Defying Death

Struggles against
Imperialism and Feudalism

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Maya Gupta and Amit Kumar Gupta

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In memory of

ASHFAQULLAH KHAN (1900–1927)

of Kakori Case fame, who had risen above
the community consciousness of his time,
and attained martyrdom for the cause of
nationalist revolutionism in India

Preface

Our curiosity about armed resistance to the imperial and feudal domination over India seems on the whole to be an enduring one. It has persisted for long and even survived the diversionary interests that we grew in a few other historical issues. Attempts at satisfying the curiosity led consequently to our enquiring into certain aspects of anti-imperialist and anti-feudal belligerency in the country. The findings were published off and on as articles in journals of history and collections of research papers. Although these articles received some academic attention at the time of their publication, they did not quite reach the interested and inspired reader—the general reading public. Besides, over the years naturally their presence was relegated to the background and their voice turned indistinct. Apparently, none of our writings was earthshaking on its own to deserve any revival or reiteration. But the explosive and inspiring developments they collectively attempted at grasping are historically significant still, and of considerable popular and scholarly concern. In view of this living interest in the subject we have often felt, as did some of those who happened to go through these in the past, that their re-statement even today—by putting these together in the relevant setting—could perhaps be both pertinent and useful. We would not, however, have made up our minds on the need for such a re-statement had one of us not been commandeered by Rajendra Prasad (Rajen) of Sahmat, New Delhi, to try feelingly for a comprehensive write-up on nationalist revolutionism in India and thereby get an opportunity to recount the utility of some of our original findings. Similarly, it might not have taken the shape of a collection of articles at all but for Kumkum Sangari of the Centre of Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, who drove us to make an elaborate search for all our articles, select some among these thematically, and keep them in readiness for the publisher's attention. We are grateful to both these hard taskmasters, as well as to Tulika, New Delhi, who spared no effort in rendering this collection into a worthwhile publication.

We also wish here to express our gratitude for the encouragement we received while writing these articles from the late Kalpana Joshi (Dutt), the heroine of the 'Heroic Chattagram', the late Sourin Roy, former Director, National Archives of India, New Delhi, and Professor Bimal Prasad, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This collection nevertheless represents our views only, and we alone are responsible for the unintended errors of fact, interpretation and presentation in it.

MAYA GUPTA
AMIT KUMAR GUPTA

Introduction

Any crystallization of socially exploitative processes seems to have resulted in the subjection of a people or peoples, and their surroundings, to the overall control of the dominant categories of expropriators among them. The nominees of such categories have consequently constituted the ruling authority and their rule has usually been unhindered till it was popularly felt to have turned into misrule. Against this misrule (which might be stark or camouflaged) and for righting a public wrong or wrongs (which may be located at the fringe, on the surface, but have wider and deeper significance for some or many layers of society), the vast majority—under varying degrees of exploitation—has been reduced to a state of utter helplessness.

Under monarchy/autocracy (the personal rule of a despot), which was irresponsible (in that it was not responsible for its actions to the subjects) and unlimited (in that it was not limited by restrictions under a constitution—the safety-valve for the subjects), the righting of public wrongs had to take place through the use of counter-physical force against the physical force already monopolized by the authority and imbibed in the state. (Since the subjects' use of such non-physical force as moral and rationalizing pressure depended entirely on the authority volunteering to take cognizance of them, they were not likely to be effective unless backed by counter-physical force. In fact, almost all use of counter-physical force appears to have occurred as the last expedient, following the employment of rational persuasion and a clear demonstration of the perceived rights and wrongs.) The application of counter-physical force was seen generally to have taken the shape of a mutiny, an insurrection or a rising, or a civil war. Approximately a similar outcome had followed under oligarchic regimes against coteries which had assumed unbridled power by taking advantage of the inadequacies of some existing constitutions, or by defying and going above these.

Their rights flouted and the channels by which they could air grievances choked under such regimes, the subjects had little alternative but to take recourse to counter-physical force or armed resistance in the above-stated forms. In other words, in pre-modern straightforward monarchic and oligarchic set-ups, the only way the people could object to and oppose what they believed to be misrule, was by opting for the use of counter-physical force or by offering armed resistance to it.

Apparently, however, the offering of armed resistance or the resorting to counter-physical force was no less bounteous in the days of emergent modernism, despite its trumpeted reliance on popular will, individual liberty, social justice, constitutional finesse and administrative equipoise. It was noticed, and is still being seen, that even in the most skilfully devised democratic set-up public opinion on critical issues can be callously ignored, civil liberties ruthlessly trampled, and popular interests affecting the lives of the multitude or a large section of it, rudely thrown away. If a democracy is overwhelmed by a coalescence of certain classes and categories without its being able to become a genuinely people's democracy, and if it operates in a society whose exploitation-base has not been substantially undermined either gradually or drastically, some public wrongs of grave nature will continue to intermittently take place, and the quest for remedial actions including armed resistance, whether one likes it or not, may still be very much in vogue. But even after conceding all this, one can hardly be indifferent to the great strength of modern liberal democratic traditions—their ideals of the equality and sovereignty of people, and their instrumentality in bringing about such fundamental concepts of governance as the establishment of the rule of law, the separation of state powers, the enlistment of the rights and duties of citizens, the introduction of the universality of adult suffrage, the guaranteeing of civil rights, and the working out of constitutional checks and balances. Although the set of basic ills that is congenital to socially exploitative systems still continues to plague the people, it seems that, under liberal democratic constitutions, channels for ventilating popular grievances have, to a certain extent, cleared, methods of mobilizing public attention systematized, means of pressurizing the authorities strengthened, and prospects of redressal brightened. As the feeling of frustration among the masses went down by some degree, so did the intensity of desperation among many of them and the urgency that led them to take to arms as the last bid.

Whatever be the strengths and the weaknesses of a liberal democratic system vis-à-vis a people/peoples, it could not have been introduced in substance to all territories which had somehow been conquered by others. Such introduction would simply have been self-defeating for the conquerors who could maximize benefits only by completely subjugating the conquered, and very obviously by conceding as little constitutional advantage to the subjugated as possible. Liberal democracy and imperialism being products of the same modern age, under a similar bourgeoised social formation, and moulded by an identical western worldview, an anomalous situation developed in the subjugated sector where the imperialists must deny its inhabitants precisely those rights and advantages which they themselves had to grant to the people in their own countries. Howsoever much the high and the low of the imperial countries like Britain, France and Germany were led to overlook this anomaly in the belief of their sharing, even if in trickles, imperialist gains from the subjugated economies, the conquered people were bound, sooner or later, to discover it, resent it in view of their utter imperial subjection, and fight till they were able to free themselves from their tormentors' clutches. The fight against unrelenting imperialist rule was likely, therefore, to begin on the line of certain kinds of armed resistance or through some use of counter-physical force, just as it seemed to have taken place notably in India under the British.

British imperialist rule over India, whether it was vastly superior administratively to the preceding indigenous governments or only marginally so, had in reality been as tyrannical as any of the previous despotic and oligarchic regimes. Despite the Raj (the East India Company as well as the British monarch) being responsible theoretically, and very nominally in practice, to the British parliament, it was for all practical purposes reduced to the personal rule of governors-general and governors, assisted by their respective councils, propped up by the British-dominated armies and civil services, and upheld—following the initial jurisdictional squabbles—by a placating judiciary. The great distance between the British Isles and the Indian dominions, the challenging problem of transport and communication, and the British public's apalling apathy toward and ignorance of Indian affairs, turned even its nominal control into an ostentatious farce. In effect the Raj became the sole concern of a few Britons committed to the British industrial and financial capitalistic causes, who happened to be informed of the happenings in India, and apart from being somewhat fanciful of Christian proselytization, had no hesitation whatsoever in leaving all initiative and power to a highly centralized British authority in India to run it in the imperial interest. Since an oligarchic and despotic Raj had thus set up an almost absolute rule over its Indian territories, without the faintest trace of accountability to anybody therein, the subjugated Indians—in times of what they felt to be insufferable oppression—could give vent to their agonies only by taking up arms against it in utter desperation. The Raj's record from the beginning, therefore, was full of confrontations with such numerous desperate acts (to recall only a few) as the rebellions of the Sannyasis (1763–1800), the Chuars (1767–1809), the Paiks (1804–17), the Faraizis (1838–47), and the Santhals (1855) in eastern India; of Virapandya Kattabomman (1792–99), the Poligars of Tinneveli, the Ceded Districts and Arcot (1801–05), Dewan Velu Thambi (1808–09), the tenantry in Vizagapatam (1830–33), and Narasimha Reddy of Karnool and Bellary about the same time in the south; of the Bundelas (1808–12), the Jat peasants (1809–24), the Aligarh Taluqdars (1814–17), the landholders of Bareilly (1816), and the Gujars (1824) in the north; of the Bhils (1818–31), the Desais of Kittur (1824–29), the Kolis (1828, 1839, 1844–48), the Gadkaris (1844), and the aristrocacy of Savantwadi (1844–50) in western India; and of Sheikh Dulla of Narmada Territory (1825–28), the armed mendicants of Malwa (1840s), and Appa Saheb, the impostor, of Nagpur (1848) in central India.

The Raj had to face armed resistance not only from the various disaffected categories among the ruled but also from the components of its chief machinery to rule—sections of the Indian soldiery it had commandeered. Mutinies of the sepoys, who formed the pillars of the British–Indian armies, were not just outbreaks of military men for their own betterment and better treatment within the military; these also represented the undercurrents of dissent flowing through the social formations they came from—mainly the peasant and artisan stocks in rural and semi-urban (*kasba*) areas. Whether a society's points of dissent were material (like the over-assessment and dispossession of lands, and industrial assaults on artisanship); sentimental (the wounding of religious communities or the nostalgia for past regimes); or persecutional (subjection to harassment and the imposition of penal measures)—these affected its members adversely wherever they were placed. All the mutinies, therefore, were socially linked, and each of them had a telling effect on the imperial authorities. However, if the mutineers were unable to carry any section of the civic populace (of their own origin) with them, their effectiveness tended rapidly to shrink (as it happened in Vellore in 1806). On the contrary, if they succeeded in inspiring a civil rising in unison (as they did in northern India in 1857), their impact dramatically widened with devastating consequences. It was the active support of the general populace that played a crucial role in determining the magnitude of any mutinous or rebellious form of anti-imperialist armed resistance. For leadership, the rebels generally looked up to the hitherto traditionally respected—those more vibrant and articulate among the Indian ruling families and chieftains, their courtiers and dependents, the aristocrats and landlords, the religious leaders and the high-ups in the caste hierarchy. Such feudal leaders naturally lacked any vision of the future and, being socially exploitative and politically anachronistic, they were not capable—even in the short run—of making any serious attempt at fulfilling the popular aspirations.

Their leadership over an armed resistance seems, therefore, to have been doomed from the beginning, and the more the public participated under it the clearer became its fragility—its contradiction with those whom it led. The participation of a part or parts of the affected populace was thus obviously more decisive than the qualities of its leaders—their so-called defiance, skills and attitudes. In a certain way, the events of the great revolt of 1857 demonstrated the fragile nature of its leadership and also anticipated the emergence of popular figures from the ranks on the battle-lines and at the barricades—near Kashmere Gate in Delhi, on the road to Kalpi, in the forests of Shivpuri and similar other arenas of conflict. Had the revolt continued further, and for some more time, bringing the war of independence closer to the end of the *feringhi* Raj, the rebels would have thrown up their leaders from among themselves, their own heroes and heroines—those more worthy of the causes they espoused than the feudal venerables.

The great revolt of 1857 failed to overthrow British rule in India but succeeded in violently shaking the Raj to its very foundation, leaving gaping cracks in its wake. In response the British took urgent steps for overhauling their Indian administration, reorganizing their defences and finances, and revising of some of their policies. Although there was no real attempt at bridging the widening gap between the rulers and the ruled or restraining the overspilling vengeance of the former against the latter, the Raj was brought, munificently for reassuring all its beneficiaries, under the direct supervision of the British monarch. It was also brought under closer scrutiny of the British parliament, a scrutiny by the indifferent in effect, denying the Indians any opportunity to be heard as before. However, the most profound change that came in the wake of the revolt of 1857 was the Raj being able to discover, following its groping about for so many decades, the mechanism of a colonial political economy that could assure it of a more profitable and durable hold over India.

II

In the light of the discovery, it was felt that a fresh orientation had to be given to the colonial political economy by building it upon the structure of feudalism in India, by getting over the British attitude of ambivalence and distrust towards the princes, chiefs and landed magnates (who, by and large, happened to be optimistic about the success of the revolt of 1857), and by entering into a firm collaboration with these categories of native feudal exploiters. Apart from the middle-class intelligentsia who were introduced to the advances of western civilization through the onset of the Raj, and who stood justifiably bedazzled and benefited, British imperialism also had other collaborators galore on the Indian social scenario—financial capitalists and business houses, compradors of British capital and revenue farmers, various kinds of professionals and subordinate officials, substantial peasant proprietors and neo-*zamindars* (those who invested their profits from trade into lands), and even many influential members of the landed aristocracy. However, as the representative largely of an emergent bourgeoised society in the west and only partly of a commercialized landed interest thereof, the Raj had a natural distaste for the dominance of Indian feudal elements whose stranglehold over the country and its people was an impediment for the more modernistic imperial utilization of their full potential—both as suppliers of raw materials for British industries and as buyers of finished products. The Raj's discomfort with feudal India was consistent with the prevailing British utilitarian and Benthamite notions of effecting some good (if not the 'greatest good') for the many (if not for the 'greatest number'), and with concern for the proverbial goose that would regularly lay golden eggs. It was too far-fetched in the initial decades of the nineteenth century to think of what could happen to the goose growing healthier and stronger, and eventually turning less obliging and more obdurate. That the possibility of modernizing and bourgeoising India was fraught with apprehensions of the rise of a self-confident Indian nationhood in the future and, more importantly, of the growth of an Indian capitalist class in contradiction with British capital later on, did not appear to the Raj at that point to be urgent enough to break its head upon. Even the immediacy of dealing with feudalism and its shibbolethic sway over the populace was not pursued as decidedly as it ought to have been, in spite of the Raj's hardening attitude against them from the 1830s to the 1850s (or, during the age of reforms, from the governor-generalship of Bentinck to that of Dalhousie). Its waverings in undertaking a frontal attack on the feudal forces seem to have stemmed substantially from an inflated estimate of the latter's position of strength within a traditional, hierarchical society. This magnification apparently increased manifold during the devastations of 1857 when the leading feudal personalities being thrown up the whirlwind of popular outburst, gave the jaundiced impression of their having complete control over it. Consequently, as soon as the storm blew over, the Raj acted in indecent haste to make peace with feudalism, restore it to its former vantage position and reinforce it in every possible way.

Despite the Raj's imprecision in assessing the strength of the feudal categories in India, the consequence of befriending them was calculated primarily to be to its advantage, and it turned out precisely to be so. Imperialism after all was not required to bother too much about the fate of the subjects under its rule, or suffer pricks periodically from a liberalist conscience, and in the colonial circumstances it was likely to have the best of friends only among the worst of the native exploiters if their exploits—the basics of their existence—were allowed to continue unhindered. By commissioning the feudal section of Indian society as its subservient junior partner, the Raj in due course succeeded in having its most reliable ally faithfully standing by it in all circumstances—favourable or difficult. Since feudalism, or for that matter any prevailing social order at the crossroads, is anxious to hold back society's mobility, its continuation and redeployment as an allied force must have appeared to the Raj to be a strikingly useful lever for controlling the country in motion—accelerating mildly at times and keeping it in check otherwise. Imperialism, in the age of an expanding capitalist network, could derive its full benefit not by perpetually leashing the subject economies, but by relaxing the leash around them occasionally so that their resilience was utilized in the imperial interest.

The Raj's interest thus lay more in the retardation of Indian economic growth than in its wholesale stifling, in its distortion and unevenness rather than its decline and decay, and in its acting supportively for the British economy rather than its becoming a showy appendage to Britain. Some chlorine drops of infrastructural change and technological input, of indigenous capital formation and investment in allied areas, of agricultural commercialization and marketing facility, it was believed, would be enough to clear up—of course, within the strict partial limit—the gathering of stagnated water in the cistern of feudal make, modality and condition. The imperio–feudal combination would thus be in a position to ensure India's continued economic underdevelopment: handicapped entrepreneurship, restricted industrial prospects and a depressed agriculture. Apart from affording Indian feudalism the opportunity to enjoy a renewed lease of life, such developments would guarantee the colonizing metropolitan capital being able to bring the colony's economy into the vicissitudes of the capitalist world system as its supplementary. This was in effect how colonial economy and colonialism—as they were eventually understood—came systematically into existence in India, rendering India's enslavement more overpowering and its liberation more Herculean.

Ironically, as it happened in most other colonies, the difficult terrain of colonialism in the subcontinent had proved to be somewhat favourable for the growth of Indian nationalism. The intelligentsia's attraction for English education—born out of the professional and employment requirements of the middle class—opened up the vista for an understanding of western civilization, its various facets of modern, scientific and liberal attainments. Once this was juxtaposed on their own social, cultural and ideological standing, an awareness of themselves—of their predicaments, vitalities and promises—was destined to dawn upon them. Then, of course, they were to undertake the journey from locality to nationality, and from community cognition to national consciousness. The manner in which the Indian bourgeoisie, especially the petty bourgeoisie, passed quickly through these stages and reached the level of perceiving nationalism vis-à-vis foreign domination, visualizing some easing of its harshness if not freedom from alien rule, is rather well-known. So also is evident the state of despondency that colonial economic strain had brought upon this process of visualization and germinated in response the content of economic nationalism, through a scorching examination of deprivation and 'drainage', underdevelopment and immiseration, indebtment and extraction.

To the pioneers of nationalism in India—in the context of their newly imbibed western socio-economic and political concepts, and their freshly remembered rebel military reverses in 1857—ideologies looked far more useful than gunshots, articulation of demands more practicable than the crossing of swords, and pressurizing the authorities for concessions more effective than taking them on at the barricades. The familiar nationalist developments till about the beginning of the twentieth century, from the formation of local associations (like the Poona Sarvojanik Sabha, 1870; the Indian Association, Calcutta, 1876; the Madras Mahajana Sabha, 1884; the Bombay Presidency Association, 1885), the founding of the countrywide platform of the Indian National Congress in 1885, or from the voicing of public concerns through 'petitions and prayers' to the pressing for political concessions from the Raj (such as Indian representation in legislative councils, Indianization of the civil services, separation of the judiciary, reduction of military expenditure, cutting down the 'Home Charges' and promotion of Indian industries), had precious little to do with either the preparation for or the actual enactment of armed resistance against the British imperial authorities. The revolt of 1857 seems to have lost—for a considerable length of time—its relevance to the Indian situation and its legacies missed their claimants in Indian society, although the tradition of armed confrontation did continue to flicker at the popular level. It in fact came forcefully into play for some time, not so much directly against the Raj symbolizing anti-imperialism as frontally against the native exploiters—landlords, planters, *mahajans*—representing anti-feudalism, but its overall impact had apparently been one of opposition to the imperio–feudal structure of colonialism. The trend could be illustrated by mentioning only some of the many anti-feudal outbreaks which rocked post-1857 India: the Indigo rebellion against the planters in Bengal, 1860–61; the Keonjhar revolt against the feudal chiefs in Orissa, 1868 and 1891; the Serajganj rebellion against the *zamindars* in Bengal, 1872–73; the Moplah rebellions against the landlord–*mahajan* combine in Malabar, 1873–96; the Koli risings against the *mahajans* and landlords in Maharashtra, 1871–75; the Deccan rebellion or 'riots' against the *sowcars* in the Deccan districts, 1875; the Rangiya rebellion against the landlords and *mahajans* in Cachar, 1894–95; and the Munda rebellion against the landlord–*mahajan*–priesthood alliance in Chhotanagpur, 1895–1900—in all of which the Raj stood solidly behind the feudal exploiters and crushed these as heavy-handedly as possible.

The surviving tradition of popular armed resistance, as reflected in the above list of occurrences, could not have gone unnoticed by the vanguard of Indian society—the rising bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalist leadership, but its members did not quite know what use to make of it and, more significantly, for what purpose. Had their purpose been (if they, by a very long stretch of imagination, happened to be radicals far ahead of their times) to throw up a challenge to colonialism by simultaneously opposing both imperialism and feudalism, they might have built upon the tradition an armed struggle for Indian liberation. But their not being so astonishingly and improbably advanced, the nationalists' purpose was confined to the extraction of some self-governance from the Raj for the all-round progress of all Indians, irrespective of race, region, language and creed, and inclusive of even the native exploitative categories—a gigantic task in itself in the context of the latter half of the nineteenth century. From this position, the nationalists of the time could at the most fathom the depth of discontent from the popular outbursts without making any serious effort to utilize these, risking thereby a disruption in their grand project of national consolidation and inviting an almost unrepulsable imperio–feudal offensive. The tradition of popular armed resistance lay dormant, therefore, barring its expressing itself occasionally and on the spur of the moment, till anti-feudalism came into the focus of the organized, conscious struggle against colonialism from the 1930s onwards. Whatever might have been the strategic (i.e. to bring a diversified populace under a sentimentally unifying umbrella-like cover) and the tactical (i.e. to play a constitutional game assiduously according to its rules) motivations of the nationalists at a given point of time, they were free at another to break loose from the monotony in the legislative politics of 1892, 1909 and 1919 and step either into agitational politics (which they did in the Swadeshi movement in Bengal in 1905), or into the popular politics of a massive non-violent confrontation (which they undertook in great style during the Gandhian Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements in the 1920s), or into a violent armed struggle for winning independence (which their contemporaneous militant compatriots tried most compellingly in Ireland). If some among the nationalists cultivated a militant temper in themselves, recognized arms and ammunitions as tools for breaking the chains and not merely as instruments of monstrosity, they were bound to make some use of these at one time or the other. The Indian militant nationalists commenced doing so at the meeting-point of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

III

The last decade of the nineteenth century and the first one of the twentieth together marked the high noon of British imperialism in India. Racist arrogance under the Raj and the heaping of humiliations on the ruled, violating their public and private domains, detaining and fining them on any pretext, torturing them and inflicting corporal punishment on them, created a situation in which they could not take any more, having reached the limit of their endurance.

To buy some relief, Indians had to pay the torturers in their own coin, meet officially engineered terrorization with a natural tendency for counter-terrorization—get at least a tooth for all the teeth. The task at this point was cut out for the militant nationalists who, under the protective shadow of the 'extremists' (as opposed to the 'moderates') in the Indian National Congress, had romantically been ruminating over the prospect of a nationalist revolution in India—of rapidly turning their enslaved country into a free new India through a decisive armed victory in a trial of strength with the Raj. It was the hard core of militant nationalists or, more aptly, the band of national revolutionists[*] who came forward to organize counter-terror as a preliminary to posing a challenge to British might. Consequently, a number of secret societies were formed in different parts of India and abroad (Mitra Mela and Abhinava Bharat in Maharashtra, the Anushilan and

[*] The term 'revolutionists' has been used here to mean those who pledged themselves to winning the nation's independence from the imperialist rule drastically through the use of force ('revolutionism'). They should be differentiated from the 'revolutionaries' who committed themselves to the nation's qualitative social transformation dramatically through the use of force ('revolution'), over and above securing its independence.

Jugantar groups in Bengal, India House in England, the Bharat Mata Association in Madras Presidency, the Hindusthanee Association and the Ghadar in Canada and the United States), arms procured and bombs manufactured, fund-raising 'political dacoities' committed, hated British officials—personifying imperialist persecutions—assassinated, and patriotic martyrdom attained.

The glory that martyrdom brought upon individual heroes and the shock-wave that it sent through the nation at large, over and above the satisfaction that the wronged felt at their being avenged by the revolutionist knight-errants and the spell that acts of clandestine audacity could cast on the patriotically charged, all contributed to the continuous flow of counter-terror in India, running high sometimes and lying low at others, till Jugantar—one of the earliest secret societies—decided to disband itself in 1938. Nevertheless, if such a conspiratorial linear pattern, howsoever deadly as an attraction and striking as an antidote, was persisted with in isolation from the public for more than forty years, from 1897 to 1938, it was bound to become stereotyped and turn jaded in appearance and effect. This could have been the predictable fate of nationalist revolutionism in India, had some of the revolutionists not previously gauged this themselves and tried creatively, oblivious of their own peril, to introduce new and ambitious designs into the pattern, noticeably at least on two occasions: once during the First World War, and then in course of the lull after the stormy Non-Cooperation movement.

