code and enter the extremely high atmosphere of the *Srimat Bhagvad Gita* and consider the actions of great men.

B.G. Tilak in *Kesari* (June 15, 1897)

revolutionary who had developed contacts with French socialists and who brought out *Bande Mataram*, and Ajit Singh operated. And after 1909 when Anglo-German relations deteriorated, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya chose Berlin as his base.

● The Ghadr

The Ghadr Party was a revolutionary group organised around a weekly newspaper *The Ghadr* with its headquarters at San Francisco and branches along the US coast and in the Far East.

These revolutionaries included mainly ex-soldiers and peasants who had migrated from the Punjab to the USA and Canada in search of better employment opportunities. They were based in the US and Canadian cities along the western (Pacific) coast. Pre-Ghadr revolutionary activity had been carried on by Ramdas Puri, G.D. Kumar, Taraknath Das, Sohan Singh Bhakna and Lala Hardayal who reached there in

1911. To carry out revolutionary activities, the earlier activists had set up a 'Swadesh Sevak Home' at Vancouver and 'United India House' at Seattle. Finally in 1913, the Ghadr was established.

The Ghadr programme was to organise assassinations of officials, publish revolutionary and anti-imperialist literature, work among Indian troops stationed abroad, procure arms and bring about a simultaneous revolt in all British colonies.

The moving spirits behind the Ghadr Party were Lala Hardayal, Ramchandra, Bhagwan Singh, Kartar Singh Saraba, Barkatullah, and Bhai Parmanand. The Ghadrites intended to bring about a revolt in India. Their plans were encouraged by two events in 1914—the *Komagata Maru* incident and the outbreak of the First World War.

Komagata Maru Incident and the Ghadr The importance of this event lies in the fact that it created an explosive situation in the Punjab. *Komagata Maru* was the name of a ship which was carrying 370 passengers, mainly Sikh and Punjabi Muslim would-be immigrants, from Singapore to Vancouver. They were turned back by Canadian authorities after two months of privation and uncertainty. It was generally believed that the Canadian authorities were influenced by the British government. The ship finally anchored at Calcutta in September 1914. The inmates refused to board the Punjab-bound train. In the ensuing conflict with the police at Budge Budge near Calcutta, 22 persons died.

Inflamed by this and with the outbreak of the First World War, the Ghadr leaders decided to launch a violent attack to oust British rule in India. They urged fighters to go to India. Kartar Singh Saraba and Raghubar Dayal Gupta left for India. Bengal revolutionaries were contacted; Rashbehari Bose and Sachin Sanyal were asked to lead the movement. Political dacoities were committed to raise funds. The Punjab political dacoities of January-February 1915 had a somewhat new social content. In at least 3 out of the 5

main cases, the raiders targeted the moneylenders and the debt records before decamping with the cash. Thus, an explosive situation was created in Punjab.

The Ghadrites fixed February 21, 1915 as the date for an armed revolt in Ferozepur, Lahore and Rawalpindi garrisons. The plan was foiled at the last moment due to treachery. The authorities took immediate action, aided by the Defence of India Rules, 1915. Rebellious regiments were disbanded, leaders arrested and deported and 45 of them hanged. Rashbehari Bose fled to Japan (from where he and Abani Mukherji made many efforts to send arms) while Sachin Sanyal was transported for life.

The British met the wartime threat with a formidable battery of repressive measures—the most intensive since 1857—and above all by the Defence of India Act passed in March 1915 primarily to smash the Ghadr movement. There were large-scale detentions without trial, special courts giving extremely severe sentences, numerous court-martials of army men. Apart from the Bengal revolutionaries and the Punjab Ghadrites, radical pan-Islamists—Ali brothers, Maulana Azad, Hasrat Mohani—were interned for years.

Evaluation of Ghadr The achievement of the Ghadr movement lay in the realm of ideology. It preached militant nationalism with a completely secular approach. But politically and militarily, it failed to achieve much because it lacked an organised and sustained leadership, underestimated the extent of preparation required at every level—organisational, ideological, financial and tactical strategic—and perhaps Lala Hardayal was unsuited for the job of an organiser.

● **Revolutionaries in Europe**

The **Berlin Committee for Indian Independence** was established in 1915 by Virendranath Chattopadhyay, Bhupendranath Dutta, Lala Hardayal and others with the help of the German foreign office under 'Zimmerman Plan'. These revolutionaries aimed to mobilise the Indian settlers abroad to send volunteers and arms to India to incite rebellion among

Indian troops there and to even organise an armed invasion of British India to liberate the country.

The Indian revolutionaries in Europe sent missions to Baghdad, Persia, Turkey and Kabul to work among Indian troops and the Indian prisoners of war (POWs) and to incite anti-British feelings among the people of these countries. One mission under Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh, Barkatullah and Obaidullah Sindhi went to Kabul to organise a 'provisional Indian government' there with the help of the crown prince, Amanullah.

● **Mutiny in Singapore**

Among the scattered mutinies during this period, the most notable was in Singapore on February 15, 1915 by Punjabi Muslim 5th Light Infantry and the 36th Sikh battalion under Jamadar Chisti Khan, Jamadar Abdul Gani and Subedar Daud Khan. It was crushed after a fierce battle in which many were killed. Later, 37 persons were executed and 41 transported for life.

Decline

There was a temporary respite in revolutionary activity after the First World War because the release of prisoners held under the Defence of India Rules cooled down passions a bit; there was an atmosphere of conciliation after Montagu's August 1917 statement and the talk of constitutional reforms; and the coming of Gandhi on the scene with the programme of non-violent non-cooperation promised new hope.

Summary

● **Revolutionary Activities**

* **Reasons for emergence**

Younger elements not ready to retreat after the decline of open phase.

Leadership's failure to tap revolutionary energies of the youth.

Government repression left no peaceful avenues open for protest.

* **Ideology**

Assassinate unpopular officials, thus strike terror in hearts of rulers and arouse people to expel the British with force; based on individual heroic actions on lines of Irish nationalists or Russian nihilists and not a mass-based countrywide struggle.

● **Revolutionary Activities**

* **Bengal**

1902—First revolutionary groups in Midnapore and Calcutta (The Anushilan Samiti)

1906—*Yugantar*, the revolutionary weekly started

By 1905-06—Several newspapers started advocating revolutionary terrorism.

1907—Attempt on life of the former Lt. governor of East Bengal and Assam.

1908—Prafulla Chaki and Khudiram Bose attempt to murder Muzaffarpur Magistrate, Kingsford.

Alipore conspiracy case involving Aurobindo Ghosh, Barindra Kumar Ghosh and others.

1908—Burrah dacoity by Dacca Anushilan.

1912—Bomb thrown at Viceroy Hardinge by Rashbehari Bose and Sachin Sanyal.

Sandhya, *Yugantar*—newspapers advocating revolutionary activity.

Jatin Das and *Yugantar*; the German Plot during World War I.

* **Maharashtra**

1879—Ramosi Peasant Force by Vasudev Balwant Phadke.

1890s—Tilak's attempts to propagate militancy among the youth through Shivaji and Ganapati festivals, and his journals *Kesari* and *Maharatta*.

1897—Chapekar brothers kill Rand, the plague commissioner of Poona and Lt. Ayerst.

1899—Mitra Mela—a secret society organised by Savarkar and his brother.

1904—Mitra Mela merged with Abhinav Bharat.

1909—District Magistrate of Nasik—Jackson—killed.

* **Punjab**

Revolutionary activity by Lala Lajpat Rai, Ajit Singh, Aga Haidar Syed Haidar Raza, Bhai Parmanand, Lalchand 'Falak', Sufi Ambaprasad.

● **Revolutionary Activity Abroad**

1905—Shyamji Krishnavarma set up Indian Home Rule Society and India House and brought out journal *The Sociologist* in London.

1909—Madan Lal Dhingra murdered Curzon-Wyllie; Madame Bhikaji Cama operated from Paris and Geneva and brought out journal *Bande Mataram*.

Ajit Singh also active.

Berlin Committee for Indian Independence established by Virendranath Chattopadhyay and others.

Missions sent to Baghdad, Persia, Turkey, Kabul.

* In *North America*, the Ghadr was organised by Lala Hardayal, Ramchandra, Bhawan Singh, Kartar Singh Saraba, Barkatullah, Bhai Parmanand.

The Ghadr Programme

Assassinate officials.

Publish revolutionary literature.

Work among Indian troops abroad and raise funds.

Bring about a simultaneous revolt in all colonies of Britain.

Attempt to bring about an armed revolt in India on February 21, 1915 amidst favourable conditions created by the outbreak of First World War and the *Komagata Maru* incident (September 1914). The plan was foiled due to treachery.

Defence of India Act, 1915 passed primarily to deal with the Ghadrates.