The Indian national revolutionists seem to have recalled at the beginning of the First World War, lingering memories of the great revolt of 1857, and decided to go all-out in its tradition to organize synchronized violent risings against British rule at some strategic points in the country. The objective of the grand scheme was to overthrow the Raj by taking advantage of its predicament in having a war on hand. It was also sought to obtain help from Germany which could be friendly to the Indian revolutionists (as it incidentally was to their Irish counterparts) because of its being the enemy's enemy on the battlefront. For its execution, the scheme depended on the participation of the only armed category of Indians, the sepoys of the British–Indian armies; on the homecoming of immigrant volunteers from abroad, especially the United States and Canada; on the receipt of German shipments of arms in the coastal areas; on the setting up of an elaborate operational network within the subcontinent; and, of course, on the participation of all the existing secret societies.

Although the preparations were made carefully in 1914 and, despite all precautions, plans of action leaked out, German arms failed to show up and the risings scheduled for February–March 1915 remained by and large still-born, except those premature ones in the cantonments which the forewarned authorities ruthlessly crushed. The debacle and its aftermath—the summary trials and courtmartials, the executions and transportations for life—virtually sealed the future of any endeavour in 1857-style for wresting Indian freedom by throwing down the gauntlet. Another plan for launching a war of independence was hardly thought of for a full twenty-six years, till it had finally been worked out by the most irrepressible anti-imperialist among the national leaders—Subhas Chandra Bose. Subhas's dramatic escape from home internment at the initial phase of the Second World War, his flight through Afghanistan and Soviet Russia to Germany, his obtaining German help to raise a liberation army for an invasion of India, coinciding with an anticipated rise in Indian unrest under wartime stresses and strains—all stemmed from a formulation that was remarkably similar to the one the national revolutionists adopted in 1914–15, namely, to count on the friendly support of one's enemy's enemies. The objective was also the same, i.e. to wage a war of independence in the fashion of 1857 and to initiate it on the strength of those who handled arms professionally—the sepoys, or the Indian prisoners of war in the Axis hands.

Too much, however, may not be made of the resemblances between the revolutionist project of 1914–15 and the Subhasist strategy of 1941. Apart from the differences of time (twenty-five years) and the circumstances of the two world wars, the architects of both these plans also varied widely in their ideological standing and political perception. Besides, while the national revolutionists barely recognized the popular strength of the Swadeshi movement, Subhas received his sustenance from the mass upsurge during the Non-Cooperation movement. Consequently, while the national revolutionists operated in the pre-First World War days away from the people, Subhas functioned charismatically among them between the two world wars.

It was perhaps not possible, even for the most outstanding romantics among patriotic Indians, to think in terms of a war of independence, except at the extraordinary times of the Raj's singular preoccupation with the world wars. Ordinarily otherwise, under strict government surveillance, nationalist revolutionism in India had to confine itself to the operational limits of counter-terror, and settle in howsoever sensationalized a manner—into its repetitive routine. The maximum extent to which the national revolutionists could have thought of going during the inter-war years, and the optimum effect they could derive from it, was epitomized in the daring solo rising in April 1930 in Chittagong, Bengal, by the self-styled Indian Republican Army (Chittagong Branch). Curiously, the Chittagong rising was planned by the revolutionists only to fail and not to succeed, since success in their eyes appeared not only less predictable than failure but also far less profound in effect. They were determined, therefore, to set a stunning example of heroic failure before the public, arouse the nation from its troubled slumber, and inspire the people to take to arms. Never before did the people—the common man and woman—assume as much significance in the national revolutionists' estimation as they did in the post-Non-Cooperation days. Those who relied primarily on the valour of individual heroes were struck by the scale of popular participation in the Non-Cooperation movement and the strength that the mass mobilization under Gandhiji displayed. Greatly impressed by it, the national revolutionists came to realize that conducting the anti-imperialist struggle on their own terms, or on the terms of others like Gandhiji and his followers, depended crucially on each formation's ability to rally the people around it. It was the people that the Chittagong rebels wanted to impress, and it was the people's power that their comrades in northern India passionately wanted to invoke.

The Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA) was aware even of the kind of people who might be geared into battle-readiness, and they also had some clue as to the fighting potentialities of the working class and the peasantry—the worst and the most numerous victims of colonialism in India. Such findings they apparently shared with the radicals—the socialistically-oriented Congress activists and Communists—but unlike them, the HSRA did not quite know how to go about these, how to mix secret organization with public mobilization, blend popular political aspirations with the prospect of socio-economic transformations, combine—for the maximum deployment of popular forces—resisting the alien rulers with combating the indigenous exploiters, and attain thereby not only the independence of

India but also the liberation of the Indian people from the colonial stranglehold of the imperialists and their native collaborators. The radicals knowing what to do did not necessarily mean their being able to work it out successfully, and the Congress Socialists and Communists were also found to have failed either in push-selling their know-how to the well-entrenched, almost omnipotent, leadership of nationalist mass mobilization, or in wresting from its overwhelmingly powerful hands the mantle of a nationwide anti-imperialist struggle. They nevertheless tried hard to live up to their ideological calling, and the resultant experimentation they conducted with popular insurgency became historically significant not so much for its achievements as for its commitments.

For a considerable length of time the Communists (from the mid-1920s) and the Congress Socialists (from the mid-1930s), along with other like-minded individuals and groups, took up the causes of the working class and the peasantry, organized them in trade unions and *kisan sabhas*, and led them in defence of their bare subsistence against the assaults of the industrial and landed magnates. In most of their battles on the trade union and *kisan* fronts, the radicals or the 'left' (as they had been termed) had to contend with the Raj, which invariably intervened on behalf of the exploiting categories and in the name of maintaining law and order. Despite these strong-arm authoritarian interventions, the left was seldom able to elevate the workers' and peasants' movements to the level of a bitter anti-imperialist campaign. Some of them in fact eventually gave up the task of continuing the fight against the native exploiters alongside their tooth-and-nail opposition to the Raj, lest it disturb the carefully laid multi-class nationalist consolidation against imperialism, and scare away the vacillating handful of representatives of the monopolistic big bourgeoisie, financial capitalists and landlords from their fold. Consequently, to retain a few uncertain elements within its camp, the anti-imperialist mobilization could not utilize the vast and energetic worker and peasant participation that it might have done otherwise. Since cattle and tigers do not drink from the same stream, mobilizers must always choose between the exploiters and the exploited as to who can play a more decisive role in the mobilizing processes. The Communists made their choice, viewed the struggles against the native exploiters and the confrontations with the Raj as one and the same, and stuck singlemindedly to the unification of both kinds of struggle. Even if remarkable at the time, the Communist success in the line of action they pursued appears on the whole to have been rather limited and partial. In the few cases where they were able to unite the workers' struggles with the high pitch of anti-imperialism, notably in merging the agitated students' demonstration with the industrial workers' militancy in Calcutta in November 1945 and February 1946, or in fusing the naval ratings' mutiny with the working class's fury in Bombay in February 1946, they could not raise these to any great height of popular insurgency or climactic partisanship. In contrast, in a few other instances where the Communists succeeded in lifting anti-feudalism on the high plane of insurrectionist and guerilla-styled armed struggle, by guiding the poor and the middle peasantry in Telengana (1945–51), and the sharecroppers and the landless in Bengal (1946–50), they were unable to connect these with anti-imperialism in pre- and post-independence India. Despite their falling short of the radical objective—their inability to reinforce and complement popular opposition to the Raj directly—the rural poor's formidable armed resistance to the economic and social extortions of the *jagirdars*, *deshmukhs*, moneylenders and affluent peasant proprietors in Telengana, and the *jotedars*, landlords, *mahajans* and rich peasants in Bengal, more specifically in the Sundarbans, was outstanding in the annals of anti-feudalism, both for the manner in which it came into play, and the purpose for which it was so resolutely employed.

The Communist political activists' sustained campaign and unqualified concern for the *kisan* cause won the *kisan* ranks in Telengana and the Sundarbans over to their side, exposed the feudal system that exploited and oppressed the *kisan* masses, and readied a considerable section of them to fight feudalism to the finish. The fight started originally with the peasant protestations in Telengana against feudal extractions like *vetti* (forced labour) and *vettichakiri* (forced services), as well as the landlords' grabbing of *kisan* lands; and with the *kisan* remonstrances in the Sundarbans over the division of crops between the landlord and the sharecropper, and against evictions and exactions of *begar* (unpaid labour) and irregular levies. The manner in which the protestations and remonstrances in Telengana and the Sundarbans turned into outbreaks of counter-physical force—in the face of the imperio–feudal combine's unbridled use of coercive power—and the style of autonomous initiatives that the *kisan* fighters demonstrated in both these armed struggles, were remarkably similar, though the former had evidently been wider in scale and higher in intensity than the latter. The *kisans* had to take to arms in defence either of the lands from which they had forcefully been evicted or of the crop-share which had forcibly been taken away from them. From the defence of their lands and crops they quickly graduated to the next higher stage, namely to an all-out offensive against landlordism through seizure of landlords' lands and their restoration to the rightful owners or distribution among the landless. Such advanced steps towards an agrarian revolution (the destruction of the landlord system and the giving away of land to the tillers) were perhaps symptomatic of most of the rural poor's readiness for dealing a devastating blow to the feudal foundation of colonialism in India. It was like the ripeness of a few mangoes indicating the ripened state of most mangoes in a grove. Had the ideologues and organizers of the *kisan* movement read the pulse of the peasant masses correctly and devised a suitable strategy, they might have gone for the daunting task of performing an orchestratic anti-feudal extravaganza in the vast Indian countryside. Whether they were at their wits' end in the then circumstances or overawed by the magnitude of the task itself, the Communists did not venture to go further by over-riding the setbacks that might have come their way or correcting the mistakes they happened to have made. They in effect called for a halt—a ceasefire—and that respite led to the survival of feudal–colonial overtones in the Indian economy. Like Sindbad enduring the old man on his shoulders, independent Indians have continued to bear the burden of landlordism to their perpetual disadvantage.

The Vellore Mutiny

July 1806

Maya Gupta

A major crack in the British Raj's relations with its devoted Indian sepoys was first noticed at Vellore in the Carnatic in July 1806. The mutiny of Vellore, though shortlived, left the British panic-stricken and concerned about the security of their authority in South India. Apart from the usual bloodshed and horror associated with such incidents, the Vellore mutiny took a heavy toll on the Madras administration with the removal of the governor of the Presidency and the commander-in-chief of the army. Very little light has been shed on this obscure episode. Existing accounts of the mutiny[1] are mostly partial, often based on the narratives of European survivors of the disaster and on scanty official documents. These accounts, besides being generally incomplete and sometimes unreliable, also wholly lack a critical approach. Here, an attempt is made to first trace the circumstances leading to the mutiny and then to ascertain its causes and nature.

Beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, the sepoys in South India had a long association with the English East India Company. The rivalry with the French had led the English to realize the great necessity of having a considerable supply of local manpower in India for defence purposes. Accordingly, in 1748, following the example of the French, the Company raised a small troop of regular sepoys at Madras.[2] British territory soon expanded along with the sepoy armies of Bengal and Madras. And within half-a-century the major portion of the Company's forces in Madras was constituted by the sepoy army. By 1804–05 there were twenty-three infantry regiments of 2000 each, eight cavalry regiments of 200 each, and over 1000 European officers.[3] In efficiency too the Madras native infantry had been transformed from a 'rabble of peons to a disciplined body, worthy to stand in line with the British troops'.[4]

Evidently, the sepoys were not very happy with conditions of service under the British. No sepoy could rise higher than a *subadar* and the demotion of Indian officers even for small faults was quite common. Moreover, Cradock, the commander-in-chief, admitted that 'Most European officers in native regiments looked on the native officers with contempt . . . the native officers were aggrieved. . .'.[5] The pay-scale of the sepoys was also very low and they often complained that 'the *sipahis* of the Nizam and the Maratha Chiefs are better off than our *subadars* and *jamadars*'.[6] In comparison with low-ranking English officers, like lieutenants and ensigns who received 45 and 32 pagodas[7] per month, the monthly pay of Indian *subadars* and *jamadars* was only 12 and 7 pagodas respectively. Where an English soldier received 12 pagodas a month, a sepoy secured only 2 pagodas.[8] However, the sepoys were never loud in their protest against the insufficient pay or British ill-treatment till the situation suddenly altered in 1805 over an entirely new issue.

In February 1805, Sir John Cradock succeeded Major-General D. Campbell as the commander-in-chief of the Madras army. He soon found that there were no well-defined military regulations in the Madras establishment. Cradock decided to convert the confused mass of scratchy regulations into a systematic code. The deputy adjutant-general, Major Pierce, an officer of considerable experience in India, was entrusted with the task of drafting the code. Following this, on 14 November 1805, the commander-in-chief issued an order for the use of a new turban for sepoys in the infantry and artillery. Made of the same materials as the old one, with a broad cloth and in iron frame, the new turban boasted a cotton taft 'made to resemble a feather and a leather cockade'.[9] In January 1806, the draft military code of regulations, including the order regarding the new turban, was submitted for the government's approval. The tenth paragraph of section XI of the code sought to effect a further innovation which forbade the sepoys from wearing caste marks or displaying religious signs. 'It is further directed that at all parades and duties every soldier shall be clean-shaved on the chin . . . and uniformity should be preserved in regard to the quantity and shape of the hair upon the upper lip.'[10] On 13 March 1806 the Code of Military Regulations of the Madras establishment was given approbation by the governor-in-council.

The new turbans were sent to each regiment at different stations with directives to the commanding officers to issue these to the sepoys. But the sepoys sternly refused to accept the new turban. On 6 May 1806, Lieutenant-Colonel J. Darley, the commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Regiment at Vellore, ordered twenty-nine sepoys to wear the new turban. The sepoys openly stood against the order even though they were threatened with imprisonment. Consequently, some were arrested.

On 7 May, when the sepoys were asked to don the new turban during morning parade, they disobeyed, placing handkerchiefs on their bare heads instead and abusively calling the English officers 'dogs'. During evening parade the same day they refused to carry side-arms in protest against the introduction of the new turban and the imprisonment of some of their comrades. They looked askance at the new turban which resembled the hat of the *feringhis* (Europeans) and declared it objectionable to their caste and religion.[11] Colonel Fancourt, the officer commanding at Vellore, was enraged at this defiance and reported the affair to the commander-in-chief with the remark that objection to the new turban was based merely on the 'lively prejudice' of the sepoys.[12] Cradock supported Fancourt's views and directed him to confine the agitators and to send them to Madras to face a courtmartial,[13] which took place in June 1806. The military court received evidence from two experts in social customs—one each from caste Hindus and Muslims. These experts confirmed Fancourt's opinion that the new turban was not offensive to either Hinduism or Islam.[14] The courtmartial inflicted severe punishment on the defiant sepoys. Two *havildars,* one Muslim and the other Hindu, who still refused to wear the new turban, were sentenced to 900 lashes each. Those who regretted their disobedience and promised good conduct in future were spared dismissal from the army.[15]

A month after this incident at Vellore, a similar agitation took place among sepoys stationed at Wallajabad in North Arcot. When the Grenadier Company of the 2nd Battalion, 14th Regiment, wore the new turban in June, the public taunted them for accepting the European-fashioned '*topies*' (hats). In consequence, the sepoys at Wallajabad grew excited, threw away the new turbans and abused those who still continued to wear them.[16] Subadar Venkata Nair, formerly in the service of Tipu, was suspected to be the instigator. He was promptly arrested and the situation was brought under control as soon as he was dispatched to Madras for trial. Sepoy unrest at Wallajabad led Cradock to suspect for the first time the growth of some 'universal objection' among the sepoys against the new turban. At that point he was further informed by Lieutenant-Colonel James Brunton, the military auditor general, and another military officer of Seringapatam, that the new turban had caused widespread resentment among all the sepoys.[17] Brunton even attempted to impress upon Cradock the necessity for rescinding the new turban order.

Cradock, much concerned at these developments, decided to seek the government's advice on the matter. On 29 June he informed Lord William Bentinck, the governor of Madras, about the turban affair and also sent him the letter of Lieutenant-Colonel Brunton. The Madras Council in its turn indifferently considered the agitation as merely an issue of army discipline. They thought it improper to change a government resolution merely because it was threatened with defiance. The findings of the courtmartial, they believed, had proved that the new turban could not violate the religious tenets of the sepoys and therefore the agitation was based solely on prejudice.[18]

To Cradock the governor wrote: '. . . if the marks of discontentment . . . should still continue, no time should be lost in interposing the authority of the Government'.[19] But he further advised him to reassure the sepoys that their religious sanctity would be protected by the passing of a General Order as soon as possible. On 4 July 1806 the General Order was written and handed over to Cradock for immediate circulation. It explicitly stated the government's intention of non-interference in the religious faith of the sepoys.[20] Cradock, with the government's support, resolved to stand firm on the turban issue. Meanwhile, he learnt that perfect discipline had returned among the sepoys at Vellore and they had started wearing the new turban. Cradock felt so relieved that he thought it unnecessary to circulate the General Order. Thus both the executive and the military authorities in Madras failed to recognize the need and urgency to enquire into the origin and depth of sepoy discontent, and lost the opportunity to avert a tragedy. As was proved later, the agitation of the sepoys had subsided only superficially and was still smouldering inside. Soon it received additional stimulus and even a political objective. The descendants of Tipu collaborated with the sepoys at this juncture.

After the fall of Seringapatam in 1799 Tipu's twelve sons, six daughters and several hundred of their relatives and followers were kept in captivity in the former palace of the nawab of the Carnatic inside Vellore fort. They lived in pomp in the palace and were permitted to draw around them many of the Muslim nobility who had lost their fortunes and strength with the extension of British rule. The outer gates of the palace were guarded only by Indian sepoys. Generally no European officer could enter the palace without the prior permission of the princes. Lieutenant-Colonel Marriott was appointed as the paymaster stypend of the princes and discharged all the civil and political duties of the fort and the adjoining town of Vellore. While Marriot was kept thus busy the Mysore princes, who lived under relaxed vigilance in Vellore, formed a liaison with the sepoys.

Many of the twelve sons of Tipu were either minors or imbeciles. But the third, Mohiuddin, and the fourth, Muizuddin, were 'the best specimens of Tipu's descendants',[21] and were quite capable of raising the standard of their father. They carefully watched the sepoys' sentiments on the turban issue and other dress regulations and, during the temporary lull in the agitation, stepped in to exploit the rebellious spirit of the sepoys through their numerous palace attendants. The sepoys' concern for the sanctity of their religion was given a mutinous turn and the foundation of a secret but well-organized plot was laid. It was said that Alauddin, a foster brother of Prince Muizuddin, acted as a link between the sepoys and the palace. His endeavours resulted in frequent secret meetings at the sepoy barracks attended by Indian officers, sepoys and agents from the palace. The sporadic agitation of the sepoys was thus given a political purpose, namely, challenging the Company's Raj and restoration of the rule of Tipu's family in Mysore. The sepoys were made to believe that after an initial victory over the English, Prince Muizuddin would lead the rebellion with support and reinforcements arriving from different quarters of South India. The sepoys were also assured by the prince that if they could occupy and hold Vellore fort for only eight days, 10,000 men from Gorramcondah would certainly join them by that time.[22] Besides, the princes and their men also hoped apparently for popular support throughout South India.

Subadar Sheikh Adam and Jamadar Sheikh Hussain assumed the leadership of the sepoys as the first and second in command. The sepoys were initiated ceremoniously into this plot by drinking milk and taking an oath on their swords and the *Koran* to maintain absolute secrecy, to destroy all the Europeans at Vellore, and to re-establish the government of Tipu's family in Mysore.[23] Preparations were made under absolute secrecy and the scene set for a surprise attack. The mutineers originally resolved to act on 17 June 1806. But this was postponed when the leaders of the mutiny learnt that Mustafa Beg, a sepoy of the 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, had divulged some of the plans to Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes, the commanding officer.[24] Forbes, instead of making a secret enquiry into the allegations, sent for Indian officers to comment on the information. All the Indian officers solemnly affirmed their allegiance and professed innocence about any secret design against the British. They further convinced the colonel that Mustafa was a confirmed eccentric in the habit of inventing rumours. Forbes believed them so completely that he lost no time in sending Mustafa to confinement under chains.[25] Similarly Colonel Fancourt, the commanding officer at Vellore, disregarded the widow of a European official who also volunteered to give some secret information regarding the sepoys.[26] Thus, the last chance of discovering the sepoy conspiracy was carelessly lost.

Following Beg's arrest, it was decided to launch the offensive on 10 July 1806. On the night of the mutiny the garrison at Vellore fort consisted of four companies of His Majesty's 69th Regiment, six companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, and the whole of the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Regiment. The total number of sepoys at Vellore fort was approximately 1800 and there were nearly 400 Englishmen.[27] The situation at the fort seemed so normal that on the night of 9 July the European officers did not even wish to go out on their routine round and requested some Indian officers to do the job. Sheikh Cassim at once volunteered to carry out the duty on their behalf. In the palace, Prince Muizuddin requested Colonel Marriott to allow him to spend the night on 8 and 9 July in his public room and to retain his servants there. He further requested Colonel Marriott on both nights to permit his cousin, Hyder Hussain Khan, to stay with him. All these requests were granted.

As midnight struck, the moon rose above the ramparts and all the barracks appeared to be fast asleep. At 2 am on 10 July a secret message passed through the sepoy barracks that the time had come to attack the Europeans. The sepoys broke into the arsenal and armed themselves with swords and guns. Then they killed the English sentinels manning the main gateway and took possession of the magazine. Between 2 and 3 am the sepoys surrounded the European quarters and launched a coordinated attack on the European main guards and on the European barracks. They also kept up a steady fire on the quarters of the European officers to prevent them from joining the English soldiers in the barracks. Then 'volleys of musketry were poured in through every opening and guns brought up from the magazine were turned against the barracks of the 69th'.[28] The quiet and peaceful night was pierced by gunfire and shrieks. More than half the men of the 69th Regiment were either killed or wounded in the first onslaught. The quarters of the English officers were ransacked and men massacred. It is important to note here that the sepoys generally spared the women and the children.[29] Colonel Fancourt, the commanding officer of the Vellore garrison, and Lieutenant-Colonel Kerras, the commanding officer of the 23rd Regiment, were shot dead at pointblank range. Some officers, however, managed, with the assistance of their Indian servants, to hide themselves. At dawn, creeping under the shadows of the walls, they made their way to the devastated European barracks. There they rallied the survivors and forced a passage to the ramparts. In spite of injury and death they took shelter and held on under the main gateway until help arrived from outside.

Thus far, the sepoys had been successful in carrying out their programme, with the exception of letting some Europeans survive on the ramparts. The fort had been captured and a large body of Englishmen killed. At this point Prince Muizuddin agreed to assume the leadership of the sepoys and promised to double their salary in the event of a complete victory. He also handed over the flag of Tipu Sultan which the sepoys promptly hoisted on the fortress of Vellore.[30] Up till now the progress of the mutiny had been steady. But once the massacre ended and the fort was occupied, the sepoys embarked upon a course of loot and plunder, ransacking the quarters of the European officers and the pay master's office, where they found valuables. Their avarice for wealth overshadowed the higher objective and their leaders appeared to have little control over them.[31]

The news of the Vellore outbreak reached the nearest British military station at Arcot, fourteen miles away, at about 6 o'clock in the morning on 10 July. Robert Rollo Gillespie, the officer in command at Arcot, gallopped out with a squadron of the 19th Dragoons and a strong force of the 7th Cavalry. He was promptly followed by Colonel Kennedy with further reinforcements and guns.

Even as Gillespie approached Vellore fort at about 9 o'clock that morning, confusion prevailed within. The sepoys were still occupied with plundering and sharing the pillage, and a large number had started running away from the fort. The mutiny of Vellore thus began to collapse even before the English tried to retrieve their position. Gillespie found the three outer gates of the fort opened and had no difficulty in getting in. But the last inner gateway was still under the command of the sepoys. Gillespie clambered up a rope to the top of the gate and reached the other side to the survivors. Hurriedly rallying the men he found there, he led them in a final bid to capture the cannons, so long held by the sepoys inside the fort. After a pitched battle, the guns were seized and instantly turned against the mutineers. The sepoys stood firm against this setback and fought until their ammunition was exhausted.[32] At this point reinforcements from Arcot, under Colonel Kennedy, arrived with gallopper guns. The fort was recovered as fast as it had fallen. There followed horrible retribution. Some of Gillespie's men ran to kill Tipu's sons in the palace. They were however saved by Colonel Marriott, who earnestly appealed to Gillespie to spare them.

The whole affair lasted approximately eight hours. The mutiny started at 2 o'clock in the morning and by 10 am Gillespie wrote that he was 'in full possession of the fort and of the family of the race of Tipu'.[33] In the course of the mutiny and its suppression fourteen European officers and approximately 100 European soldiers were killed by the sepoys.[34] According to Gillespie's estimate, the number of casualties following the suppression of the mutiny included fourteen European officers, nine Indian officers and 168 European soldiers, besides 76 Europeans seriously injured during the mutiny.[35] Of the number of casualties among the sepoys, no official account is available and other sources are hardly unanimous. According to one account, not less than 350 sepoys died in the Vellore outbreak.[36] Another account states that: 'Eight hundred bodies were carried out of the fort, besides those who were killed outside.'[37]

Following the mutiny, on 12 July, the Government of Madras instituted a special Commission of Enquiry. To pacify the feelings of the sepoys, however, the government decided to deal with the turban question without any delay. While reconsidering the issue, the Madras government—having ratified the code as a whole without scrutinizing it in detail—was astonished to discover for the first time in the Military Code of Regulations, the section prohibiting caste marks, whiskers and earrings.[38] This discovery gave the government a new perspective on sepoy grievances. The governor, Lord William Bentinck, commented to the commander-in-chief that the sepoys' apprehension of interference in their religion was not altogether unfounded. 'Under these circumstances the clause [regarding the dress and turban] becomes a bad one and true policy and wisdom appear to require that it should be immediately abandoned.'[39] On 4 August 1806 the Commission of Enquiry submitted its report about the mutiny. On 17 July 1806, the Government of Madras declared that all orders contrary to the usages of the Indian soldiers should be rescinded. In accordance, a General Order was duly passed on 26 August, by which the new turban was withdrawn and the sepoys given permission to wear caste marks and ornaments. The same liberality was also extended to keeping whiskers.[40]

The Commission found two factors mainly responsible for the mutiny. The primary cause, according to it, was the introduction of the new turban and dress regulations for the sepoys. The religious fanaticism prevailing among the Muslim and Hindu sepoys, the Commission observed, had strongly prejudiced them against the new turban. The sepoys took it as a deliberate attempt to 'Europeanize' them. The other factor, the Commission stated, was the plot hatched by the Mysore princes. Tipu's sons were responsible for instigating the dissatisfied sepoys with the object of recapturing the throne of Mysore.[41]

Bentinck, the governor of Madras, was satisfied with the findings of the Commission, primarily because they corroborated his own opinion to a great extent. He had no doubt that the turban and the dress regulations issued by the military authorities in Madras were the real causes of the mutiny. About Tipu's sons, Bentinck held that they were not strong and active enough to engineer a revolt, but they might have participated when it did take place.[42] Hence the Vellore uprising, according to him, was essentially a mutiny of the sepoys. Similar was the view of George Barlow, the governor-general.[43] But Cradock, on the contrary, refused to accept what he called 'the inadequate findings' of the Enquiry Commission. The outbreak of Vellore, he believed, was not a simple mutiny of the sepoys but an uprising 'due to far graver causes'.[44] In Cradock's opinion, the novel changes introduced by Bentinck's government in the civil administration of Madras Presidency, especially the revenue and judicial reforms, had created general disaffection among the people. Banking on this popular dissatisfaction, the Mysore princes had engineered the mutiny by playing on the sepoys' fanaticism.

Maitland, the governor of Ceylon, went further in emphasizing the popular causes of the mutiny. According to him, the expansionist policy of Wellesley and the overthrow of the Indian rulers caused political unrest. The resultant suspicion and vengeance of the native ruling class incited the sepoys to rise in revolt. The turban and dress regulations, in Maitland's view, were nothing more than mere pretexts for the mutiny.[45] Petrie, the senior member of the Madras Council, felt that Tipu's family, the traditional enemy of the British in South India, fomented and led the mutiny at Vellore. He, however, admitted that the mutiny would not have taken place had there been no dress regulations.[46] Oakes, the next in the Council, similarly held that the Mysore princes took advantage of a situation which was rendered explosive by the introduction of the new turban.[47]

According to some views then current in England and in India, the real cause of the mutiny was the activities of the Christian missionaries and evangelical chaplains.[48] Missionary activities, it was alleged, had made the sepoys suspicious about the motive of the British government in introducing the new turban. The hardships of the sepoys, their poor pay and ill-treatment by European officers and men were considered additional causes of the mutiny.

Thus, the people at the helm of affairs in Madras Presidency held a number of factors responsible for the outbreak. These, though varied in importance, were the dress regulations, Christian missionary activities, the startling changes that Bentinck introduced in the judiciary and land administration, the material sufferings of the sepoys, the prevailing political unrest, and the plot of the family of Tipu. It should be remembered, however, that these contemporary views were seemingly influenced by personal considerations. Bentinck, for example, was eager to prove that the mutiny was mainly due to the changes effected in the dress of the sepoys. Such a conclusion would absolve him and his administration of much of the blame, leaving the responsibility with the military authorities. Similarly, Cradock was keen to shift the responsibility of his department to the executive authority by ascribing the mutiny to more general causes. It is necessary, therefore, to examine all the factors and to determine their respective merits.

Most of the sepoys, Hindus and Muslims, came from rural areas where society was generally conservative and narrowminded. It was only natural that such people would possess strong religious sentiments and scruples, as well as ignorance and superstition. The new turban and the dress regulations raised serious doubts in their minds about the sincerity of the government's secular policy. Their suspicions were not altogether ill-founded. While it was proved that the new turban had no connection with the religion of the sepoys, there is no doubt that the dress regulations interfered with the religious customs of both the Muslim and Hindu sepoys. The prohibition of whiskers went against Muslim custom; the prohibition of caste marks and earrings was opposed to Hindu practice. Though the authors of the dress regulations had no intention of hurting the religious feelings of the sepoys, they could not prevent the sepoys from reading in the new army directives a clear encroachment upon their sacred religion.[49] Most contemporary views agreed that the new turban and dress regulations constituted the primary cause of the mutiny. Sheikh Cassim, one of the ring-leaders of the mutiny, confessed later during his imprisonment that the sepoys took these directives as a religious infringement and were willing to die rather than submit to t hem.[50]

The argument loses some weight when it is known that some restrictions on the sepoys' dress had been introduced prior to March 1806. In order to maintain uniformity in dress and appearance the military authorities in Madras had, in practice in the past, opposed caste marks without arousing any hostility among the sepoys. However, they had not passed any regulations in this direction. Several changes in turban style that resembled the new one had already been experimented with, without any resistance from the sepoys.[51] It may further be observed that opposition to the new turban at Wallajabad, Vellore and Hyderabad[52] did not represent the collective sentiment of sepoys in Madras Presidency. It may again be noted that the mutiny at Vellore did not immediately follow the turban agitation. Normalcy had returned between the turban agitations at Vellore and Wallajabad in May and the outbreak of the mutiny at Vellore in July. This strongly suggests that the mutineers were not acting fanatically, on the spur of the moment. The mutiny was carefully planned and absolute secrecy was maintained with regard to its elaborate preparations.

The question about the responsibility of the Christian missionaries was first raised in India by Cradock. Soon after the mutiny he observed that the 'advancement of Christianity played a role behind the outbreak'.[53] Later, this view was taken up by some prominent persons in England. East India Company directors Francis Baring, Swaney Toone, Thomas Twining and William Elphinstone believed that commotion among the sepoys in the Carnatic had links with the activities of the European Christian missionaries.[54] Some other directors like Charles Grant and Edward Parry, the defenders of Protestant missions in India, had to battle against such opinions.[55]

From the beginning of the Company's rule, it had been a settled policy of the government 'in no way to meddle with the religions and social customs of the Indians'.[56] The missionaries entered Indian territories but received no encouragement from the British government. In November 1804 the Court of Directors advised the Government of Madras not to treat the missionaries with any special favour.[57] In May 1807 the Court of Directors made it further clear that in allowing missionaries into India they had no wish to be associated with missionary activities.[58] It is of interest to note that the number of missionaries in Madras Presidency was small, and in the Carnatic there was only one missionary at the time of the mutiny and none near Vellore.[59] There is no evidence to show that missionary propaganda had any effect on the public mind in the neighbourhood of Vellore. Neither did any responsible person, other than Cradock in Madras, mention it as a probable cause of the mutiny. Moreover, no sepoy ever spoke of missionaries trying to convert him.

Apart from the dress regulations and the new turban, the sepoys had long-suppressed grievances about their pay and conditions of service. They were generally treated very harshly by their European officers. To be a *subadar* or *jamadar* was not attractive from the point of view of power and influence, as these men were 'the downtrodden among officers'.[60] Cradock himself admitted that the European officers ill-treated sepoys and antagonized Indian officers through insolent behaviour.[61] It may be recalled that the mutineers at Vellore included not only sepoys but also Indian officers. The Court of Directors also noticed this fact and they had no doubt that the Indian officers were alienated from the British because of the humiliation they suffered at the hands of the European officers.[62] To this was added the sepoys' grievance of poor pay. In evidence given before the Enquiry Commission the sepoys attested that inadequate pay was also a factor that caused them to mutiny. The government records bore testimony to the fact that the Mysore princes attempted to rally the sepoys by promising to double the salary they received from the Company.[63] The sepoys at Wallajabad explicitly mentioned that poor pay, excessive labour and rigorous discipline were their main complaints.[64] All these factors prove the existence of general resentment among the sepoys.

Cradock, however, believed that not only the sepoys but also the people of the Presidency were discontented due to some hasty and radical reforms introduced by Bentinck's government in the judicial and revenue administration.[65] But in criticizing the government Cradock did not make any attempt to substantiate his views. The introduction of *zillah* courts reversed the previous administration of justice by the collectors of revenue and separated the judiciary from the executive. In effect, the measure offered security to the people against what Cradock himself deemed 'the oppression of Government officials.'[66] The government did not effect any drastic reform in the laws of the Presidency. In matters of land revenue Bentinck's government favoured the *rayatwari* settlement which was not entirely new in the Presidency. The *rayats* of southern India were familiar with the direct system of land revenue. Besides, the *rayatwari* system was advocated only in the newly acquired unsettled districts of Madras. The government did not interfere with the settled areas where the *zamindari* system was in existence. There was no evidence that the people of Madras were averse to these reforms or protested against any change. None of the sepoys, at any stage of agitation or whilst stating their reasons for revolting after arrest, raised these issues as reasons for the outbreak. The vague accusation of Cradock, therefore, cannot be considered as a cause of the mutiny.

Though there was no popular discontent against the government on the questions of land and judicial systems, there always existed in the Presidency elements hostile to the government. Bentinck admitted the presence of a small minority of interested persons who were disaffected.[67] Cradock maintained that a large section of the Indian aristocracy was antipathetic toward the British government.[68] The Court of Directors also believed that 'disgruntled elements' were active in Madras.[69] It is not difficult to specify the disgruntled section in the context of the political situation in South India at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Wellesley's expansionist policy resulted in the general weakening and gradual extinction of the Indian princes. Consequently, their dependents and followers became powerless and hostile to the British government. In South India these dependents and followers included the relatives of royal families and members of royal courts.

The aggrieved elements generally flocked around the family of their masters. In Vellore town alone 3000 adherents of Tipu's family had settled down.[70] The Enquiry Commission observed this fact and commented that 'the interest of Seringapatam was transplanted in the Carnatic'.[71] This large number of 'outsiders' at Vellore was always eager to foment excitement on any pretext. They were undoubtedly active in spreading the rumour that the sepoys would become Christians if they wore the new turban.[72] In this context it is also necessary to take note of the *poligars*—the turbulent Hindu and Muslim military chieftains of the southern and western parts of Madras Presidency. These people were disciplined by the British by force or deprived of their authority.[73] The humiliated *poligars* detested British rule and promised to assist Prince Muizuddin and the mutiny.

Thus, there is no doubt about the existence of anti-British elements in the Presidency. The role of Tipu's sons may be judged in this context. Contemporary sources are of a unanimous view as to the involvement of the two sons of Tipu (Muizuddin and Mohiuddin) in the mutiny. There is, however, some difference of opinion with regard to the importance of the part played by them. Numerous facts are available to prove the involvement of Tipu's sons, especially Muizuddin, in the mutiny. He organized and directed the sepoys for the outbreak through his attendants and agent, Alauddin. It was Muizuddin who attempted to obtain help for the mutineers from the *poligars* and allies in Mysore.[74] Before the mutiny, the prince publicly disclosed that he would soon be out from his captivity.[75] According to the plan of the mutiny, Muizuddin was also supposed to lead the mutineers and his favourite horse was found by Gillespie's men ready inside the palace gate.[76] Two other facts further demonstrate the involvement of Muizuddin and his associates. One was the proposed object of the mutiny, namely, the destruction of the English and the restoration of Tipu's family to the throne of Mysore. The other was the replacement of the British flag at the top of the Vellore fortress by Tipu's family flag held in Muizuddin's possession.[77] All this is sufficient to prove that Tipu's inheritors had really engineered the operation of 10 July 1806. In fact, neither Mohiuddin nor Muizuddin could be described as 'weak or foolish young men',[78] as Bentinck believed. Colonel Marriott, who knew them intimately, entertained quite a different opinion.[79] A genial, impulsive prince of the esteemed family of Tipu was, therefore, fully capable of assuming the leadership of an uprising. No direct evidence, however, could be obtained against Muizuddin or Mohiuddin to charge them with plotting against the government. They were never seen during the action nor had they attended the secret meetings and openly preached rebellion.

The uprising of Vellore was thus not a mere mutiny of the sepoys. It was carefully planned and secretly organized. Recruits to the plot were selected with great caution and every new member was required to take an oath before joining the conspiracy. The object of the mutiny definitely imparted a political character to the rebellion. The sepoys fully understood the object of the mutiny and acted toward its implementation. The efforts of the sepoy leaders and the palace attendants to keep alive the sepoys' apprehension about the new turban and dress regulations proved that they relied heavily upon the religious prejudices of the sepoys in the bid to attain their political objectives.

It was the prevalent tendency among the British officials to characterize the Vellore mutiny as an uprising of Muslim sepoys. Bentinck himself referred to the mutiny as an operation of 'numerous moormen'.[80] Cradock believed that the mutiny was the product of a Muslim conspiracy.[81] Important military officials too adopted the same view.[82] However, an examination of the evidence by the Vellore prisoners gives lie to this view. There is no doubt that the sepoys of the troubled spots of Vellore, Wallajabad and Hyderabad were predominantly Muslims. But Hindu sepoys had also joined hands with them and played a significant role during the mutiny. Alleygurry, a Hindu sepoy, was one of the ring-leaders of the Vellore mutiny. It was alleged that in the course of the mutiny he shot dead a prominent British officer, Major Armstrong.[83] Colonel Marriott, in his evidence before the Enquiry Commission, named a Rajput sepoy—Ram Singh—who incited the sentries of the palace to join the mutineers.[84] There is indication that the palace attendants made separate arrangements for the distribution of betel-leaves, sweetmeats and drinks among the Hindu and Muslim sepoys during the mutiny.[85] There is further proof that some Hindu sepoys like Muthuswamy Naik, Muthulingam and Jagannath Naik, actively participated in the massacre of the Europeans.[86]

Though all the sepoys, both Hindus and Muslims, took part in the mutiny, they were not supported by the common people. The excitement preceding and following the mutiny made little impression upon the inhabitants of the locality. The mutiny did not demonstrate any great flaw in the economic or political policies of the Company's government. It did not voice any grievance of the people or raise any great enthusiasm in favour of the Mysore princes. Even the question of religion hardly moved the populace to action. Once the sepoys were crushed, the revolt, having no mass involvement, subsided. Tension died out soon after the transfer of the Mysore princes to Calcutta, discipline was restored and daily life returned to normalcy. Only five months after the mutiny, Bentinck wrote without hesitation: '. . . the empire is safer in my opinion than ever it was in any former period'.[87]

The aim of restoring Tipu's dynasty in Mysore by destroying the British authority in Madras was politically very lofty. But an isolated uprising of the sepoys at Vellore was too insufficient a means to attain this ambitious end. A series of sepoy mutinies in all the military establishments of the Presidency, a simultaneous rising of the *poligars* and the allies of the princes, and widespread popular support for Tipu's sons might have seriously threatened British authority in the south. No such great combination or connection of interests acted behind the outbreak in Vellore.[88] The captive princes, as facts bear out, failed to make such a great move. With several hundred sepoys and vague promises of help, they desperately gambled against the consolidated might of the British in South India.

Lack of popular sympathy and its conspiratorial pseudo-religious nature were the greatest weaknesses of the mutiny. To these was added the general confusion of the ordinary sepoys who had no clear idea about the aim of the mutiny. The inevitable result was ultimate failure after initial success. Soon after the fort was captured the sepoys indulged in an unrestrained scramble for loot. The Commission of Enquiry observed that 'the eagerness with which the sepoys and men of the palace betook themselves to plunder . . . and to escape out of the fort with their booty, tended to weaken the general effect of insurrection'.[89] The taste of plunder converted these professional soldiers into an indisciplined horde and their high command completely failed to control them.

On the morning following the mutiny a good number of sepoys deserted and the remaining were in no state of mind to organize and offer resistance. In his confession, Sheikh Cassim bitterly lamented this failure. He was of the opinion that the plundering and desertion of the sepoys were the main factors that contributed to the failure of the mutiny.[90] The unsuccessful mutiny, however, left the British government groping for quite some time with a feeling of general insecurity. It was the natural outcome of a vague understanding as to the causes of the mutiny. The authorities were not sure whether it was the sepoys' financial requirement, or their ill-treatment, or their prejudice, that warranted such a conflagration. The government suspected the existence of wrongs in the administration of India but were unable to locate them clearly. They even doubted an alienation between the rulers and the ruled without being able to devise any bridge. The effect was an uncertain yet frantic search for security including the removal of such stalwarts as Bentinck and Cradock, among others, and a thorough overhauling of Madras sepoy regiments to ensure a distinct British preponderance. The panicstricken military authorities continued to suffer, in every army establishment, from the delusion of recurring sepoy mutinies.[91] Restrictions were imposed on missionary publications and preachings attacking the Indian religions. The necessity 'to protect the native inhabitants in the free and undisturbed possession of their religious opinions' was reaffirmed.[92] The administrative novelties were, for the time being, suspended and the notion that 'no man has the right to make another happy against his will'[93] was allowed to prevail. The aftermath of the mutiny thus saw the British in India more perplexed than wise.

This essay is based on material preserved in the archives of the India Office Library and the British Museum, London. Lord William Bentinck's papers were consulted in Nottingham University Library. The essay was first published in *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. XLIX, Parts I, II and III, April, August and December 1971, published by University of Kerala, Trivandrum.

Notes and References

[1] Important among the accounts are: Lieutenant Col. W.J. Wilson, *History of the Madras Army*, Vol. III, Chapter XVIII; Kaye and Malleson, *History of the Indian Mutiny, 1857–58*, Vol. I, Book II, Chapter I; J.S. Mill, *History of British India*, edited by Wilson, Vol. VII, Chapter II; H.M. Vibart, *The Military History of the Madras Engineers and Pioneers*, Vol. I, Chapter X; Arthur Stanley, 'Gillespie of Vellore', *Army Quarterly*, Vol. XX, April–July 1931.

[2] Sir G. Chesney, *Indian Policy*, p. 205.

[3] W.J. Wilson, *History of the Madras Army*, p. 165.

[4] Ibid., p. 19.

[5] Cradock's Minute, 2 October 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 510.

[6] Kaye and Malleson, *History of the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. I, p. 161.

[7] A pagoda was a Madras gold coin equal in value to three-and-a-half Madras silver rupees in the early nineteenth century.

[8] The new arrangement with respect to rank and promotions in the army in the East Indies, resolved by the Board of Control, 1796, p. 93.

[9] Report of the Enquiry Commission appointed by the Government at Vellore, 9 August 1806, *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. 42, 1861, pp. 689–93.

[10] Extract from the Code of Regulations Standing Orders, 13 March 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 307.

[11] Report of the Court of Enquiry at Vellore, 7 May 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[12] Fancourt to Cradock, 7 May 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[13] Agnew to Fancourt, 7 May 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[14] Evidence before the Native Courtmartial, *Bentinck's Memorial to the Court of Directors*, 1810, p. 56.

[15] Courtmartial verdict, 11 June 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 567.

[16] Colonel Harcourt, Commanding Officer at Wallajabad, to Agnew, 13 June 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[17] Cradock to Governor-in-Council, 29 June 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[18] Governor-in-Council to Commander-in-Chief, 4 July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[19] Bentinck to Cradock, 4 July 1806, *Bentinck Papers*.

[20] Draft of the General Order of the Government of Madras, 4 July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[21] Character sketch of the Mysore princes by Lieutenant-Colonel Marriot, April 1804, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[22] Confession of Sheikh Cassim, a leader of the mutiny at Vellore, to Colonel Forbes, 31 July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[23] Evidence of Sheikh Ahmed, a sepoy, 21 July 1806, *Proceedings of the Court of Enquiry at Vellore*, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507. Oath-taking on the *Koran* obviously applied to the Muslim sepoys. The Hindu sepoys, presumably, were required to take an oath on their religious texts. However, this cannot be confirmed.

[24] Evidence of Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes, 22 July 1806, *Proceedings of the Court of Enquiry*, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[25] Ibid., 24 July 1806.

[26] Evidence by Mrs Burke, 23 July 1806, *Proceedings of the Court of Enquiry*, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[27] A. Stanley, 'Gillespie of Vellore', p. 340.

[28] Ibid., p. 341.

[29] In all the official and non-official accounts there was no mention of a single death of a European woman or child. Possibly, to the Indian sepoys it was still very unchivalrous to kill women and children. Report of the Committee of Enquiry instituted by Gillespie, July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[30] Report of the Enquiry Commission, 9 August 1806, *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. 42, 1861, pp. 689–95.

[31] Ibid., and confession of Sheikh Cassim to Colonel Forbes.

[32] Gillespie to Bentinck, 11 July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[33] Gillespie's private letter preserved in the *War Office Records*. Quoted in A. Stanley, 'Gillespie of Vellore', p. 342.

[34] Kaye and Malleson, *History of the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. I, p. 168.

[35] Gillespie to Bentinck, 11 July 1806. Wilson, in his book *History of the Madras Army*, Vol. III, p. 187, gave the following number as dead: nine officers and 90 men of the 69th Regiment and fifteen soldiers—who died subsequently due to their wounds.

[36] Wilson, *History of the Madras Army*, Vol. III, p. 186.

[37] H.M. Vibart, *The Military History of the Madras Engineers and Pioneers*, Vol. I, p. 409.

[38] *Bentinck's Memorial*, 1810, p. 9.

[39] Bentinck to Cradock, 4 July 1806.

[40] Publication of the General Order by the Government, 26 August 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 509.

[41] Report of the Enquiry Commission, 9 August 1806, *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. 42, 1861, pp. 689–93.

[42] Bentinck's Minute, 5 September 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 510.

[43] Barlow's Minute, 11 August 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 509.

[44] Cradock's Minute, 21 August 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[45] Maitland to Minto, 21 September 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 510.

[46] Oake's Minute, 24 August 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 510.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Charles Grant to Bentinck, 17 April 1807, *Bentinck Papers*.

[49] Marriott's evidence before the Enquiry Commission, 25 July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[50] Confession of Sheikh Cassim, 31 July 1806.

[51] Cradock's Minute, 2 October 1806.

[52] Corresponding with the Vellore uprising on 11 July 1806, the sepoys at Hyderabad rebelled against the new turban. The commotion was promptly tackled by the commanding officer of Hyderabad, Colonel Montressor, who suspended the turban order without delay.

[53] Minute of Commander-in-Chief, 25 July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[54] C.H. Philips, *East India Company 1785–1834*, p. 160.

[55] A. Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India*, pp. 241–45.

[56] C.H. Philips, *East India Company*, p. 158.

[57] Letter from the Court of Directors to the Government of Madras, 6 November 1804, *Madras Despatches*, Vol. II.

[58] *Madras Despatches*, Vol. 40, 29 May 1807.

[59] Embree, *Charles Grant and the British Rule in India*, p. 241.

[60] Bentinck to Minto, 1 October 1806, *Bentinck Papers*.

[61] Cradock Minute, 2 October 1806.

[62] *Madras Despatches*, Vol. 40, 29 May 1807.

[63] Confession of Havildar Eusuf Khan, 13 August 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[64] Adjutant-General's Report, 27 July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[65] In the judicial administration of Madras, Bentinck's government introduced *zillah* courts in 1806 to separate the judiciary from the hands of the revenue officers. The judicial power of the governor-in-council was also separated and vested in an experienced judge. In revenue administration Bentinck advocated the introduction of *rayatwari* settlement by which the revenue was to be collected directly from the *rayats* without any intermediary like the *zamindar*. This system was introduced for land settlement of vast territories of Madras Presidency acquired between 1799 and 1805.

[66] Cradock's Minute, 21 September 1806 and 2 October 1806.

[67] Bentinck to Minto, 1 October 1806, *Bentinck Papers*.

[68] Cradock's Minute, 2 October 1806.

[69] *Madras Despatches*, Vol. 40, 29 May 1807.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Report of Enquiry Commission, 9 August 1806, *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. 42, 1861, p. 690.

[72] Evidence of Allegury sepoys before the Court of Enquiry instituted by Gillespie, 16 July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[73] *Madras Despatches*, Vol. 40, 29 May 1807.

[74] Confession of Sheikh Cassim, 31 July 1806.

[75] Evidence of Syed Churadmund Ally, former servant of Mysore government, 23 July 1806. *Proceedings of Enquiry Commission, Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[76] Evidence of Colonel Marriott, 25 July 1806, *Proceedings of Enquiry Commission, Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[77] Ibid.

[78] *Bentinck's Memorial to the Court of Directors*, 1810, p. 14.

[79] 'Character Sketch of the Mysore Princes' by Lieutenant Colonel Marriott, April 1804, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[80] Bentinck to Minto, 20 October 1806.

[81] Cradock's Minute, 2 October 1806.

[82] Petition of the Military Officers to the Governor, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[83] Evidence of Colonel Forbes, Commanding Officer, 1 Batt. 1 Ret., 22 July 1806, *Proceedings of the Enquiry Commission, Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[84] Evidence of Colonel Marriott, 3 July 1806, *Proceedings of the Enquiry Commission, Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508.

[85] Evidence of Moorty, 13 July 1806, *Proceedings of the Court of Enquiry* instituted by Gillespie, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 507.

[86] Confession of Havildar Eusuf Khan, 10 August 1806. Campbell, Commanding Officer of Trichinopoly to Government of Madras, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 508, 10 August 1806.

[87] Bentinck to Maitland, 8 December 1806.

[88] Bentinck to Grenville, 1 December 1806.

[89] Report of the Enquiry Commission, 9 August 1806, *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. 42, 1861, p. 692.

[90] Confession of Sheikh Cassim, 31 July 1806, *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Vol. 509.

[91] The hue and cry over the sepoys' dispositions at Nandidroog, near Bangalore, and at Palamcottah in Tinnevelly in 1807, were typical examples of infectious British fears.

[92] C.H. Philips, *East India Company*, p. 169.

[93] Famous epigram of Robert Dundas, President, Board of Control, 1807, cited in ibid.

Defying Death

Nationalist Revolutionism in India

1897–1938

Amit Kumar Gupta

They were heroes
They used to raise storms in the heavens
Their stories still sound thrilling
Haloed by the blood of executed alien rulers
Guns, bullets and a burst of bombs.
—From Sukanta Bhattacharya's *Janotar Mukhe*

Tyrannically governed people sometimes feel compelled, once they reach the end of their tether, to hit back at their tormentors through violent means. Resorting to violence—whether as a primary mode of resistance or as a device to counter authoritarian excesses—was rather common on the part of the colonized against colonialist oppression. That the case of India under colonialism could not have been very different and that Indians conformed—more or less—to the general trend, despite all the euphoric din over their achievements in 'non-violence' and 'negotiations', seems evident from the activities of the national revolutionists among them. Although the Indian people had a tradition of using arms against what they perceived to be the unjust and injustice, the rebellious nationalists' armed confrontations with the British Raj commenced only in the early years of the twentieth century—the point of its imperialist high noon in India.

First Phase 1897–1910

The footsteps of nationalist revolutionism in India were first heard in Maharashtra on 22 June 1897 when, following an outbreak of plague in Pune, the British plague commissioner (Mr Rand) and another civilian (Mr Ayrst) were murdered by the Chapekar brothers and their associates. Apparently the killings were designed as a terrorizing counter-action against the reign of terror the British unleashed in the name of fighting the epidemic through atrocities over quarantines, segregation camps and plague hospitals, and by burning properties, violating private domains and committing outrages on women. The arrest, trial and hanging of the Chapekar brothers in 1898 did not go in vain, and their line of action seems to have impressed the Mitra Mela—the group that was led by V.D. Savarkar in 1900 in Nasik—which in 1904 turned into Abhinava Bharat. Two years earlier, in far-off Bengal, a barrister (Pramatha Nath Mitra) under the hypnosis of the cult of European secret societies, a local physical culture enthusiast (Satish Bose) in touch with Sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda's famed Irish disciple, and an expatriate (Jatindranath Banerji) in the service of the Baroda state army, came together to establish the Calcutta Anushilan Samiti—the progenitor of the two main groups of revolutionists in Bengal, namely, Anushilan and Jugantar. The appearance of clandestine groups in the eastern and western parts of India at about the same time could not have been altogether unconnected. And it was not actually so because of their drawing sustenance from the same 'extremist' politics of the Indian National Congress, as opposed to its 'moderate' one. They received in Maharashtra the indirect encouragement of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, whose successful concealment of revolutionist connections did not spare him from British suspicion of his having had a hand in the Chapekar plot.

So far as Bengal was concerned, Aurobindo Ghose not only encouraged secret societies directly but also played a pivotal role in organizing them. It was Aurobindo who, during his stay in Baroda, met Jatindranath Banerji and persuaded him to go to Calcutta in 1902 for setting up the first secret group there. Both Banerji and Savarkar had read Thomas Frost's book, *The Secret Societies of European Revolution, 1776–1876*, in two volumes (London, 1876), and they were struck by the hierarchical framework of the Russian nihilists, in which the rank-and-file members knew only those in the same groups, and the members of the directing committee were known exclusively, and only, to one another. The leaders of the secret societies in Bengal and Maharashtra tried to set up their own organizations on nihilistic lines, and also to adopt other practices enumerated by Frost as characteristics of secret societies, such as oaths of secrecy (to be taken by touching a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* and, additionally in Bengal, in front of the goddess of strength, Kali) and rituals of initiation (to be observed symbolically by shedding drops of one's blood or by writing one's name in blood, as well as by disengaging oneself from familial and emotional involvements). Even some kind of a nihilist and anarchist link seemed to have developed abroad later on when Hemchandra Das (Kanungo) of Bengal and P.M. Bapat of Maharashtra managed, in Paris in 1907, to contact a few of the Russian revolutionaries who emigrated to France after the revolution of 1905. Both were trained by *émigré* Russians in the use of explosives and on their return to India in December 1908, Hemchandra succeeded in producing powerful bombs.

Coincidentally, further, there appears to be a resemblance between the Russian anarchical method of acquiring money through armed robbery or 'expropriations' and the Indian revolutionists resorting, for the same purpose, to 'political dacoities'. Robbery being a common fund-raising tactic employed for clandestine resistance against oppressive regimes, the Indian case was not very different and the 'dacoities' no less ingenious. These Russian linkages—the real and the alleged—soon led to the Indian revolutionists being branded frequently as 'anarchists', especially in governmental circles, though in their straightforward reliance on anti-imperialistic, romantic and democratic nationalism, they had very little to do with European anarchism as a theoretical and political movement. The importation of a bomb-making technique from Russia via Paris was also not wholly a novelty, since the Bengali revolutionists had already been experimenting with explosives from 1906 on their own, and Ullaskar Dutt had in fact produced high-intensity bombs in Calcutta before Hemchandra returned from Paris.

Earlier than Paris, however, it was London—the den of the British lion—that became the rendezvous of the national revolutionists, not only from Bengal and Maharashtra, but also from other parts of India, and notably from Punjab. Shyamaji Krishnavarma, a Cambridge-educated barrister, who served as dewan of a number of princely states in western India, settled down in England in 1897. In 1905 he founded the India Home Rule Society, started a journal—*Indian Sociologist*, established India House—a centre for Indian students, and introduced a scholarship scheme to further patriotic Indians' study abroad. India House soon became the meeting-point of many revolutionist luminaries like V.D. Savarkar, P.M. Bapat, Virendranath Chatto-padhyaya, Lala Hardayal, Bhai Paramanand, Madanlal Dhingra, V.V.S. Aiyar and the Paris-based Madame Cama and S.R. Rana.

In 1907, Madame Cama and S.R. Rana attended the International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart, where Cama delivered her impassioned speech on behalf of the 'dumb millions' of India, moved a resolution in favour of Indian independence and unfurled an Indian flag. It was from London that Savarkar continued with the Abhinava Bharat activities at Nasik and tried to smuggle in arms for the use of his counterparts there. The sudden revelation of Abhinava Bharat's functioning led to the institution of the Nasik Conspiracy Case resulting, in June 1909, in severe punishments for the accused, including life imprisonment for Savarkar's elder brother, Ganesh Savarkar. The revolutionists retaliated against British severity by assassinating in India the collector of Nasik, Jackson, and in England the India Office civilian, Sir Curzon Wyllie, the implanter of informers among Indian students in England. Wyllie was shot dead in London on 1 July 1909 by Madanlal Dhingra, who went to the scaffold on 17 August 1909 declaring that he was ever ready to die for his motherland's deliverance: '. . . may I be reborn of the same mother, and may I re-die in the same sacred cause. . .'. Such easy overcoming of death and transmigrationary commitment substantially echoed what a street-singer in Bengal ascribed to Kshudiram Bose, who was sent to the gallows a year earlier, on 11 August 1908:

> *Hasi hasi porbo fansi*
> *Dekhbe jagatbasi,*
> *Ekbar biday de ma*
> *Ghure asi.*
> (Smilingly I will put on the noose around my neck, and the world will view it; Mother, send me off, I shall return after the wanderings.)

Despite the changes that crept in later on, the Indian revolutionists' trading in death—and the high price they paid for it—seems to have been dominated, for about a decade or more, by Kshudiram's popularly held approach towards it. Kshudiram, or numerous Kshudirams, to be more correct, whirled up about the end of the tornado-like Swadeshi movement that blew over Bengal between 1905 and 1908. The movement, occasioned by the Curzonian partition of Bengal, assumed such serious proportions by 1906 that the panicky British authorities tried to contain it through use of force and acts of racial arrogance. The breaking up of the anti-partition meetings, the *lathi* charges on the agitationists, the fining and the whipping, the arrest and ill-treatment of their leaders, generated intense public indignation against the government. The year 1906 was also the point when Barindra Kumar Ghose (the younger brother of Aurobindo) managed to scoop out of the Anushilan Samiti in Calcutta a militant group of his own, and started the weekly *Jugantar* with the help of Bhupendranath Datta (the younger brother of Swami Vivekananda) and others.

The incentive for all this came apparently from Aurobindo, who had left Baroda by the middle of 1906 to settle down in Calcutta and to take part in the Swadeshi movement in the open and the newly-born secret society in private. While *Jugantar* spat fire on the government and summoned the youth to rise ('Without blood, O patriots! Will the country awake?'), the group went about setting up its centre and a bomb-making factory at a garden house in the Maniktala area of Calcutta. Those in Jugantar also tried to carry out a few 'actions', including an abortive attempt on the life of the unpopular east Bengal lieutenant-governor, Bramfylde Fuller. They planned simultaneously to assassinate the chief presidency magistrate in Calcutta, Kingsford, who was notorious for his high-handed and torturous ways of dealing with the cases of the Swadeshi agitationists. Kingsford was transferred to Muzaffarpur soon after the discovery of a parcel bomb in his mail. The Jugantar group deputed Kshudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki, two of its young activists, to carry out Kingsford's killing, and they hurled a bomb at a carriage on 30 April 1908 presuming it to be Kingsford's. But in reality the carriage belonged to one Mr Pringle Kennedy, and the explosion killed his wife and daughter. While on the run, Prafulla shot himself to avoid capture by the police, and the teenaged Kshudiram was arrested, tried and hanged in Muzaffarpur to become the legendary prodigal son.

The Muzaffarpur blast led the government to discover its source in the Maniktala garden house, and consequently to the arrest of Barindra Kumar Ghose and all his associates in the first instance, and then of Aurobindo and some others a few days later. They were tried in the Alipore Bomb Case and awarded, in February 1910, various terms of imprisonment, including transportations for life. Aurobindo was ably defended by C.R. Das (*Deshbandhu* later on) and, as the charges against him could not be proved, he was released. Two others (Kanailal Datta and Satyendranath Basu) who, during the trial, killed the approver in the case within the prison, were hanged separately. With Aurobindo's escape on a spiritual odyssey to Pondicherry via Chandernagore, and the Bomb Case prisoners' arrival on the Andamans in the main to serve their respective sentences, the initial outburst of nationalist revolutionism in Bengal came abruptly to a halt in 1910. So was the case the same year in two other arenas: in Maharashtra where Savarkar was brought to trial in December 1910, following his arrest in London, and thereafter transported for life to the Andamans; and in England where, in the wake of Dhingra's execution and under the pressure of British surveillance, the leading figures at India House had to leave London for Paris, Geneva and Berlin.

During their adventures in Europe, the Indian national revolutionists had often been exposed to contacts with radical European sympathizers of the colonized people and laid open to the fall-out of their radiation in matters of outlook, at least in the beginning, if not of ideology. They were known to have developed between 1906 and 1910 some uncertain linkages with the British socialist, H.M. Hyndman; the French socialists, Jean Jaures and Jean Longuet; the Russian social democrat, Michael Pavlovich; and the Russian anarchist, Nicholas Sofronski. It is possible that these linkages had in a certain way encouraged them to restrain their fondness for the romanticized Hindu past, glorify the Hindu–Muslim unity during the revolt of 1857 by laying stress on the 'common consent of Hindus and Mahommedans'[1] and realize the connection their own endeavours had with the struggles of the colonized people the world over—the possibility of Dhingra's pistol shot being heard 'by the Irish coterie in his forlorn hut, by the Egyptian *fellah* in the field, by the Zulu labourer in the dark mine. . . .'[2] However, neither the perspective of a worldwide anti-colonial movement nor the urgency of forming an armed Hindu–Muslim joint front against the British had clearly been projected by their counterparts within pre-First World War India. Revolutionism of the nationalist variety was practised in the main by those inside the country who belonged to the educated middle class of the upper-caste Hindu society. The sustenance they drew from Hinduism, and the use they made of its rituals and idioms, did not encourage non-Hindus and members of the lower castes to join them. Nevertheless, since the national revolutionists themselves were not overtly hostile to other religionists, the benefits of their *purna* *swaraj* or complete independence—the nationalist demand which they were perhaps the first to raise in India—had presumably been meant for the enjoyment of all, irrespective of caste and creed. More than religiosity, however, the *purna swaraj* concept's lack of social content stood in the way of attracting the masses to its cause. As a result, the revolutionists who espoused it remained mythical heroic figures to their own people, whose self-sacrifices must always be revered and valour admired, but only from a certain distance.

Second Phase 1911–18

Although hectic secret revolutionist activity was resumed with the onset of the First World War, its recrudescence could be observed in advance both inside India and outside. Within the country, secret societies were springing up afresh at various centres in Benares and Dehradun in the United Provinces at the initiative of persons like Sachindranath Sanyal and Rashbehari Bose, respectively; in Punjab under the leadership of Ajit Singh (Bhagat Singh's uncle) and his Anjuman-i-Mohibban-i-Watan on the one hand, and the militants of the Arya group (founded by Lala Lajpat Rai and Hansraj), like Bhai Paramanand and Hardayal, on the other; in Dacca of eastern Bengal under the Anushilan Samiti that had spread branches at the district level; in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal through the exertions of Jatindranath Mukherji (or Bagha Jatin) and his Jugantar group; and in Tirunelveli of Madras Presidency at the instance of the Bharat Mata Association with which the famous poet Subramania Bharati was associated.

It was in Tirunelveli that the notorious collector of the district, William Ashe, was shot dead in June 1911. A series of attacks on officials and police agents took place in Bengal, coupled with a fairly large number of 'political dacoities'. Rashbehari, who was in close touch with fellow revolutionists in Calcutta and Chandernagore as well as in Benares, organized on 23 December 1912 a daring bomb attack on the viceroy, Lord Hardinge, in Delhi. The viceroy, in the process of officially entering the new capital of India, was injured near the clock tower at Chandni Chowk, but managed miraculously to survive. Those involved in the occurrence—barring Rashbehari, of course—namely, Awadhbehari, Amir Chand, Bal Mukund and Basanta Kumar Biswas, were apprehended later in connection with another 'action', tried in the Delhi Conspiracy Case and eventually hanged.

Outside India, the nationalist rebels' propagation of their cause from Paris, Geneva and Berlin was in full blast through organs like *Indian Sociologist, Bande Mataram* and *Talvar*. Their search for sympathetic foreign contacts, bids for procuring arms and attempts at obtaining material assistance also continued unabated. But what had proved to be of greater significance than the European exploits at this point was the rapid unfolding of a movement of migrant Indians on the other side of the Atlantic—in British Columbia and the Pacific coast of the United States of America. There had already gathered a sizeable number of Indian migrants consisting mostly of Sikh traders and workers, who continued to suffer racial discrimination without even a semblance of protection from the British Indian government. Having settled down in far-off lands, and maintaining links with their places of origin, these patriotic Indians were also keen to ameliorate conditions in India. Out of this concern was born a movement in San Francisco in 1913, which Sohan Singh Bhakna led, and which assumed the name of its famous weekly—*Ghadar* (Revolution). It was also in 1913 that Hardayal arrived in the United States from Paris, joined hands in building the movement and became its most impressive leader. The objectives of the Ghadarites were made clear in the very first issue of *Ghadar*: 'What is our name? The Ghadar. In what does our work consist? In bringing about a rising. Where will this rising break out? In India. When will it break? In a few years.'

Like *Ghadar*, another revolutionist organ, *Free Hindustan*, was being brought out by Taraknath Das from Vancouver, Canada—another region that drew Indian immigrants. In 1914, a good number of aspiring Punjabi Sikh and Muslim immigrants chartered a Japanese ship, *Komagata Maru*, for their journey to Canada. The ship was turned back from Vancouver by the Canadian immigration authorities, and approached Calcutta port on its return. Its passengers were forced to disembark at Budge Budge, and in the mélée the police shot dead twenty of them. The massacre resulted in as much tension in Bengal as in North India, especially Punjab, and among the immigrants in North America. It also created an urgency about giving effect to the grand scheme of concerted action that revolutionists in all these three locales were dreaming about.

The nationalist revolutionist grand scheme was contemplated in the backdrop of an impending First World War in which Britain would be too preoccupied with its enemies to maintain its usual vigilance over the colonies. The war, therefore, offered the colonized people a rare opportunity to raise their heads and challenge the colonialist hold over them, provided, of course, they were able to induct support from outside—preferably from Britain's opponents. This line of thinking among the national revolutionists in 1914 was as prevalent in India as in Ireland, where they were fighting their own bitter battle against British domination. Both apparently were moving in the same direction without much connection with each other. The Irelanders (belonging to the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Citizens' Army), incidentally, enjoyed one salient advantage: they openly controlled well-drilled and illegally armed Irish volunteers who could act as a militia in an insurrection. Such a volunteer corps did not exist in India, and the revolutionists could not organize it overnight without causing strong suspicion. They were, therefore, left with the task of surreptitiously enlisting the support of the Indian men in the British–Indian army, and the sepoys' role in the great revolt of 1857 appeared to them to be a model well worth following. The design for a concerted armed rising in India during the war, nevertheless, does not seem to have been clearly planned nor its details adequately worked out. Vagueness prevailed about the assistance sought from foreign powers, the manner of its rendering and receipt in India, as well as the method of mobilizing the sepoys and the mechanism for coordinating different groups of revolutionists within the country and abroad. The vital question of garnering support from various segments of society did not arise at all, for the revolutionist heroes' orientation was to take the popularity of their heroic acts for granted.

The concerted action plan of 1914 had three components: first, negotiations with opponents of the British, mainly Germany but also Turkey, for obtaining financial and military assistance; second, endeavours to mobilize the sepoys at the army centres in the northern and eastern regions; and third, arrangements for taking the delivery of foreign arms on the eastern coast and their distribution all over the country. To take charge of these components, the revolutionists from abroad—the Ghadarites—opted to return to India. Revolutionists in Bengal opted to receive foreign arms on the Orissa coast, and those in the United Provinces (UP) opted to coordinate all these enterprises. Rashbehari Bose, who moved constantly in Punjab, the UP and Bengal, turned out to be the most effective coordinator, and he was ably supported in his work by the Maharashtrian Ghadarite, Vishnu Ganesh

Pingle, who returned from the United States in November 1914, as well as Sachindranath Sanyal, who operated from Benares. Jatindranath Mukherji was in command of affairs in Bengal, gearing up the organization there for a rising and preparing for the receipt of foreign assistance. The assistance—wholly from the Germans—was to come in shipments from their locations in the Far East and Southeast Asia, through Shanghai, Batavia and Bangkok. The *modus operandus* was decided in discussions between the German foreign office (including Zimmerman, Weisendonk and Oppenheim) and the Indian national revolutionists (including Virendranath Chattopadhyay, Champakaraman Pillai, Hardayal, Bhupendranath Datta, Barkatullah and others) towards the end of 1914. The Indians, who originally functioned as the Berlin–India Committee and later in 1915 as the Indian Independence Committee, apparently agreed to repay the Germans following India's attainment of independence, for all their assistance, and to give them concessions of trade in India. The Berlin collaboration also resulted in an Indo–German–Turkish mission for stirring up the tribes along the Indo–Iranian border against the British, and in the setting up in Kabul of a 'Provisional Government of Free India' under Raja Mahendra Pratap, Barkatullah and Obeidullah Sindhi, in December 1915.

Meanwhile, the Ghadarites started pouring into Punjab in large numbers (about 8000) and despite their being rounded up on suspicion by the police and detained, many of them managed to disperse in different parts of Punjab and the Frontier Province. They started contacting the sepoys in Lahore, Rawalpindi and Ferozepur garrisons, and Sachindranath tried the same in Benares and Danapur, followed by Jatindranath at Fort William in Calcutta. The Calcutta group had already started its search for arms, and it snatched away in August 1914 a substantial chunk from the armament-dealing Rodda Company's consignment of guns and ammunitions. It had also stepped up 'political dacoities' for raising funds, as had the Punjab revolutionists in their own areas. The coordinators of all the proceedings, namely, Rashbehari, Pingle and Sachindranath, were running feverishly from one revolutionist centre to another in Lahore, Amritsar, Allahabad, Benares and Calcutta, procuring explosives, importing bomb-makers from Bengal and exchanging information. Eventually, however, synchronization between the day planned for the rising in the north (21 February 1915) and the time of the German arms delivery in the east could not be achieved, primarily because the shipment of arms had not actually been undertaken in early 1915. The shipment never reached India, in spite of Jatindranath awaiting its arrival as late as September 1915, and his sending emissaries like Narendranath Bhattacharya (later M.N. Roy) in April 1915, and Phanindra Chakravarty, Bhupati Majumdar, Abani Mukherjee, etc. It was learnt subsequently that the ships carrying the shipment (the *Annie Laurson* and the *Henry S*) bungled in passing it over to another ship (the *Maverick*) that was scheduled to leave for India, and the arms finally fell into American hands.

Apart from this fiasco, the proposed rising of 1915 faced another debacle when the plans were betrayed at the last moment to the British authorities. A large number of sepoys from the 12th Cavalry, 128th Pioneers, 23rd Regiment and 7th Rajputs were promptly arrested, and about twenty of them were summarily executed. The Ghadarites were also rounded up in many places, put on trial and punished by incarceration and even hanging. Altogether about forty-six Ghadarites were hanged, 64 transported for life and many others sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. In far-flung Singapore, where the Ghadarites could engineer a mutiny—having infiltrated the Punjabi Muslim 50th Light Infantry and 36th Sikh Battalion in February 1915—thirty-seven sepoys faced execution and forty-one transportation for life. Pingle and young Kartar Singh made a last-ditch attempt at a rising of the sepoys of the 12th Cavalry Regiment at Meerut, which ended in their arrest in March 1915 and eventual hanging. Sachindranath was also arrested in Benares and, following a trial along with his associates, sentenced to transportation for life. Rashbehari, however, succeeded in evading arrest, leaving Lahore and thereafter the country, incognito for Japan in May 1915. Only Jatindranath—the incorrigible optimist—continued in his quest for a rising and still awaited in Balasore the arrival of German arms. He was followed there by a strong contingent of armed policemen and died valiantly in a gun battle near the Burha Balang on 15 September 1915. With Jatindranath's death—for all practical purposes—came to an end the revolutionist grand design of enacting in 1915 a revised version of the great revolt of 1857. What remained of it was the continued existence of the Berlin or the Indian Independence Committee in Europe, and murmurings in America—after the US entry into the war—over the trials of the Indian revolutionists in Chicago and San Francisco in 1917–18.

Such extravagant and audacious planning for a concerted armed rising against British colonial rule in 1915, and that too, by preparing to draw into its scope the vast stretch from Peshawar to Balasore, was in itself an astonishing feat by any nationalist revolutionist standard. Since the plan miscarried, such audacity might appear melodramatic, even quixotic, had its executants—the well-known and the least known—not acted as fearlessly and purposively as they did. This was clearly borne out by the parley in Berlin, the Ghadarite exodus from North America, the contact with the sepoys, the drive for funds, bombs and arms, the maintenance of a secret line of communications and, above all, by the execution of about one hundred and imprisonment of several hundreds. The loss and persecution of human lives were greater in the still-born rising in India in 1915 than in the rising that actually took place a year later in Ireland—where the German arms shipment aboard the *Aud* had been prevented from landing by the British. Of course, the magnitude of operations planned in Ireland covered less territory compared to what the Indians had aimed to, and this fact indicated the strength of the Indian perception rather than its weakness. The national revolutionists in India had also advanced, between 1911 and 1918, towards closer inter-communal cooperation among themselves and towards a somewhat favourable appreciation of the future roles of peasants, artisans and other commoners, from whose ranks emerged the Ghadarites and the sepoys. But their ideological standing still continued to be more or less the same, the social content yet to figure in it, and their defiance of death still remained Kshudiramian and Dhingraite in approach. Characteristic was teenaged Kartar Singh's ringing announcement from the gallows on 17 November 1915: 'If I had to live more lives than one, I would sacrifice each of them for my country's sake.'

Third Phase 1919–38

A lull seemed to have set in among the nationalist revolutionists between 1919 and 1922, coinciding with the unfolding of a mass upsurge against British colonial rule. The general unrest of the people during the First World War and soon thereafter, over the scarcity of essential commodities, the spiralling prices, the fall in real incomes, the pressure of land-taxes and loans, and the insensitivity of a high-handed government, had already created an explosive situation. It was further heightened when the common man and woman in India vaguely heard about a revolution in Russia and took heart from the poor people's success against the zarist tyranny. The flashpoint, however, was reached when Gandhiji's call for the attainment of *swaraj* (self-rule) through the strategy of *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance to injustice) swayed the masses, and resulted in the countrywide Non-Cooperation movement (December 1920–February 1922).

The staggering scale of popular participation in the movement —the likes of which had not been witnessed hitherto in India—greatly impressed all patriotic Indians, including the nationalist rebels. They were also struck, like everyone else at that delirious point, by the messianic promise of '*swaraj* within one year'—an assurance Gandhiji held out to the public in the *Young India* issue of 22 September 1920. Besides, following their setbacks during previous years, the national revolutionists were left with little alternative but to give Gandhiji a free hand, and some of them even formally agreed at the Nagpur Congress (December 1920) to his request for cessation of all violent acts for some time. However, when the promised *swaraj* did not materialize within one year, and the galloping Non-Cooperation movement had suddenly to be harnessed and withdrawn in February 1922, subsequent to the violent outburst of Chauri Chaura, the morale of the people touched rock-bottom as dramatically, perhaps, as it had peaked.

In the bleak and agonizing aftermath of the Non-Cooperation movement, especially after Gandhiji's arrest in March 1922, the non-cooperators and their supporters did not really know what to do with themselves. As is natural in such circumstances, many of them returned to their earlier loyalties—the elite nationalists to legislative politics, the reformist agitators to Gandhian constructive works, the staunch Hindus and Muslims to their respective community folds, and the local dignitaries to their class and caste niches. The national revolutionists similarly resumed experimentation with violent means, a search for arms, dacoities for funds and absconding to avoid arrests.

Since they had already experienced unprecedented popular upheaval during the Non-Cooperation movement and had seen for themselves the immense strength that the masses could thrust into it, the revolutionists were no longer in a position to think about themselves in isolation, or perceive a life-and-death confrontation with colonialism without the active support of the Indian people. Once the ideas of popular support for, and popular participation in, anti-colonial national resistance entered their consciousness, they had to refashion their own political role and redesign their immediate tasks. Committed to armed struggle and prepared for the taking and giving of lives, they would still form a band of individual heroes, or constitute the prophetic shock minority to be followed by the vast majority. More importantly, however, they would not like the vast majority to lapse any further into silence or remain mute after coming to life. Rather, they wanted it to be aroused and activated—as Gandhiji seemed to have done—but on lines diametrically opposed to his, and more consistently than what he spasmodically achieved.

The national revolutionists of the post-Non-Cooperation days wished to work toward this through selective acts of aggression, which by themselves would be the most powerful modes of public propaganda and would be performed in such a manner that these appeared to be exactly so (as they usually do in a guerilla movement). When a continually aroused populace would take to rising—whenever it was possible, with whomsoever as the leader—the revolutionists must come to the forefront and act as its armed hands. If one accepted popular participation as the basis of anti-colonial struggle, especially in the days of Leninist reverberations, he or she had to think in terms of giving it an emancipatory character. Emancipation of a people being dependent on the building up of an egalitarian society, its exponents tended to move towards socialist thought and movements. This was what many national revolutionists felt compelled to do even at that time, and very explicitly so much later on, and some of those who thought differently had eventually to tread the Gandhian path. All these changes in perception, however, could not have taken place overnight, and a kind of neo-nationalist revolutionism naturally took several years to crystallize in the mid-1920s.

Meanwhile, the revolutionists continued their activities on stereotyped lines, by reorganizing their secret societies, setting up new bomb-making factories, undertaking political dacoities and attempts on the lives of marked individuals. A New Violence Party was formed in Bengal in 1923, by the younger elements from both Anushilan and Jugantar, who tried to build up their centres in Assam and Bihar and establish links with activists in the United Provinces (UP) and Punjab. By 1924 the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) came into existence in the UP, with branches in Benares, Allahabad, Kanpur, Lucknow, Shahjahanpur, Saharanpur and Agra. Bomb-making was carried out from the Dakshineswar and Shovabazar hideouts in Calcutta —where the members of the UP group also received training in the use of explosives. In November 1925 the police succeeded in locating these places, capturing some of the leading rebels and putting them on trial in the Dakshineswar Bomb Case. Another bomb factory, which functioned in Deoghar, Bihar, was discovered by the authorities later, in October 1927. There were political dacoities galore, notably the looting of Sankharitola post office in Calcutta in August 1923, the snatching away of the railway fund near the Pahartali workshop in Chittagong in December 1923, a number of robberies in the UP by HRA activists between November 1924 and May 1925, and the most remarkable of them all—the daring train hold-up near Kakori, about fourteen miles away from Lucknow—on 9 August 1925.

The assassination attempts were made mostly in Bengal where Gopinath Saha shot dead Ernest Day on 12 January 1924, mistaking him for Charles Tegart, the foremost among the counter-revolutionist British officials in Calcutta. Other attempts included the killing of a police officer in Chittagong's Paltan ground in May 1924, and the murder of a senior intelligence officer in Alipore Central Jail, Calcutta, in May 1926. Of these only two, namely, Gopinath's trial and the Kakori train robbery case, attracted some public attention and, therefore, aroused the public. Gopinath's straightforward confession of the killing, his expressing sorrow for the victim, his impatience with the slow court proceedings and his belief in the inspirational consequence of martyrdom, left a clear mark on the popular mind. Similar were the effects of the Kakori case where the railway fund was robbed from a train, and a passenger killed by accident. Most HRA stalwarts were rounded up later in connection with this incident, except the ever-elusive Chandrasekhar Azad, and brought under trial for their roles in various 'actions' in the UP, culminating at Kakori. The case continued for more than a year in a court in Lucknow and its proceedings were reported in the city newspapers, particularly in the *Pratap*, by its famous editor, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi himself. The press coverage and the regular court appearances of the accused in fetters, singing patriotic songs and raising slogans, created a certain commotion all over the province and beyond.

The outcome of Gopinath Saha's trial in Calcutta, and that of the UP revolutionists in Lucknow, ran along expected lines, culminating in executions and long-term imprisonments. While Gopinath was hanged in March 1924, the martyrs of the HRA—Ram Prasad Bismil, Rajendranath Lahiri, Ashfaqullah and Thakur Roshan Singh—were sent to the gallows in December 1927. Faced with death, they remained as fearless as their predecessors, though their overall approach towards death appeared to be different from that of Kshudiram, Dhingra and Kartar Singh. They had a carefree nonchalant way of treating death: Gopinath reportedly put on five pounds of weight before execution, and the Kakori accused sardonically referred to the 'swing' they would take on the gallows. Their death was not wholly an act of studied overcoming or stoic defiance but also a game challenge to their persecutors, in tune with the song the Kakori undertrials so frequently sang:

> *Sarfaroshi ki tamanna ab hamare dil me hai*
> *Dekhna hai zor kitna bazu-e-qatil me hai*
> (We have now a longing in our hearts to put our head on to the bidding. It is to be seen how much strength the executioner has in his arms.)

The idea of transmigration had clearly been dropped from the neo-nationalist revolutionism of the mid-1920s, as had the secret societies' religiously ritualistic oath-taking ceremonies. Young muslim men like Ashfaquallah of the HRA in the UP, or Afasaruddin and Dalilur Rahaman of the Chittagong group in Bengal, were making their presence felt among the revolutionists. Even the male chauvinistic tendency of keeping women out of revolutionism was weakening rapidly, and heroines were stepping in to take their rightful place in the movement, more in Bengal perhaps than in other regions. But the revolutionists in northern India were apparently ahead of their Bengali counterparts in matters of ideological finesse.

The HRA manifesto, *Revolutionary*, published in January 1925, and the constitution it adopted about the same time, stood for the establishment of a 'Federal Republic of the United States of India' by throwing out colonial rule. Based on 'universal suffrage', the republic was expected to abolish 'all systems which make any kind of exploitation of man by man possible'. While arousing the people from an enforced slumber and preparing for popular armed risings against colonialism, the HRA also thought about the need for organizing the toiling masses and stamping out their sufferings, for, in the final analysis, 'the revolution is for them' only. Such ideological trends progressed further in the socialistic direction and, in due course, started taking the shape of a Marxism-oriented revolutionary political standing under its successor organization, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA).

Moves for the formation of the HSRA began soon after the debacle of the Kakori trial, which resulted not only in the hanging of four important HRA leaders but also in long sentences for sixteen other leading figures, as well as the detention and surveillance of many more. The survivors of the collapse (who included Chandrasekhar Azad) did not lose much time in gathering the bits and pieces of what remained of their organization, and getting in touch with the resurrected rebel groups in Punjab, Bihar, and even Bengal. The interactions led to a meeting of the revolutionists in Delhi (inside Feroze Shah Kotla) from 7 to 8 August 1928, and out of its deliberations emerged a central body—the HSRA. The Bengal group decided to stay out of it, though it agreed to collaborate and send from Calcutta an explosives expert (who turned out to be Jatindra Nath Das) to help. Knowing ideas to be no less explosive in the hands of an aroused people, the HSRA groped for ideals simultaneously. Within the next two years, the 'Army' was to perceive in fragments the goals it must set for striving. The perception was reflected in such pronouncements as its leaders chose to make from the dock in June 1929 (Bhagat Singh and Batukeswar Dutta), or circulate at the Congress session in December 1929 ('Manifesto to the Congress'), or send for publication in January 1930 ('The Philosophy of Bomb' in Gandhiji's *Young India*).

Analysing the oppressive colonial conditions under which people were forced to live in India, and the sufferings to which the workers, peasants and toiling masses had been subjected by foreign and native exploiters ('the latter is showing a progressive tendency to join forces with the former'), the HSRA felt that only a revolution could bring about complete independence as well as 'the removal of all social distinctions and privileges' in India. By 'revolution' its members meant the uprooting of the existing social order and the capturing of state power—the apparatus of which continued to remain not only in the hands of the colonialists but also under the control of the privileged among the colonized. For the protection and furtherance of the interest of the masses the state apparatus must be seized, and a socialist government be established under 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' to 'forever banish parasites from the seat of political power'. For bringing about the revolution, the HSRA anticipated a mobilization of workers, peasants, youths and the intelligentsia, and depended upon armed struggle by the masses. As regards its own immediate role, the HSRA decided to concentrate on preparing the Indian people for revolution, propagating its ideas and generally acting as their armed contingent—the vanguard.

The radical temper that the HSRA generated was already in the air in India from 1927–28 onwards, in the countryside through the beginnings of *kisan* solidarities, and at the industrial centres—where the Communists were active—in the massive strike waves of workers. Led by young Bhagat Singh, an outstanding ideologue and organizer of his own kind, who came in contact with the radicals in Kanpur at an early stage, worked briefly in the Delhi daily, *Veer Arjun*, founded the revolutionary youth organization, Naujawan Bharat Sabha, in March 1926, maintained links with the Kirti Kisan Party in Punjab and contributed to its journal, *Kirti*, the revolutionists in northern India were exposed to 'the impact on us of our time and circumstances'.

The achievement of HSRA members in imbibing the radical spirit of their days, however, could not be matched by the revolutionists in Bengal, who were not yet agreeable to adding socio-economic objectives to the concept of nationalist revolution. Freedom from colonial rule being the foremost task, they were in favour of dealing with social, including communal, problems after the attainment of independence. 'The [freedom of the] country comes first, and thereafter justice and religion', they felt, and asserted the Indian people's exclusive right of the ownership of India and the control of its destiny. Indians, therefore, must come forward and act for the exercise of their right, and for the 'freedom, welfare and exaltation' of India.

The Bengali revolutionists' line of thinking in the late 1920s and early 1930s closely resembled Irish nationalist revolutionism during the First World War and soon thereafter, which gave priority to the attainment of freedom over procrastination about its social content. Since the Irish model did not give much of a clue as to the quality and character of the anticipated freedom, the popular participation in the struggle for achieving it was likely to be confused and half-hearted. But that did not restrain the Bengal revolutionists from trying to perform their task of awakening the people by setting suitable examples for emulation. They had already been popularizing the volunteer corps movement in Bengal in the Irish style, and gave it shape through the formation of the Bengal Volunteers, following the dazzling turn-out of Subhas Chandra Bose's band of volunteers at the Calcutta Congress session of 1928. Their desire to form an underground army on the pattern of the Irish Republican Army soon found expression in the Chittagong group fashioning itself as a branch of the would-be Indian Republican Army (IRA). Despite the differences in ideology both the

'Armies'—the HSRA in northern India and the IRA (Chittagong Branch) in Bengal—similarly stood for electrifying the nation through shock therapy. While the IRA (Chittagong Branch) planned a stunning 'death programme'—the parallel of which could not be found in the annals of Indian nationalist revolutionism—the HSRA prepared meticulously its deadly 'action for propaganda'.

The first HSRA act that attracted some public attention was the way it avenged Lala Lajpat Rai's death. When the whole of India resented the visit of an 'all-white' Simon Commission for constitutional stocktaking, the police severely *lathi*-charged a protest demonstration in Lahore, assaulting many, including its leading figure Lalaji—who later succumbed to injuries. To retaliate against this outrageous occurrence, the HSRA decided upon the assassination of the person responsible for Lalaji's death, namely, Mr Scott, the superintendent of police, Lahore. In December 1928, therefore, Bhagat Singh and Rajguru, aided by Chandrasekhar Azad and Sukhdev, killed Saunders, the deputy superintendent of police, mistaking him for Scott. The error apparently did not matter much, for the killing clearly represented the retribution that it was meant to be, and as a further clarification, some hand-written posters appeared in Lahore: 'Saunders is dead, Lalaji is avenged.'

Following the authorities' failure to locate Bhagat Singh and the others, the HSRA went in for a more dramatic act of revolutionist propaganda. It was to coincide with the discussions in the Central Legislative Assembly, Delhi, on such official measures as the Public Safety and Trade Disputes bills to counter the spread of both revolutionism and trade unionism. Apparently in protest against these bills, Bhagat Singh and Batukeswar Dutta raised slogans in the assembly hall on 8 April 1929, scattered HSRA leaflets and hurled bombs—not to hurt anybody, but 'to make the deaf hear'. The duo made no attempt to escape but allowed themselves to be arrested on the spot and sent before a special tribunal for trial. As contemplated, both were able to take full advantage for the impactful spread of their revolutionist propaganda, by making a passionate statement from the dock. The two were sentenced to transportation for life but their point had reached home, and the nation heard them in anguished silence.

Thereafter followed a series of happenings—the accidental discovery of the HSRA bomb factory in Lahore, the arrest of its prominent activists with Saunders's murder. In 1929 began the famous Lahore and UP Conspiracy Case, dragging the country on for fifteen months to a high-pitch of tension. Conceiving the courtroom and the prison cells as constituents of an amphi-theatre, and taking the Indian people as the audience, Bhagat Singh and his fellow accused enacted the most poignant real-life drama that had so far been witnessed. They would enter the courtroom boisterously, raising radical slogans and singing revolutionist songs. In the courtroom itself they observed Kakori Day (19 December 1929), Lenin Day (24 January 1930), May Day (1 May 1930), and sent greetings to the Soviet Union on the anniversary of the November revolution. Side by side continued their demonstration of forward-looking patriotic fervour and utter contempt for the colonialist state, hunger strikes for political prisoners' rights and an epic race for death by starvation (culminating in Jatindra Nath Das's martyrdom following 63 days of hunger strike), engaging the police in hand-to-hand fight despite being handcuffed prisoners, and despite the judges' preference for *ex-parte* justice without defence witnesses, defence counsels and without even the accused.

Apart from the efforts to save only those who could be saved, Bhagat Singh and his comrades offered little defence, and ridiculed British justice by refusing to deny charges against them. It was not surprising, therefore, when an upset country learnt on 7 October 1930 that Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru had been condemned to death, and others to various terms of imprisonment.

From the national revolutionist point of view, the limelight was not only on Lahore but also on distant Chittagong in Bengal, despite the growing national tension around Gandhiji's Dandi March (March–April 1930) and the imminence of a mass Civil Disobedience movement. Surjya Kumar Sen (known as '*Masterda*' because he was a local school teacher), a long-standing revolutionist leader from Chittagong, played a significant role in reorganizing neo-revolutionism in eastern India in the post-Non-Cooperation days. Escaping from the police dragnet at Shovabazar, Calcutta, and thereby evading arrest on the Dakshineswar Bomb Case (1925), a fugitive Surjya Sen was believed to have helped revolutionist regrouping in Assam, Bengal, Bihar and the United Provinces. He was later arrested in Calcutta in 1926 and detained till the end of 1928, when he returned to Chittagong with some misgivings. Apparently, the monotonous wrangling within the revolutionist movement in Bengal, the melancholic aftermath of the Kakori trial in the UP (irrespective of the sprouting of the HSRA), and the vanishing dream of a large-scale insurrection, led Surjya Sen and his associates (Nirmal Sen, Ambika Chakravarty, Ganesh Ghosh, Ananta Sinha, Loknath Bal, etc.) to think in terms of a brilliant solo insurrectionary outburst in Chittagong itself—a model for repeating it at various other places. Out of their concern was born the IRA (Chittagong Branch), and the tragically romantic (and martyr-creating) 'death programme', or the blueprint of an Easter Rising in Bengal on the lines of the Easter Rising of Dublin in 1916. The 'programme' anticipated a dramatic rising around Easter in 1930 by the IRA (Chittagong Branch), the military occupation of all the vantage-points of Chittagong town, the public distribution of arms by ransacking the police and military armouries, the declaration of a free—albeit tiny—republic in Chittagong with headquarters at the collector's office at Fairy Hill, the defence of its freedom by resisting British attempts to recapture the town, the falling back on the centrally located headquarters if British reinforcements proved irresistible, and finally, a last-ditch fight to the finish at Fairy Hill, leaving a spectacle of the dead for the Chittagong people and the country to learn from. The scheme of Surjya Sen and his IRA (Chittagong Branch) for a collective rise and fall was in effect in tune wholly with 'the heroic, tragic lunacy of Sein Fein' (W.B. Yeats to Lady Gregory, 18 May 1916).

In actual practice, however, the Chittagong rising on 18 April 1930 did not proceed the way it was planned, even after the revolutionists successfully occupied all the strategic posts, paralysed the government forces, raided the armoury and proclaimed ceremoniously the birth of the independent republic of Chittagong. The course of the rising was altered when the revolutionist army grabbed all the arms in the armoury but failed to locate the ammunition kept in a separate and hidden magazine room. The heaps of guns thus rendered useless, the IRA (Chittagong Branch) left town with whatever arms and ammunitions it was carrying, to a more defensible position atop Jalalabad Hill. In the ensuing battle, armed mainly with police musketry and revolvers, the revolutionists faced a very considerable force of regular British troops of the Eastern Rifles and Surma Valley Light Horse Brigade, armed with magazine rifles, Lewis guns and Vickers machine guns. The battle took place at Jalalabad Hill on 22 April 1930 for about three hours in the evening, from 5 to 8 pm. The revolutionist army, which lost thirteen soldiers in the action, was able to inflict heavy casualties on the attackers, and forced them to retreat. After the victory at Jalalabad Hill, Surjya Sen and his men dispersed to enter into a new phase of struggle from the underground, which they termed as *khanda juddha* or guerrilla actions—again on the Irish revolutionist style.

It was during the *khanda juddha* phase that Surjya Sen succeeded in bringing into the operations in Chittagong two outstanding women revolutionists—Pritilata Waddedar and Kalpana Dutt. Women rebels were already making their mark. Notable was an incident in December 1931 in Comilla, where Shanti Ghose and Suniti Chowdhury shot dead the district magistrate, and in February 1932 in Calcutta, where Bina Das attempted to shoot the governor during the university convocation. Like them, Priti and Kalpana were already in the thick of the revolutionist struggle in Chittagong, and had gone into the underground. Surjya Sen's IRA (Chittagong Branch) continued to remain in the forefront of the Bengali political scenario, despite the public attention being stolen briefly by the spectacular suicidal attack of three young men (Benoy, Badal and Dinesh) on the citadel of colonial administration in Bengal—the Writers' Building of Calcutta—in December 1930. Meanwhile, as part of the Chittagong revolutionists' guerrilla action programme, Priti led their squad in September 1932 to assault the Pahartali European Club, and committed suicide after completing the mission. Kalpana functioned as a guerrilla leader thereafter, participating in some of the adventurous 'actions', including the one on Gairala village, where Surjya Sen was arrested in February 1933. Sen's successor as the chief of the IRA (Chittagong Branch), Tarakeswar Dastidar, and the legendary Kalpana were apprehended three months later in May 1933 at Gahira, following a furious and bloody gun battle with the Jat Regiment. All the three, Surjya Sen, Tarakeswar Dastidar and Kalpana Dutt, were put on trial in June 1933, resulting in death sentences for Sen and Tarakeswar, and a life sentence for Kalpana.

The situation in North India had, by the beginning of 1931, turned rather bleak from the national revolutionist point of view, particularly after the failure of Chandrasekhar Azad's plots for rescuing Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru from their condemned cells, and more so after his own death in an exchange of fire with the police on 27 February 1931 in Allahabad. The popular expectation of commutation of the death sentence rose very high at the time of a truce between Congress supremo Gandhiji and British viceroy Lord Irwin, after the Civil Disobedience movement. It did not come about, mainly because Gandhiji had not insisted in his discussions with Irwin upon a reprieve, but asked only for postponement of the executions till the Karachi session of the Congress ratified the Gandhi–Irwin pact. Irwin refused to oblige on the ground that such a postponement would lead the public to think that a reprieve might be forthcoming, which impression he conscientiously was not willing to create.[3] The executions were, therefore, to take place as scheduled, and on 23 March 1931 Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru went to the gallows raising revolutionist slogans and singing:

> *Dilse niklegi na markar bhi watan ki ulfat,*
> *Meri mitti se bhi khushbu-e-watan aayegi*
> (Love for the motherland will not leave my heart even after death;
> its fragrance will still be there in my dusty remains.)

Millions all over the country mourned the martyrs in angry condolence meetings, hysterical processions, street clashes with the police, and strikes in schools and colleges. About three years later, public reaction to the execution of Surjya Sen and Tarakeswar Dastidar (on 12 Janurary 1934) was not stormy as it had been in March 1931, though January 1934 had its own shocking, sombre effect on the people. In both March 1931 and January 1934, the authorities chose not to hand over the martyrs' bodies to their relatives and friends for cremation. Rather, they decided—as the live-bomb diffusers do—to dispose of the bodies themselves, by cremating Bhagat Singh and his comrades in secret, and by throwing the bodies of Surjya Sen and Tarakeswar into the deep sea from the cruiser *The Renown.*

After the exit of Bhagat Singh and his comrades on the one hand, and Surjya Sen and his fellow-fighters on the other from the political scene, nationalist revolutionism in India seemed to have reached a point wherefrom it could go further only by becoming drastically more innovative than all its past advances. This was not easy to do by remaining purely nationalistic, and by practising revolutionism wholly through secret societies. Consequently, the many demonstrations of individual heroics and acts of startling reprisals in Punjab, Bihar, Tripura and other places, between 1932 and 1935, could not really produce any national revolutionist way out of the morass of hackneyed exercises. Inanity often ended in introspection, and in searches for new understanding of mass mobilization, leading to the formation of the Communist and other socialist consolidations in the Andamans, as well as in various detention camps. Some of them, of course, remained separate, and took to Gandhian ways, and in July 1938 Jugantar—the most durable of the precursors of secret societies in India—formally decided to dissolve itself.

Like any peep into a stormy past, this narrative merely reveals glimpses of nationalist revolutionism in India, without being able to cover much of its operation in certain parts of the country. Since even a glimpse is capable of indicating what the revolutionists wanted to do, actually did and failed in doing, drawing any conclusions, passing pontifical judgement on them, or the deduction of some moral out of their fabulous accounts, seems rather unwarranted. In spite of the accounts having a morbid touch of plottings, killings, jailings and hangings—especially perhaps in the eyes of the post-colonial posterity—these expectedly evoked very strong emotions among the people of the time, inspired and steeled them in their struggle against colonialism.

Popular appreciation of nationalist revolutionism as a result grew in density, and between 1905 and 1935 it changed from distant admiration of the heroes to spontaneous sentimental attachment to them. At the time of his martyrdom, according to the Congress chronicler, Bhagat Singh's name was 'as widely known all over India, and was as popular as Gandhiji's'.[4] Surjya Sen's popularity was of course not as great, though his legend had also spread far and wide, and created consternation among the ruling circles in Bengal.

Locally, during the *khanda juddha* phase, Sen and his band of guerrillas received the support of the rural folk, and enjoyed the protection of peasants and artisans belonging to divergent communities. Coincidental with the change in popular attitude in their favour, the national revolutionists appeared to have drastically altered their own approach towards death. Death did not seem any longer to be a matter of Kshudiramian transmigration or Kakorian daredevilry. Bhagat Singh, a self-proclaimed atheist, was facing death for his 'principles' and 'priceless ideals'.[5] Surjya Sen, an apparent mystic, similarly, was readying to die for 'a golden dream' he pursued 'like a lunatic'.[6] Both passionately desired the immortality, or deathlessness—not of revolutionists, but of the revolution. Their final watchwords had to be '*Inquilab Zindabad*', 'Long Live Revolution'.

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Notes and References

[1] From the pamphlet, *O Martyrs*, London, 1907, cited in Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, Delhi, 1983, p. 146.

[2] *Bande Mataram*, London, 1909, cited in Sumit Sarkar, ibid.

[3] This point had already been examined in Amit Kumar Gupta, 'The Executions of March 1931, Gandhi and Irwin', *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. XC, Part I, No. 169, January–June 1971.

[4] Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *The History of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. I, 1946, p. 456.

[5] Bhagat Singh's open letter to his father, *The Tribune*, 4 October 1930.

[6] Surjya Sen's message to his comrades, Chittagong jail, 11 January 1934.

National Revolutionist Grand Designs

Northern India 1914–18

Maya Gupta

It is better to die fighting like the brave
Than lose one's life like a dog;
Either we kill the enemy or get killed,
We should not turn tail like cowards.
—*Ghadar-di-Gunj*

The militant nationalists' recourse to terror as a method of resistance against the colonial authorities in India was an outcome as much of the urge for countering a repressive government and cooling the hot-headed Englishman, as for restoring 'Indian' confidence and self-respect. A sense of honour led naturally to uncontrollable patriotism, pride in the country's heritage to a revivalist, religionist tendency, and the feeling of desperation gathering romantic, adventurist tinges to the formation of a number of secret societies. A spurt of terroristic activities, starting in Maharashtra and Bengal, soon spread to Bihar, the United Provinces, Punjab, the Central Provinces and thence toward the south. Individuals were selected for exemplary reprisals and a series of actual and attempted assassinations began. Bombs were made, guns procured and robberies committed to raise funds. The attempt on Kingsford's life (1908), the killing of Jackson (1909), the plan to kill Lord Minto at Allahabad (1909), the Gwalior Conspiracy Case (1909), the Satara Conspiracy Case (1910), the Dacca Conspiracy Case (1910), the Howrah Conspiracy Case (1911), the Lord Hardinge Bomb Case (1912) and the Barisal Conspiracy Case (1913)—among many similar occurrences—had the desired effect. They startled the governmental authorities and created a fear psychosis among the British officials, non-officials and their henchmen. Simultaneously, the militant nationalists achieved what a 'shock minority' invariably does—they shook up an inert nation, reminded it of its virility and its tradition of armed resistance.

The contributions of the militants at the emotional level, in the first decade or so of the twentieth century, were stirring and inspiring, indeed. However, such episodes were numerically too small, isolated and localized to overwhelm a well-entrenched imperial authority or to rally a vast and diverse people to their line of action. Their conscious identification with a certain community (Hindus), their representation of the hopes and desires of a particular category (the educated middle class), and their concentration in specific pockets (in Dacca or Calcutta in Bengal, Benares and Allahabad in the United Provinces, Poona and Satara in Maharashtra, for example), had severely limited their social and popular base. To make matters worse, groups of militants had not been able to attempt, until then, any coordination among themselves, throw up an all-India leadership, or devise a concerted course of action. Consequently, their acts of bravery and self-sacrifice, howsoever impressive, were confined to the bounds of 'terrorism' and occasional outbursts of violence, and these could not, therefore, lead to the next stage—the phase of insurrection. Attaining an insurrectionary phase was a prerequisite for Indian militant movements to realize their basic objectives, namely, shake the British Raj to its foundations and then lead the Indian people on to the path of anti-imperialist armed struggle. That the militants strongly felt the urgency to enter the insurrectionary stage and to overcome some of their social and political debilities, is apparent from the plans they designed and the tasks they set before themselves during the fateful years of the First World War.

Although the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, war-clouds had been gathering over Europe for quite some time. Indian militants, especially those who had to leave India to escape British vigilance for Europe, America, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, did not miss the unmistakable signs of the approaching storm. British involvement in a long-drawn war, dissipating all their strength and absorbing all their attention, clearly offered the militant nationalists a rare opportunity to strike at the base of the Raj in India. The prospect of striking effectively also increased with the possibility of obtaining assistance from Britain's enemies in the war. Like their Irish counterparts, the Indian rebels too wanted to make as best use of the war situation as they possibly could, and to try to organize—with all their limitations—simultaneous risings in India. Their efforts rapidly advanced at this point when they evoked an enthusiastic response from Indians living in the United States and Canada.

Ghadar and *Ghadar-di-Gunj*

Indians living in Canada and the United States had already been turned into a disgruntled lot because of the discrimination and ill-treatment there. Racism, coupled with the fact that they belonged to a subject country, was the prime reason they were looked down upon. They were, therefore, receptive to the ideas and exhortations of fugitive militants who reached these countries mainly as students in different universities. The contact between the Indian emigrants—mostly Sikhs —in the United States and Canada and the firebrand students soon led to the formation of the Ghadar (rebellion) Party in the summer of 1913, with Lala Hardayal as president and Sohan Singh Bhakna as secretary. The party's weekly organ—the *Ghadar*—was first published on 1 November 1913, declaring war on the British authorities in India:

> What is our name?
> The *Ghadars*.
> What is our work?
> *Ghadar*,
> Where will the *Ghadar* break out?
> In India . . . .
> Why should it break out?
>
> Because the people can no longer bear the oppression and tyranny practised under the English rule and are ready to fight and die for freedom. . . . Time will come when rifles and blood will take the place of pen and ink.[1]

The appearance of the weekly, the *Ghadar*, was a momentous development in so far as the articulation and spreading of militant nationalist ideas were concerned. The paper, which was published in English as well as several Indian languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Gurumukhi and Marathi, had a secular, non-communal character. Its uncompromising rebellious spirit and persistent advocacy for the cause of armed struggle caught the popular imagination. Within a few months its circulation mounted, reaching almost all the Indians abroad—in China, Japan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, the Honduras, British Guyana, Trinidad and Southeast Africa. Thousands of its copies, carrying the message of rebellion, were also smuggled into India.[2]

Apart from the *Ghadar*, the party also brought out a book of poems titled *Ghadar-di-Gunj*. Some of its poems called upon Indians not to enlist in the British army. 'Fie upon those who serve the foreign rulers. Only those will leave their names behind who suffer for the country and the nation.' Some others urged Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to wage a war on the foreign rulers of India. 'Our country has been squeezed dry by the *feringhees*. We have to wage a war now on them . . .'. Some declared:

> The time for war has arrived. . . . These white men are nothing before us when you make up your mind to kill or get killed. . . . Wake up. Let us now go to our country to make war. . . . The bugle of battle has begun to sound, the lions will march forward while the jackals will run away like cowards with their tails between their legs.

Ghadarites and their followers learnt these poems of *Ghadar–di Gunj* by heart and drew inspiration from them.[3]

The Ghadar Party's plea for launching an immediate offensive against the British Raj in India was clearly prompted by its determination to take advantage of the war situation. At a meeting held at Oxford (California) on 26 July 1914, Bhagwan Singh and Mohammed Barkatullah announced that 'the time for rebellion had come and the British were to be expelled [from India] as war in Europe had commenced'.[4] Apparently, Ghadarites expected assistance to their cause from the main enemy of Britain—Germany. *Ghadar* had already written in its third issue: 'The Germans have great sympathy with our movement for liberty because they and ourselves have a common enemy. In future, the Germans can draw assistance from us and they can render us great assistance too.'[5] In indicating their offer of assistance, the Germans perhaps thought at this juncture in terms of immediate military gain. They might have felt that the outbreak of a rebellion in India would necessitate the recall of Indian soldiers from the western front and, consequently, would weaken the British position in Europe. Besides, if the Indian rebels could spread anti-British feeling among the Indian soldiers, they might stop fighting the Germans, and even undertake an invasion of British India through Afghanistan and Baluchistan.[6]

By the middle of 1914, the Ghadar Party was organizing the return of its followers and sympathizers to India to give effect to its slogan of a rebellion there. Thousands of Indians were encouraged to rush back home from Canada and the US. *The Portland Telegram* of Oregon reported on 7 August 1914: 'Every train and boat for the south carries large number of Hindus [Indians] from the city [Astoria] and if the exodus keeps up much longer, Astoria will be entirely deserted by the East Indians.'[7] The first batch of Ghadar volunteers left for India in August 1914 by the *S.S. Korea*. On the eve of their departure, Mohammed Barkatullah and Ram Chandra, who succeeded Lala Hardayal as president of the Ghadar Party, boarded the ship and addressed the volunteers:

> Your duty is clear. Go to India and stir up rebellion in every corner of the country. Rob the wealthy and show mercy to the poor. In this way you will win universal sympathy. Arms will be provided for you on your arrival in India. Failing this, you must ransack the police stations for rifles. Obey without hesitation the command of your leaders.[8]

The *S.S. Korea* was followed by a fleet of Japanese ships, such as *Nippon Maru*, *Mexico Maru*, *Tosa Maru*, *Lai Sang* and *Feo Sang*, carrying thousands of Ghadarites, off to liberate their motherland after having left all their belongings behind at the Yugantar Ashram in San Francisco. Incidentally, the well-known *Komagata Maru* incident—in which 300 Indian emigrants, after being shuttled from one place to another for about six months, disembarked at Calcutta to face charges of illegal entry, search warrants and eventually British bullets—took place precisely at this time.[9]

The Homecoming

The Ghadarites spent most of their time during the voyage reciting from *Ghadar-di-Gunj* and discussing the speeches delivered by their leaders. They also made it a point to contact as many Indian troops serving abroad as possible. At Hong Kong they came in touch with the 24th Punjab Regiment, at Singapore with the Malaya State Guides and at Penang with a unit of the Sikh sepoys. Finding the soldiers receptive, they circulated Ghadar literature among them.[10]

The months of October, November and December 1914 saw shiploads of Ghadarites disembark on the Indian coast. British authorities in India naturally could not remain a silent spectator to this unusual development. They had already received a telegram from the governor-general of Canada (dated 13 August 1914), breaking the news of the return of many 'Hindus' to India and expressing the fear that this might 'cause trouble in India'.[11] In order to get full information about the designs, movements and temper of the homecoming Ghadarites, the Government of India dispatched telegrams to the governor of Hong Kong and the British ambassador at Tokyo.[12] The Ingress into India Ordinance was passed on 5 September 1914, and the police were ordered to act as soon as the Ghadarites reached Indian soil. Of all the ships, *Tosa Maru* was believed to be carrying the most dangerous elements. Michael O'Dwyer, the lieutenant-governor of Punjab recalled later:

> Our officers were instructed to wire to us on the way up what they could elicit as to the temper and intention of the emigrants. We were soon informed that they were violently seditious, hurled abuses at the British officers and boasted openly of the impending downfall of the British Raj. . . . I gave orders that the whole band was to be interned in the central jails of Montgomery and Multan. This was done.[13]

Tosa Maru was searched when it reached Calcutta and all the Ghadar leaders, including Sohan Singh Bhakna, Jwala Singh, Kesar Singh, Harnam Singh and Jagat Ram, were arrested and 179 of their fellow-passengers sent to Punjab under police escort.[14] Some other ships were also vigorously searched on arrival at Calcutta, and passengers suspected of sedition were either arrested or sent to their native villages.[15]

The emigrants nevertheless continued to pour in and the government had to scrutinize them meticulously at Calcutta and Ludhiana and take steps for their detention and for surveillance. According to the Sedition Committee of 1918, 331 persons were interned and 2576 restricted to their villages under the Ingress into India Ordinance between 1914 and 1917.[16] Another source has estimated that 370 were interned and 2212 restricted to their villages from 1914 to 1918.[17] Michael O'Dwyer calculated that 'out of eight thousand who returned in the first two years of the war, some four hundred were interned in jail, two thousand five hundred restricted to their villages'.[18] The strict system of government vigilance clearly had its effect, and the Ghadarite infiltration was rendered ineffective. This became particularly so in the absence of a well-knit organization and centralized leadership in India. But even then, some hard-core Ghadarites like Kartar Singh, Jagat Singh, Harnam Singh and Piara Singh succeeded in slipping out of the police dragnet and reaching Punjab to pursue their mission.

Unfortunately, the situation in Punjab was far from being the one the Ghadarites had fervently imagined in distant lands. Contrary to their cherished dreams, not only had the grounds for an armed rising not grown but even its faintest possibility disappeared once the war began. There was, in fact, competition for expressing sympathy and support for the British Raj in its hour of need. While the landed magnates were traditionally pro-British, the gentry and the commercial categories saw, in the war, opportunities for financial gains. Indian princelings and industrialists, the landed gentry and traders, contributed zealously to the British war efforts. The rural masses were too depressed under the British land administration and harassed by their immediate social superiors, to react to any new development. The professionals and nationalistically-oriented urban people turned apathetic, seeing the Indian National Congress's concern for the British cause in the war. The extremists were also baffled by Bal Gangadhar Tilak's disapproval of the idea of exploiting the situation against the British. An important Sikh organization, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, organized prayers for the victory of their great benefactor—the 'Sovereign' of India.[19] It condemned the Ghadarites as 'fallen' Sikhs, and even constituted committees to help the government in tracking down these criminal elements.[20] Early in December 1914 the commissioner of Jullundur reported: 'I do not think there is any chance of disaffected Canadian emigrants receiving any measure of popular support, at least I shall be surprised if they do so.'[21]

The cool and somewhat hostile reception in Punjab and the strict police surveillance could not dampen the high spirits of the Ghadarites. They gathered undaunted at Sikh religious places, such as Nankana Sahib, Khalsa, Taran Taran, and openly exhorted the populance to rise against the British.[22] Some of them, like Harnam Singh, even travelled from village to village in an attempt to incite the Punjab peasantry. Apart from the lack of popular support, which they hoped eventually to gain by their bold actions, the Ghadarites badly felt the need for finances and arms. In the absence of any trace of German assistance so far and hounded constantly by the British police, they decided to raise funds on their own through political robberies or dacoities. The arms and ammunition thus procured would be used in a general rising. Simultaneously, they resolved to work towards winning the British Indian soldiers over to their cause. The mutiny of the Indian section of the British army in India, in their calculations, would be the signal for a widespread civil rising.

Actions and Failures

Financial considerations led Ghadar activists, towards the end of 1914, to launch a series of political dacoities. The Sedition Committee recorded some of these dacoities committed between October and December 1914:

(1) October 16—attack on Chauk Man railway station on the Ferozepur-Ludhiana line;
(2) November 27—attempt to loot the Moga sub-divisional treasury in Ferozepur, resulting in the death of a police sub-inspector and a village *zaildar*, as well as in the killing of two rebels and the capture of seven;
(3) December 17—robbery in a rich moneylender's house in village Pipli, Ambala;
(4) December 24 and 25—dacoities in villages Pharala and Karnana, Jullundur;
(5) December 24 and 25—a number of dacoities in Ferozepur district.[23]

However daring, the robberies achieved very little in financial terms. Politically too, they were of no consequence, except to startle the local population and further alert an already vigilant police force. The Ghadarite inability to make a breakthrough in Punjab was in a way a reflection on the German incapacity to take advantage of a favourable anti-British circumstance. Reviewing the activities of the militants between 1914 and 1916, David Petrie of the Indian Criminal Intelligence Department concluded that 'it was the Germans who missed the bus'. He held that the Germans 'lost the best opportunity they were ever likely to be afforded in failing to finance the early thousands of Ghadar conspirators who flowed into India on the outbreak of war.'[24]

Like the unremunerative political robberies, Ghadarite experiments with the Indian soldiers, of organizing them to join in an uprising, also ran into difficulties. It was not an easy task to get in touch with soldiers in cantonments where public entry was strictly prohibited. But even then Ghadar rebels like Nidhan Singh, Kartar Singh and Khasi Ram managed to surmount all hurdles and establish links with the soldiers.

The high rate of Indian casualties in the first phase of war, the policy of pushing Indian recruits ahead of the British on the war front, and the rumours of British reverses had already caused some dissatisfaction among the soldiers in the cantonments. They were not only receptive to anti-British rhetoric but also willing to be persuaded to join the Ghadar rebels if an armed rising was initiated. Consequently, a number of group meetings between the Ghadarites and the soldiers were held at Taran Taran, Jhar Sahib and Ladowal, to discuss several plans of action. The first plan to begin a general rising on 15 November 1914 could not be implemented as it was not possible to rally together the Ghadar rebels in various centres at Jullundur, Hoshiarpur, Ferozepur and Ludhiana. Later it was decided, at a meeting on 23 November, that the rebels would raid on 25 November the military arsenal at Mianmeer (Lahore), with the help of the Indian sepoys. All the leading Ghadarites were directed to bring their followers at the appointed hour and Kartar Singh was reported to have disbursed five hundred rupees for meeting the expense.[25] According to the plan,

> the keys of the magazine (with the assistance of the *havildar* and other sepoys) would be obtained, and fire-arms, rifles, pistols, etc., together with ammunitions secured. The arms would then be distributed and an attack would be made on the European Regiment which consisted mostly of raw youths from England. After their massacre more arms would be secured.[26]

Unfortunately, the plan leaked out to the British officers in the cantonment and the rebels waited near the scene of action in vain. Neither the *havildar* nor his colleagues could manage to come forward with the promised assistance. Disappointed, the Ghadarites decided to proceed towards Ferozepur.

Simultaneously, with the plan to raid Mianmeer, the rebels worked out the blueprint of another daring action in connivance with the 23rd Cavalry—then stationed at Lahore cantonment. By discussing the *Komagatamaru* episode with the cavalrymen and circulating

Ghadar literature, the militants succeeded in drawing support. The cavalrymen were willing to join the outbreak if the Ghadarites could initiate it with guns and bombs, which the sepoys believed they had in their possession. In a meeting at Jhar Sahib on 23 November, both Ghadar leaders and representatives of the cavalrymen planned an action on 26 November. It was decided that the cavalrymen, following a mutiny by them, would ride out to join the Ghadar rebels. Then they would jointly ransack the arsenal and kill the British soldiers, spreading the mutiny to Lahore and Taran Taran.[27] Accordingly, 60 Ghadar rebels assembled at Jhar Sahib on 26 November. On 27 November, tired of waiting and with no visible sign of a mutiny, the rebels moved to Kairon (Amritsar) from where they proposed to attack certain police stations and procure arms and then loot the Taran Taran treasury. Meanwhile, many men of the 23rd Cavalry, wavering long over the commencement of mutiny, backed out at the last moment, and others preferred to wait until 'some six or seven hundred of the emigrants attacked the lines'.[28] After much vacillation only three cavalrymen managed finally to reach Jhar Sahib on 30 November, when it was too late for them to join the Ghadar rebels. By this time the plot of a mutiny had been revealed to the authorities who arrested and courtmartialled the cavalrymen. In its turn, the Ghadar group—poorly armed and badly led—also failed to proceed with its scheme.[29]

The Mianmeer group of Ghadar militants, which reached Ferozepur on 26 November, planned an attack on the Ferozepur cantonment arsenal on 30 November, with the aid of some Pathan soldiers. In preparation for this action, the group decided to raise some money by looting the Moga treasury. Some of them left for Moga by train, and a band of fifteen men—armed with revolvers—advanced by road. On 27 November, in Misriwalal village, Ferozeshah, the latter party was confronted by a police sub-inspector, Basharat Ali, who wanted to search them. In the confusion that followed, the rebels shot him dead and while retreating they also killed a *zaildar*. The shooting attracted the attention of both the local police and the villagers, who took the militants to be ordinary dacoits. In the skirmishes that took place thereafter, two Ghadar activists (Dhian Singh and Chanda Singh Waraich) were killed, several others—including the Ghadar Party treasurer Khasi Ram, Jiwan Singh and Rahmat Ali—were arrested, and six escaped.[30] Of those arrested, one was sentenced to death by the sessions court of Ferozepur, and the remaining six were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment.[31] Consequently, in the wake of the Ferozeshah incident, the plan of attack on the Ferozepur cantonment was abandoned. The Ferozeshah occurrence was the climax of a series of misadventures that the Ghadarites undertook on their own at Lahore, Amritsar and Ferozepur. The outcome of all these proved naturally to be very frustrating for the Ghadar Party. Many of its leading members, workers and sympathizers lost heart and became inactive. Others on the run—to avoid the police—suffered great privations. However, the experience hardened them and made them aware of their failings, as well as the limitations of their unbridled enthusiasm. More importantly, the Ghadar heroes came to realize the inadequacies of local actions and looked for a centralized leadership that was capable of concerted action over a larger part of the country.

The Silver Lining: Rashbehari and His Men

In this dark hour the Ghadarites saw some rays of hope through their contact with the Bengal militants working in upper India. The prime suspect of the Delhi (Hardinge) Bomb Case, 1912, and the Lahore (Gordon) Bomb Case, 1913, Rashbehari Bose, had successfully evaded the police dragnet and had actively been operating from his original centre at Dehradun. In August 1913 he visited Chandernagore, and from there made frequent trips to Calcutta to renew his contacts with the Anushilan Samiti and the Bengal revolutionaries.

In this period Sachindranath Sanyal, the leader of the Benares group of militants, known as the Anushilan Samiti again, was also visiting Bengal frequently in search of funds and arms. Rashbehari had some contact with the Benares group even in 1912 and a close relationship grew between him and Sanyal when they met in Calcutta in the latter part of 1913. Soon Rashbehari brought Sanyal into his inner circle, which at this point was pondering over the possibility of organizing simultaneous uprisings collectively by the Bengal, UP and Punjab groups of militants.[32] In 1913–14 Rashbehari, along with Jatindranath Mukherjee and Amarendranath Chatterjee, contemplated an armed rising on the model of the revolt of 1857, with the help of the sepoys of the British–Indian army. They, in fact, had, a secret meeting over the project, and Rashbehari was reported to have visited Fort William to get an inkling of the sepoys' feelings.[33] These three eminent leaders also visited Benares early in 1914 to establish personal links with the members of Sanyal's group. Rashbehari, however, had to soon go underground when the authorities, following the Delhi raids in February 1914, got enough evidence of his 'seditious' crimes and issued a warrant for his arrest. Nevertheless, he continued to function from his Benares hideout with Sanyal as his right-hand man. It was towards the end of 1914 that Rashbehari's plan of simultaneous risings was extended further when he came in touch with the Ghadarites in Punjab through Vishnu Ganesh Pingle.

The Maharashtrian Pingle went as a student to Seattle University in the United States where he came under the Ghadarite influence and joined in the Ghadar activities. Along with other Ghadar activists, Pingle returned to India in November 1914 in the fond hope of initiating armed struggle in India. After reaching Calcutta in the company of Satyen Roy, who was familiar with Jatindranath, Pingle established his credentials with the latter. With a letter of introduction from Jatindranath, he went to meet Rashbehari at Benares, and so became instrumental in bringing together the Ghadarites in Punjab and the Rashbehari–Sanyal group at Benares. Thus, by the end of 1914, the major forces of the secret militant movement in eastern and northern India converged in a joint bid to challenge the Raj. The convergence was put into effect at the end of 1914, when Pingle and Sanyal visited Punjab as Rashbehari's emissaries. Pingle met Amar Singh, Nidhan Singh, Kartar Singh, Bhai Parmanand and Ram Saran Das of Kapurthala, and discussed with them the advantages of enlisting the cooperation of the Bengal militants to the Ghadarite cause. An important meeting took place on 31 December 1914 in Virapali Dharamsala, Amritsar, where the prospect of an uprising was discussed,

> the looting of treasuries mooted, the contribution of money considered—the seduction of troops, the collection of arms, the preparation of bombs and the commission of dacoities brought into prominence . . . and the proposal originally made by Pingle to bring up a Bengali expert [in making bombs] adopted.[34]

In a separate meeting in Amritsar, Sanyal advised the Ghadarites to join Rashbehari, work under his leadership and set up central headquarters for proper coordination. Mula Singh, the local Ghadar leader of Amritsar, offered Sanyal Rs 500 as travelling expenses for Rashbehari and his associates from Benares to Amritsar. He also arranged a house at Amritsar for Rashbehari's stay, as well as for serving as the headquarters. Sanyal was greatly impressed with the dedication and dash of the brave Ghadarites who, he felt, were advantageously placed to contact and win over the Sikh regiments. Although he was somewhat apprehensive about their impulsiveness for 'action', Sanyal—on his return—spoke favourably to Rashbehari about them.[35]

Soon after the return of Sanyal and Pingle, Rashbehari called an important meeting of all his associates at the Benares hideout to announce that 'a rebellion was to take place all over the country, and that the time had come when they must prepare to die for their country'.[36] He elaborated his plan at this meeting and entrusted his friends and followers with specific responsibilities. For example, Damodar Swarup was made the leader of Allahabad; Bibhuti and Prigyonath were to function at Benares for the seduction of the sepoys; and Nalini Mukherjee was sent to Jabalpur for the same purpose. Narendranath Banerjee and Priyanath Bhattacharya were given the charge of bringing arms and explosives from Bengal, which would be carried to Punjab by Vinayak Rao Kaple and Hemchandra Datta. Later, Kaple was to go to Kanpur and assume leadership there. Pingle was asked to move and work among the Indian troops generally.[37] Rashbehari himself decided to go to Punjab along with Sanyal and Pingle, discuss plans with the Ghadarites and decide upon the final course of action. He also explained to his associates 'how to blow up bridges, how to cut telegraph wires, how to destroy railway lines and [rob] banks'.[38] According to Sanyal, after Rashbehari had taken over the command of the Benares congregation, militants all over northern and eastern India, from Punjab, Delhi and Benares to Chandernagore, Calcutta and Dacca, had—for all practical purposes—been united to organize a widespread rising with the help of the Indian sepoys.[39] Before leaving for Punjab, Rashbehari called Anukul Chakraborty and Nagen Dutta (*alias* Girija Babu) and asked them to arrange for simultaneous bomb outrages all over Bengal, and also to win over the men of the Benares Regiment then posted at Dacca. Messages were sent to north Bengal—to Maldah, Cooch Bihar, Dinajpur, Rajshahi and other places—to be ready for attacking the police lines and the treasuries on an appointed day.[40] Rashbehari also discussed his plan with Jatindranath when the latter met him at Benares along with Atul Kishore Ghosh and Narendranath Bhattacharya (M.N. Roy), and implored him to take command in Bengal.[41]

Rashbehari in Punjab and the Ghadarites

Rashbehari reached Amritsar on 25 January 1915 and stayed at Mussamat Ali's house which was also turned into the headquarters. Soon he made an assessment of the situation in Punjab and took stock of the available resources in men, money and arms. He brought the scattered Ghadar Party members under a centralized leadership and systematized communication, propaganda, assignment of work and consultation among workers. Rashbehari also set up a bomb factory in Jhabewal which was later shifted to Lohatwadi, and started manufacture with the help of two assistants, Ram Saran Dass and Amar Singh. While Rashbehari was thus busy shaping the organization, the Ghadar activists went all out to procure arms and funds. Mula Singh, Rashbehari's first lieutenant at Amritsar, secured from Karam Chand—an employee of the Shanghai–Nanking Railway at Shanghai—six pistols and 600 cartridges which had been supplied by a German sympathizer there.[42]

Nand Singh brought four pistols from Astoria (Oregon, USA) and Gopal Singh supplied some more from Kobe (Japan). A Japanese ship brought two cases of arms to Calcutta which were meant for Khasi Ram. Khasi Ram had, in the meantime, been executed in connection with the Ferozeshah murder case.[43] Some of the Ghadarites tried to smuggle in arms from abroad, and the Sedition Committee had taken note of their network in California for this purpose.[44] However, their main expectation, as well as that of Rashbehari and the others, lay in the arrival of two ships (the *Maverick* and *Annie Lourson*)—full of German arms—said to have been arranged for the Indian rebels by the German consul at Seattle (Washington). As is well-known now, these ships never reached the shores of India—to the utter disappointment of the Indian militants. Concurrent with their search for arms, the Ghadarites once again rushed to bolster their financial position on the traditional line of political dacoities. There were several robberies in the months of January and February 1915 in the houses of shopkeepers and moneylenders in Sabnewal, Mansuran and Rabban Unchi (Ludhiana), and Jhamir and Chabba (Amritsar).[45] 'These dacoities were committed', according to the official report, 'to purchase arms and to make bombs for launching an insurrection against the Government, and we are convinced that most of the loot was actually used for this purpose.'[46] Unfortunately, the 'loot' was not only inadequate (about Rs 30,000), it also brought in its sequel ominous results. The dacoities in Chabba (Amritsar) and Rabban Unchi (Ludhiana) actually resulted in murders and injuries, and led eventually to the arrest of Mula Singh and Nawab Singh—the two important local leaders of Amritsar. Both these men betrayed their friends and turned approvers in the conspiracy case that was framed. Finding Amritsar rather unsafe, therefore, Rashbehari decided to shift his headquarters to Lahore in the middle of February 1915 and concentrate on the task of converting the troops to the cause of an upsurge.[47] As the Sedition Committee of 1918 reported: 'Rashbehari went to Lahore and sent out emissaries to various cantonments in Upper India to procure military aid for the appointed hour [of a rising]. He also tried to organize . . . gangs of villagers to take part in the rebellion.'[48] The emissaries whom Rashbehari sent to contact the sepoys in different places and cantonments covered practically the whole of north India. Hridaynath was sent to Jullundur to influence the Dogra and other regiments stationed there. Gulab Singh and Harnam Singh went to Bannu to contact the sepoys on the Frontier. They reported that the 35th Sikh Regiment had promised to join the rising on their transfer to Rawalpindi. Gulab Singh also visited Nowshera, Peshawar and Rawalpindi and felt satisfied with the reaction of the sepoys in these places. Piara Singh visited Kohat and found the sepoys receptive to the call of a rising. Pingle, Kartar Singh and Sucha Singh visited Meerut, Agra and Kanpur with the intention of enlisting the sepoys' support. On the same mission they also visited sepoys at Lahore, Ambala, Ferozepur, Rawalpindi, and finally, Benares. Apparently they were satisfied with the outcome of all their exertions.[49] 'The audacity with which', the official report stated, 'Sucha Singh and others went about the work of seduction is astounding.'[50] Sensing some kind of hectic clandestine activity, the government became alert and succeeded in maintaining strict vigilance over all the sensitive areas. Although the authorities kept their cool and believed the militants' success to be 'extremely poor', they nevertheless conceded that the 'Indian soldiers were approached [by the militants] at Meerut, Cawnpore, Allahabad, Benares, Fyzabad and Lucknow in the United Provinces'.[51] The Ghadar emissaries were in fact counting on their good work or on the prospect of the armed forces precipitating and joining in a rising.

The Plan of the Uprising and Its Outcome

The possibility of the whole-scale defection of the 23rd Cavalry at Mianmeer and the 26th Punjabis at Ferozepur, the positive response of the 28th Pioneer and the 12th Cavalry posted at Meerut, as well as the 9th Bhopal Regiment at Benares, emboldened Rashbehari to think in terms of giving his plan a final touch. Mutiny in these sepoy establishments, he felt, was sufficient to spark off popular insurrection engulfing vast areas. Consequently, on 12 February he announced that 21 February 1915 had been fixed as the day on which the sepoys must rise in revolt. They would then be joined by the civilian populace, extending from the Frontier to Bengal, and hoisting everywhere a tri-coloured flag—yellow (for Sikhs), red (for Hindus) and blue (for Muslims). According to the plan, the first move was to be made at Lahore by the men of the 23rd Cavalry at Mianmeer; thereafter the sepoys were to rise in every cantonment, overpowering the English officers and soldiers, killing and imprisoning them and capturing all the arsenals. The arms seized in the arsenals were to be passed over to those among the people who were militant activists. The Ghadarites were instructed to equip themselves with explosives and hand-grenades.[52] Simultaneously with the rising of the sepoys in North India, the militants would cut telegraph wires, arrest English civilians, loot treasuries and break into prisons. After the completion of these tasks, the rebels would assemble at Lahore to elect their representatives to take charge of that place.[53] Defeating the English part of the Indian army was not considered very difficult in view of the fact that many of its members were out of India on the war-front, leaving behind mostly young, raw recruits of the territorial force.[54] Once these weakened English troops were overwhelmed, the rebels hoped to continue fighting successfully till Britain's enemies managed to come to their assistance. The plan rapidly percolated from Lahore down to Dacca, accelerating the transportation of explosives from Calcutta to Benares and affecting the loyalty of Sikh soldiers stationed at Dacca. As Sir Michael O'Dwyer later observed: 'the idea [of the plan] was not fantastic, for it had penetrated as far down as Bengal and was known to the disaffected elements in Dacca.'[55]

Unfortunately for the Indian militants, the uprising failed to take off the ground as they were not able eventually to give the signal for the outbreak. Their hectic activities, frequent meetings and careless, often irresponsible, movements aroused the suspicions of the British intelligence which probed into their causes in the usual unsavoury manner. According to Liaquat Hayat Khan, deputy superintendent of police, Amritsar, the authorities suspected the involvement of Mala Singh in the Chabba dacoity case. They were, therefore, anxious to plant a suitable person among the Ghadarites in Punjab. Soon the police picked up Kirpal Singh, an immigrant from Punjab, to work for them as a spy. With the help of his cousin Balwant Singh, a Ghadar activist, Kirpal Singh succeeded in establishing links with Lahore and then quickly worked his way up into the inner circle of the Ghadar Party.[56] On 10 February, Kirpal Singh passed information to Khan that Mula Singh was visiting Lahore to meet other rebel leaders. He was then directed to proceed to Lahore and introduce himself to Mula Singh. On 12 February, soon after his meeting with Rashbehari and others, Mula Singh was suddenly arrested by the police at Lahore. Meanwhile Kirpal Singh managed, mainly through his previous acquaintance (from his Shanghai days) with Nidhan Singh, to get in touch with Kohat Singh, Harnam Singh and others. None of them had any inkling about Kirpal Singh's true identity. He was in fact recommended by all of them in Mula Singh's place as a leader.[57] On 14 February, Kirpal Singh transmitted all the information about the rebels to the Amritsar police, including the arrangements for manufacturing bombs, the commission of dacoities and, more importantly, the entire plan for an uprising on 21 February. As his own statement goes, Kirpal Singh was accepted as Mula Singh's successor in the party and was directed on 15 February to assist the 23rd Cavalry for the rising. He left with the ostensible purpose of going to Mianmeer, but instead went to the railway station to meet the police whom he had already contacted. Although Kirpal Singh's treachery did not remain hidden for long, irreparable damage to the cause had already been done.

Following his arrest, Mula Singh also turned traitor by giving a statement to the police and by agreeing to become a prosecution witness. He stated:

> I went to Lahore on 12 February and put up in the cantonment. I went then to see the house that had been rented and the fat Bengali [Rashbehari] who had sent for me. Pingle and Kartar Singh returned and told the fat Bengali that the troops [British] were ready to sail for France. . . . So we fixed on 21 February. We fixed upon a flag of three colours. I was appointed to get Ghadar men

> from Lahore and Amritsar districts to attack the Lahore cantonment. The Bengali said he himself should make arrangements regarding Meerut, Peshawar and Ferozepur. We made enquiries about the British troops and were told that there were only a few in the Lahore cantonment. The native troops we expected to be on our side.[58]

When Rashbehari learnt of Mula Singh's arrest and subsequent confession he tried, in a desperate bid to delude the police, to advance the date for the uprising from 21 to 19 February.[59] The move did not work at all, and perhaps it was even revealed to the police since it led to the arrests of Amar Singh, Balwant Singh, Hriday Singh and others. The police raided the party headquarters and recovered arms, explosives, 'seditious' literature and tri-coloured flags.[60] Some Ghadarites, ignorant of the police raid, came to the headquarters on 20 February, only to fall into police hands. The prospective mutineers in the armed forces also could not do any better. In the hope of a rising by the 23rd Cavalry, a group of Ghadarites came to join them on 19 February and kept waiting near the railway lines. At 7 o'clock in the evening the regiment was suddenly ordered to fall in and armed British personnel were put on sentry duty. Seeing all this the Ghadarites realized that the plot had been leaked. They had, therefore, no alternative but to leave the place silently. Other Ghadarites had to similarly retreat at Ferozepur where regiments were ordered out on parade in the evening and the sepoy-suspects identified, courtmartialled and executed.[61] Police also raided various Ghadarite centres in Punjab and arrested a large number of militants. Although successful in frustrating the uprising, the authorities were unable to apprehend chief planner and organizer, Rashbehari Bose. When Kartar Singh rushed to Lahore, he found Rashbehari in the company of Harnam Singh and Ram Saran Das. Rashbehari lamented the collapse of the entire plan and advised all of them to go underground. He himself left for Benares the same night.

With the departure of Rashbehari, the militant experiment with its thwarted insurrection in February 1915 practically came to an end. The militants, who worked conspiratorially throughout without much scope for popular connection, had very little active support of the people. The common man was generally ignorant of their exploits and, therefore, was unable to appreciate or follow their example. Thus isolated, the Ghadarites had to confront not only the might of the Raj but also the hostility of all those who enjoyed social domination under colonial rule—the landed magnates, moneylenders and local officials like *zaildars*, *pattidars* and *lambardars*, who opposed the emigrants, facilitated their arrests and tendered evidence against them in the law courts. It was with their assistance that 'the Government established committees of the local Sikhs [in various places]. . . which proved to be of most valuable help to the administration'.[62] On their part, the heroic efforts of the Ghadarites could not cover up some of their weaknesses—treachery, a poor mass base and frequent falling into disarray, and, above all, the tendency to underestimate the ruthless efficiency of the Raj. Once the plan of the rising was divulged, the rebels had no chance. As Sir Michael O'Dwyer recalled:

> The coup at Lahore on 19 February foiled the plans for a general rising at night. We at once wired in cypher to the various cantonments, Sialkot, Ferozepur, Rawalpindi, etc., and the military authorities took the necessary precautions. At Lahore and Ferozepur cantonments gangs of the Ghadar Party had gathered to chip in when the expected mutiny began. But they found all the troops fallen in and under arms, and they beat a hurried retreat.[63]

The failure to bring about the rising naturally demoralized the Ghadarites, though some among them—who managed to go underground—continued to raise ripples in a placid, apparently easygoing Punjab. They could not regroup themselves any more, but nonetheless tried their hand at influencing the sepoys, penetrating the cantonments and hatching new plots.

In March 1915 Pingle, along with an Afghan *jamadar*, Nadir Khan, slipped into Meerut cantonment with ten live bombs, powerful enough 'to annihilate half the Regiment'.[64] He was busy at this point of time with the 12th Cavalry, exhorting the men to mutiny and bringing them bombs made in Chandernagore. Pingle was soon caught red-handed by the authorities with bombs and a hand-written bomb-making formula, on 23 March 1915.[65] His capture was the result of the *jamadar's* betrayal and he was later hanged on charges of treason. Nidhan Singh—another renowned absconder—planned an 'action' in the principality of Mandi. With the help of some local people, he planned to capture the magazine after killing the British resident there. The plan, however, leaked out and Nidhan Singh and his accomplices were arrested, tried and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment.[66]

Similarly, Kartar Singh was arrested at Shahpur on the charge of rousing the men of the 12th Cavalry. All these misadventures naturally called for Ghadarite reprisals on the informers, witnesses and loyalists. Chanda Singh Zaildar was murdered at Hoshiarpur while Bahadur Achhar Singh was killed for assisting the police. These incidents were followed by the killing of one Kapur Singh—a government witness against the arrested Ghadarites—and the assassinations of prominent loyalists like Sundar Singh Majithia and Roop Singh.[67] But these last flickers did not continue for long in Punjab, and by the middle of 1915 they seemed to have died away. After approximately nine months of tension and suspense, the authorities claimed that they had crushed the Ghadar rebellion. 'Nearly all the leaders and many of their most active adherents were in our hands', it was announced, and 'were awaiting trial . . . internal order was restored, and above all, the Sikh community had again proved its staunch loyalty'.[68]

The Trials and Departure of Rashbehari

To deal speedily with the Ghadar rebels—the 'sedition-mongers'—the Government of Punjab constituted at the beginning of April 1915 a Special Tribunal under the Defence of India Act of 1914. The Tribunal consisted of three hand-picked judges—A.R. Irvine, T.P. Ellis and Sheo Narain—and was given the widest possible powers under the provisions of the Act. No appeal could be made against the decision of the Tribunal and its verdict was to be final and conclusive, 'though the local or the Supreme Government may exercise powers of clemency'.[69] The court was held *in camera* and the arrested persons were accused of 'waging war on His Majesty the King Emperor and overthrowing by force the Government established by law in India, expelling Europeans and establishing a *Swadeshi* or self-government'.[70] Besides the first Lahore Conspiracy Case (which started on 26 April 1915), there were four Lahore Supplementary Cases, two Mandi Conspiracy Cases and one Lahore City Conspiracy Case. Over and above these, several murder and dacoity cases were also instituted against the Ghadarites. Extraordinary measures were taken to secure the prisoners and ensure the safety of proceedings.

According to the Sedition Committee Report of 1918, nine batches of the accused were tried by the Special Tribunal in the Lahore Conspiracy Cases. In one of these cases 61 accused were presented before the court with 404 prosecution and 228 defence witnesses, respectively. In another case, the number of the accused was 74, prosecution witnesses 365, and defence witnesses 1074.[71] Despite the large number of persons involved, the cases were tried unusually quickly and in a short-circuitous manner. Verdicts were given in all these cases between 30 March 1916 and 4 January 1917. In accordance with the judgements, twenty-eight persons were hanged, twenty-nine acquitted and the rest sentenced to transportation for life or various terms of imprisonment. Some mutinous troops were tried by courtmartial and few 'murderers, dacoits and train-wreckers' were put before the ordinary courts.[72] However, the Isemonger and Slattery Report of 1919 gives a different estimate of the outcome of these trials. According to this report, 291 persons were tried, of whom forty-two were sentenced to death, 114 transported for life and 93 sentenced to varied terms of imprisonment.[73] Perhaps none of these official estimates is truly accurate, and the number of persons actually punished was probably much higher. Besides, both these sources had not taken into account the results of certain other trials, such as the Bhawalpore Dacoity Case, Ferashehr Murder Case and Nangal Calan Murder Case. They also did not include in their calculations the sizeable number of army men courtmartialled and shot dead on the spot.

In comparison to the severity they faced in Punjab, militants elsewhere suffered much less. This was so perhaps because of the lower scale of their operations in other parts of the country than in Punjab. The development in the United Provinces is a case in point. Although Sanyal and his comrades at Benares contributed significantly to the scheme of the rising, they had not enjoyed much initiative and, consequently, they had little opportunity to act. Sanyal and his group were in fact waiting on 21 February for a signal from Punjab to join the revolt. They had already made some preparations at Allahabad under the leadership of Nalini Mohan Mukherjee and also contacted Indian soldiers (through Bibhuti and Priyanath). However, the group neither received news of the setback in Punjab nor any information as to the change of date for the rising (19 February). Besides, at this point the group had also been betrayed to the authorities almost in the fashion the Ghadarites were. So the authorities had no difficulty in arresting most members of the group, including leading figures like Sanyal, Girija Babu and Damodar Swarup. They were tried in the Benares Conspiracy Case under the Defence of India Act 1914, on the charges of subverting troops, waging war against the King Emperor, collecting arms, making bombs and distributing seditious literature. Two of the accused, Bibhuti and Manilal, became approvers and the trial continued from 5 November 1915 to 14 February 1916. At the end of the trial, Sachindranath Sanyal and Girija Babu were transported for life, nine others were sent to prison and two were acquitted.[74]

Although the retribution of the government was almost complete, the authorities nevertheless failed completely to lay their hands on the kingpin behind all developments—Rashbehari Bose. Shattered by the failure of his plan, Rashbehari left Lahore for Benares disguised as a Sikh. In Benares he had to don women's attire to pass through the heavy police cordon, and landed eventually at Chandernagore to take shelter.[75] Throughout this flight, in a mood of utter depression, Rashbehari turned introspective. Had the Indian militants possessed enough arms and funds, they would not have been forced to select the dangerous scheme of stirring mutiny among the men of the British–Indian army. So, before conceiving another plan of insurrection, Rashbehari felt, the civilian population must be provided with sufficient arms and money from foreign lands. 'A subject people could not secure their independence without international assistance.'[76]

At Chandernagore Rashbehari started seriously planning a tour abroad. After consulting his trusted friend, noted militant leader Motilal Roy, he decided to leave for Japan. To avoid detection by the police, he assumed the name Priyanath Tagore, and posed as a close relation of poet Rabindranath Tagore. He was also daring enough to call on the police commissioner of Calcutta, for procuring personally a permit for leaving India. On 12 May 1915, Rashbehari—the mastermind of an incredible attempt at insurrection in India—left for Japan on the *Sanak Maru*, in the fond hope of seeking assistance for India's liberation.

Not only did Rashbehari leave India, those Ghadarites who succeeded in giving the police a slip also left for the places they had come from—the United States and Canada. Unfortunately for them, the United States soon ceased to remain a congenial place for their activities. Having joined the war in April 1917 on the British side, the US government was pressurized by its British counterpart to take firm steps against Indian militants in America. Accordingly, the leaders and activists of the Ghadar party were rounded up in August 1917 and charged with the violation of the laws of neutrality of the United States.

On this charge thirty-one Indians were put on trial at San Francisco and sentenced to different terms of imprisonment.[77]

Muslim Militants and the Silk Conspiracy Case

India's nationalist militants, who belonged in the main to the educated middle classes, had befittingly an all-India objective, and also an attitude generally above sectional and communal interests. Yet, it would not be correct in the Indian context to imagine that any concerted plan of action for the public good could totally ignore the communal and sectional identities of its participants. With an undercurrent of religiosity and revivalism prevailing within the extremist political thinking, such identities among the militants as the Hindu, the Sikh and the Muslim did exist, and were reflected in their operations. From this point of view, it would appear that the Muslim community—many of whose members played an important role in resisting British rule in India—refrained by and large from militant activities in the latter part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The acceptance of the realities of colonial rule, the need for jobs, the appreciation of the advantages of an English education, westernization, the anxiety to raise the material level of the community in comparison, say, with the Hindus, and British willingness to help in return for subordination—these were some of the historic factors that restrained militancy among Indian Muslims.

Even then the rumblings of militancy were not altogether absent, and educated Muslims, who remained more or less committed to pan-Islamic causes, sometimes expressed strong feelings against the Raj whenever the British damaged Muslim power elsewhere in the world. This trait was in fact noticeable to many belonging to other communities, but without their being able to comprehend its anti-colonial possibility. Sachindranath Sanyal, for example, resented the fact that the Indian Muslims were not paying as much attention to India as they did to matters in Turkey, Arabia, Afghanistan and Persia,[78] but failed to appreciate the full potential of pan-Islamic sentiments in a war-torn situation. Apart from pan-Islamism, there was another factor which kept the embers of militancy alive in the Muslim mind—the continued existence of the Mujahideen in the northwest of India. The Mujahideen or the remnants of the Wahabi followers of Syed Ahmad Shah of Bareilly, had set up an independent colony across the tribal belt beyond the North West Frontier Province of India, with the cherished goal of carrying on a continuous *jehad* (holy war) against the Raj. They were able to preserve their colony mainly with secret support from Muslims in the Indian heartland. The Mujahideen who were 'frequently assisted by recruits and funds from the Indian Muslims', took part in various border clashes against the British.[79] The effect that the *Mujahideen* had on the Indian Muslims and the strong influence that pan-Islamism exercised on them became apparent with the commencement of the First World War.

Turkey's participation in the war, declaring a *jehad* against the Allies in November 1914, had repercussions in India. These became clearer when a Constantinople newspaper, *Jehan-i-Islam*, started by an Indian Muslim, Abu Said, published five anti-British *fatwas* (religious pronouncements) and transported copies of these *fatwas* to India via Persia and Afghanistan. These *fatwas* asked Muslims to join the *jehad* against the British and condemned the behaviour of those not joining it as sinful, deserving 'the wrath of God and punishment for their sin'.[80] The *fatwas* naturally caused considerable commotion among Muslims in India, and attempts were made by some enthusiasts to join the *jehad* one way or the other. Fifteen Muslim students from Lahore and several others from Peshawar and Kohat joined the Mujahideen and later moved into Kabul. In 1916 the Government of India received information of a 'Muslim conspiracy' in the Muslim-majority areas to rise against the authorities. The rising was being planned, according to the government, to sychronize it with a Mujahideen invasion from the North West Frontier.

> In January 1917, it was discovered that a party of eight Mujahideen had joined the Mujahideen colony from the districts of Rangpur and Dacca in Eastern Bengal. In March 1917, two Bengali Muhammadans were arrested in North West Frontier Province with Rs 800 in their possession which they were conveying to the fanatical colony [of the Mujahideen]. These two had for some time been Mujahideen themselves and had been sent down to their native districts to collect subscriptions.[81]

The matter came to a head when a Sikh convert to Islam, Maulana Obeidullah Sindhi, who was undergoing training to become a *maulavi* in Deoband Muslim University, United Provinces, took the initiative in launching an anti-British campaign. Thoroughly opposed to the Raj, he planned to spread pan-Islamic sentiment against the British throughout the country, with the help primarily of *maulavis.* Certain ardent supporters gathered round him, including a senior professor of Deoband, Maulana Mohammad Hussain Mandi. As Obeidullah's activities were not approved by the university authorities, he and some of his associates were rusticated. Once out of the university, Obeidullah decided to get in touch with the Mujahideen, establish contact with independent Muslim countries and try to persuade them to invade India. While he succeeded in leaving the country for Kabul, Maulana Mohammad Hussain Mandi stayed back in Deoband to maintain links with him. Obeidullah met the Mujahideen on his arrival at Kabul and also came to know the ambassadors of Turkey and Germany there.[82] At Kabul, Obeidullah was also acquainted for the first time with various other militant activists from India who had taken refuge in Afghanistan, eluding arrests and trials. This contact and the exchange of views might have led Obeidullah to review his rigid pan-Islamic views, for he made up his mind from that point to make common cause with the non-Muslim Indian rebels. The contribution of the Indian militants at Kabul, however, ran into difficulties when the amir of Afghanistan learnt of their activities and decided to detain them. They were spared by the Afghan government only at the intervention of a high-level mission led by another Indian luminary—Raja Mahendra Pratap, also a rebel.[83]

Raja Mahendra Pratap left India in 1914 and reached Switzerland, where he met Virendranath Chattopadhyay and Lala Hardayal. Accompanied by 'Chatto', he went to Berlin to take an introductory letter from the German emperor to the amir of Afghanistan. From Berlin he went Constantinople, where he met the Turkish sultan and secured from him another letter for the amir. Armed with these letters, Mahendra Pratap led his mission to Afghanistan which consisted of Maulavi Barkatullah of Bhopal[84], Dr Von Hentig, the German representative, and Captain Hamid Bey, the representative from Turkey. The mission was received cordially by the amir who, in turn, replied to both the Turkish sultan and the German emperor.[85] At Kabul, Mahendra Pratap and Obeidullah joined hands for a common cause—waging the war of Indian independence. Mahendra Pratap later recollected: 'I, together with Maulavi Barakatullah and Maulavi Obeidullah had formed a Provisional Government of [Free] India. I was acting as the President of this Government, Maulavi Barkatullah (Diwan Sahib) was working as Prime Minister and Maulavi Obeidullah was our Administrative Minister.'[86]

Some time after Obeidullah had left for Kabul, his close associate Maulana Mohammad Hussain Mandi went to the Hedjaj tract of Arabia along with Mohammed Mian Ansari and few other followers. There they came in touch with Ghalib Pasha, the Turkish military governor of the Hedjaj, and obtained from him the 'Proclamation of Holy War of *Jehad*', known popularly as the '*Ghalibnama*'. The *Ghalibnama* fervently called upon the Muslims of the world, and particularly those of India, to rise against the unjust Christian government. Mian Ansari proceeded towards Kabul with this document and distributed copies on the way, particularly in the tribal region on India's North West Frontier.[87]

By the time Ansari reached Kabul, Obeidullah was already busy with the activities of the provisional government. The government at this point was sending out letters and circulars, some of which had even reached the Russian czar and Turkestan.[88] Through its communications the provisional government urged these countries to end their alliance with Britain and concentrate their energies on overthrowing British rule in India. For this purpose, the provisional government also tried to enter into a formal alliance with the Turkish ruler. Obeidullah wrote in this connection a long letter to Mohammad Hussain, who was then in Mecca, directing him to secure the active cooperation of the Turkish government and the sheriff of Mecca in favour of the provisional government. Obeidullah further elaborated the scheme of raising a pan-Islamic army—'the Army of God'—for invading India, under the central command of Mohammad Hussain, with headquarters in Mecca and subordinate commands in Constantinople, Tehran and Kabul.[89] There were other letters also describing the progress of activities of the provisional government at Kabul. All these letters were sent to Abdul Rahim of Hyderabad (Sind), who was entrusted with the responsibility of passing them to Mohammad Hussain in Mecca. The letters were written in Persian on lengths of yellow silk and neatly sewn inside the lining of the courier's coat. The courier was a trusted family servant of the two sons of a Muslim army official from Lahore, who were studying in Kabul and acting as go-betweens for Kabul and Punjab. When the servant met their father at Lahore, the old soldier somehow got an inkling about these letters from the servant. He forced the servant to give him the letters which he handed over to a police officer, Mr Cleveland. The design in its entirety was thus exposed to the government, along with the 'valuable information as to the sympathizers in India'.[90]

The revelation of the 'Silk Letter Conspiracy', as the scheme was termed, led to the arrest of Mohammad Hussain and a dozen others by the middle of 1916. Ghalib Pasha, too, was rounded up and the government took all other 'necessary preventive measures' to deal with the situation.[91] Precisely at this juncture, the pan-Islamic concept received a serious jolt when the sheriff of Mecca raised, in June 1916, his standard of revolt against the Turks. The development was a blow to Islamic solidarity and 'knocked the bottom out of the project for combined Muslim action against British India'.[92] The conduct of the sheriff of Mecca naturally caused tension among some sections of Muslims in India. But the government prohibited all agitation and protest meetings and expressed its determination not to tolerate any condemnation of the sheriff, who had declared himself 'to be the ally of the British Government, and who was freeing his own people from Turkish oppression'.[93]

Apart from the 'Silk Letter Conspiracy' and the anticipations and frustrations over pan-Islamic cooperation, the Muslims in India were shaken during the war years by the activities of some of their young patriotic and dynamic intellectuals. These 'Young Turks' raised a wave of liberalism, called for regeneration of Muslim society and wrote vigorously anti-colonial articles in *Zamindar* (Urdu, edited by Zafar Ali) and *Comrade* (English, edited by Mohammad Ali) from Lahore, and *Al-Hilal* (Urdu, edited by Abul Kalam Azad) from Calcutta. The strident voice of all these organs consequently invited the anger of the authorities. Azad's links with the militants in Bengal had already attracted the attention of the British Criminal Intelligence which had always been on the look-out for grounds to implicate him.[94] Its plan to entangle Azad with the Silk Letter Conspiracy Case, mainly because of his close connection with Mohammad Hussain—one of its principal figures—did not prove successful. Eventually, however, the government accused Azad of 'pro-Germanism', banned *Al-Hilal* along with *Zamindar* and *Comrade,* and detained their editors.[95]

Militant activities in northern India during the war years are historically significant not so much for any concrete achievement as for the rebels' heroic failure. The plan of a civil rising, the plot for a military mutiny and the scheme for an externally assisted invasion did not come true. Had any one of these taken place—in whatever extent and intensity—the course of Indian nationalist history would have been seriously affected. Clearly, the militants failed to give effect to any of their grand designs, despite their sacrifices and sufferings, undaunted courage and unwavering determination. Eventually they remained to posterity, isolated, romantic, tragic heroes pitted unequally against overwhelmingly powerful adversaries, beaten by acts of treachery, the villainy of their near ones, and deserted completely by destiny. The clandestine methods they were compelled to adopt in offering armed resistance to an authoritarian repressive regime also had crippling limitations: the difficulty in reaching out to the people at large, the problem of coordination and communication among themselves, and the lack of access to new ideas in juxtaposition with some of their prejudices and fantasies. These are the disadvantages that armed resisters confronted by an established authority—the 'shock minority' —always suffer from. In consequence, they often fail and seldom attain instant, tangible success. Their contributions are, therefore, to be measured in the examples they set, the shock they apply to the nation, and the legends they leave behind. The conduct of Rashbehari and Sanyal, Pingle and Kartar Singh, Obeidullah and Mohammad Hussain, the Ghadar heroes and the Mujahideen, as well as the executed sepoy mutineers, should be judged mainly for their inspirational and emotional effects. But that certainly is not all, for the militants left their imprints during the war years elsewhere too. For the first time they were able, even with the regional, communal and sectional variations, to make the successful beginning of a united front (of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, and of Punjabis, Bengalis, Hindustanis, Maharashtrians, Pathans, etc.) for the cause of armed struggle against the British. That it was not possible for the succeeding generations of militants to emulate the model further highlights the importance of their achievement. Equally important is the Ghadar Party's performance abroad, in evoking a tumultous response from its followers for a genuine but uncertain cause. There is hardly any parallel to the reckless Ghadarite exodus from America in the whole history of nationalist armed struggle in India, till the formation of the Indian National Army about thirty years later. But the most important achievement of the war-time Indian militants is the manner in which they tried to rise above the sheer monotony of traditional 'terrorism' and force their entry into an insurrectionary phase of struggle—a stage which could not be attained in all the years

that followed. Much of the credit for this attainment naturally belonged to the person who remained unchained to the end—Rashbehari Bose.

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[74] Sukumar Roy, *Bharater Baiplabik Sangramer Itihas* (Bengali), Calcutta, 1910, pp. 415–16. Also see Deol, *Role of the Ghadar Party*, p. 163.

[75] Uma Mukherjee, *Two Great Indian Revolutionaries*, p. 140.

[76] Rashbehari Bose, *Atmakatha*, as published in the Bengali monthly, *Prabartak*, Jaistha, 1331, cited in ibid., p. 135.

[77] Deol, *The Role of the Ghadar Party*, p. 147.

[78] Manmathanath Gupta, *History of the Indian Revolutionary Movement*, New Delhi, 1972, p. 82.

[79] *Sedition Committee Report*, p. 174.

[80] J.C. Ker, *Political Trouble in India*, pp. 297–98.

[81] *Sedition Committee Report*, p. 175.

[82] Manmathanath Gupta, *History of the Indian Revolutionary Movement*, p. 83. Also see J.C. Ker, *Political Trouble in India*, pp. 305–56.

[83] Raja Mahendra Pratap, *My life-story of fifty-five years*, New Delhi, 1947.

[84] Maulana Barkatullah became professor at the University of Tokyo. The Japanese government later intercepted his correspondence with Shyamaji Krishna Verma. He lost his job in Japan when the First World War started. He thereafter went to USA and took over as vice-president of the Ghadar Party.

[85] Uma Mukherjee, *Two Great Indian Revolutionaries*, p. 89.

[86] Raja Mahendra Pratap, *My life-story of fifty-five years*, p. 47.

[87] R.C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement*, Vol. II, pp. 445–46.

[88] J.C. Ker, *Political Trouble in India, 1907–17*, p. 306.

[89] *Sedition Committee Report*, p. 178.

[90] R.C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement*, Vol. II, pp. 445–46.

[91] *Sedition Committee Report*, pp. 177–78. Also see ibid.

[92] O'Dwyer, *India As I knew it*, pp. 180–81.

[93] Ibid., pp. 191–92.

[94] Mahadev Desai, *Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad*, London, 1941, pp. 54–55.

[95] J.C. Ker, *Political Trouble in India*, pp. 386–90 and Abdullah Butt, *Aspects of Abdul Kalam Azad*, Lahore, 1942, pp. 19–20.

The Non-Cooperation Movement and the Militants of Bengal

Maya Gupta

Ironically, Gandhiji emerged on the Indian political scene as a non-violent leader by opposing a measure designed primarily to deal with the national revolutionists—those who adopted violent methods to attain the country's freedom. Apprehending the revival of revolutionary activities following automatic termination of the Defence of India Act at the end of the First World War, the government passed the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Acts, which came into force from 2 March 1919. The Acts, popularly known as the Rowlatt Acts or the Black Acts, provided for the trial of political cases *in camera* and set up special courts immune to appeals, but capable of considering evidence not admissible by the law of evidence. It gave the provincial governments, in addition to the centre, extraordinary powers of search, arrest and internment without trial. The measure, in fact, sanctioned governmental tyranny to suppress—in the name of stamping out terrorism—all shades of political opinion. The legislation naturally evoked discontent throughout India. Even the moderates and the constitutionalists condemned it in strong terms as inexpedient and imperious.[1] Consequently, the country reached a stage of unprecedented indignation against British injustice.

This new indignation found a new leader in Gandhiji who gave a timely expression to the mood of the nation by launching a *satyagraha* in April 1919 against the Black Law. The government retaliated with a policy of ruthless repression and the unarmed *satyagrahis*, demonstrating in various parts of India, invariably met with police excesses, including firing. The culmination of all these was reached in the savage Jallianwala Bagh massacre on 13 April 1919, carried out meticulously by General Dyer. It was followed by the imposition of a martial law regime on Gujranwalla, Lahore and Amritsar, where the authorities resorted to cruel, uncivilized methods to contain the spontaneous public agitation in Punjab.

The year 1920 turned the situation from bad to worse. The mild report of the Hunter Commission (May 1920), and the debates in the British House of Lords defending and applauding General Dyer, had a morally sickening effect on nationalist India. To the wrongs in Punjab was soon added the Khilafat injustice. When Turkey joined the First World War against the Allies, the Muslims feared an Allied attack on their holy lands. The British prime minister, however, assured Indian Muslims (9 November 1914) that these places would be immune from attack or molestation. The promise was eventually broken and the Allied powers later decided, in the Treaty of Sevres (1919), to dismember the Turkish empire and to reduce the Turkish sultan or the caliph of Islam to the position of a virtual prisoner. Indian Muslims, shocked at this atrocious treatment, resolved to plead for the restoration of the temporal and spiritual authority of the caliph. Maulana Mohammad Ali in 1920 led a delegation to England to impress upon the British authorities, the Muslim sentiment on the whole issue. The failure of the delegation resulted in agitation by the Central Khilafat Committee and the *Jamiat-ul-Ulema* in India. In this hour of agony and despair of Indian Muslims, Gandhiji supported their cause. The Khilafat injustice, according to Gandhiji, raised a moral issue—the sanctity of the government assurance to the Indian Muslims.

Gandhiji, who had already characterized the government as 'satanic' and wanted the people of India to keep their 'hands off' such a government, now raised the slogan of non-cooperation with the British Raj. He wrote to the viceroy: 'The Imperial Government had acted in the Khilafat matter in an unscrupulous, immoral and unjust manner. . . . I can retain neither respect nor affection for such a Government.'[2] Though the Non-Cooperation campaign had, in fact, started on 1 August 1920, its approval and ratification by the nation was still necessary. For this purpose a special session of the Congress was convened in Calcutta on 4 September 1920.

Following initial forceful opposition from leaders like Chittaranjan Das, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, the Calcutta session finally approved of Gandhiji's non-cooperation programme, with some amendments. The policy of non-violent non-cooperation was to include the renunciation of titles bestowed by the government, the boycott of legislature, law courts and educational institutions and, finally, the non-payment of taxes. The political leadership in Bengal was rather lukewarm in its attitude towards the Gandhian programme. They all agreed on the necessity of the participation of the common man and woman in political agitation, but suspected that it might—in the process—undermine the influence of the sophisticated political gentry. They took pride in the fact that Bengal had passed through a stage of mass movement before the rest of India, some fifteen years ago, resisting the partition of Bengal. But they were hesitant about facing the governmental repression involved in a repeat performance.

The Bengal Congress was not sure if running such risks was at all justifiable for a 'political chimera' such as Gandhiji's inadequately defined concept of *swaraj*.[3] As successors to the tradition of the Swadeshi movement the Bengal leaders had to accept non-cooperation in principle, but urged participation in the elections under the Act of 1919. Their half-hearted, confused attempt to contest Gandhiji's political stride in the Calcutta session naturally led to a clear defeat. It upset the Bengal Congress so much that Chittaranjan Das and some of his friends even thought of seceding from the Congress, but the veteran Aswini Kumar Dutta prevailed upon them not to do so.[4] It was decided thereafter that the Bengal Congress, under the leadership of Das and Byomkesh Chakrabarty, would accept the majority decision for the present, but work for its reversal in the regular session of the Congress at the end of the year. Meanwhile, Gandhiji's political activities caught the popular imagination and former critics of non-cooperation were turning gradually into its promoters throughout the country.

The feverish enthusiasm touched the public in Bengal—politically a very articulate people by tradition. The elaborate preparation of their leaders to force a change of decision against Gandhiji at the Nagpur session in December 1920, therefore, had little chances of success. The Bengal Provincial Congress Committee leadership was also not exactly a united house. The imaginative Das read through the situation almost at the last moment and effected a dramatic shift of stand, from non-cooperation to cooperation with Gandhiji. His decision must have been facilitated by the Mahatma's private assurance of freedom of political propaganda in Das's own sphere.[5] After moving the main resolution in support of non-cooperation at Nagpur, Das returned to Calcutta, having turned sure defeat into a clear victory. Bengal thus followed Gandhiji's lead, but still not without reservation.

Scepticism continued to linger—not in the public mind or among the leaders—but among the ranks of the Bengal militants, in the *samitis* or organizations of Bengal revolutionists.

Organizations like the Calcutta and Dacca Anushilan Samitis and the Jugantar group in Bengal had grown, like secret societies in all parts of the world, to combat an official policy of political persecution. The occasion for the government to adopt repressive measures and for the middle-class Bengali youth to accept the creed of violence was the same—the Swadeshi movement. In the wake of the Swadeshi movement, secret societies grew rapidly throughout Bengal with the formation of innumerable small physical culture clubs, social and charitable organizations, and relief bodies. Anushilan and Jugantar, the two rival groups with paradoxically an identical objective, functioned as federal bodies affiliating these deliriously active societies, and became decisive factors in a limited but turbulent middle-class dominated Bengali political life. The government did not hesitate to hit hard by assuming emergency powers. With the enactment of the Defence of India Act in March 1915 and its full implementation by indiscriminate arrest, house-search and internment, the movement of secret societies was virtually paralysed by 1918. According to official records, 130 persons were arrested under Regulation III of 1818 and 1100 were dealt with under the Defence of India Act.[6] Apart from some absconders, all the leading personalities of both the Jugantar and Anushilan groups were in prison. Thus, the secret societies were suppressed, though not exterminated. Loyalties to the *samitis* continued and devotion to the ideals of armed resistance to British rule remained. Activities were suspended but legends grew around the memories of martyrs and the imprisoned, particularly among the romantic and humiliated educated youth. No political experimentation in Bengal could possibly be made without some prior understanding with the secret societies.

While inaugurating constitutional developments under the Montford reforms scheme, a Royal Proclamation on 25 December 1919 granted clemency to all political prisoners in India. Those who suffered convictions for revolutionist crimes were also granted release almost on the eve of the beginning of the Non-Cooperation movement in 1920. While still in jail some of the leading personalities of the Jugantar Party agreed to support the movement after release. In 1920 the Jugantar Party, in fact, thought of working openly among the masses.[7] But they were not quite certain about Gandhiji. During the special session of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta in September 1920, Jatin Roy, Abinash Roy, Jatin Hui, Suresh Banerji and a number of important members of the Jugantar organization in north Bengal came to Calcutta to attend the session.[8] This provided Jugantar, in Calcutta and north Bengal, an opportunity to join in several secret meetings and discuss their approach towards the Non-Cooperation programme and the Gandhian principle of non-violence. It was even reported that representatives of both Jugantar and Anushilan held talks about a possible amalgamation of their respective groups.[9] But nothing actually materialized in this direction and there was no consensus. The Jugantar group, therefore, decided to wait and watch the progress of Gandhiji's non-violent struggle. They were soon convinced about Gandhiji's ability to stir the masses through the non-cooperation slogan and particularly by his pledge of bringing *swaraj* within one year. The revolutionists in Bengal were impressed at the prospects of mass participation in the Gandhian movement and were inclined to allow his non-violent agitation a fair trial for some time. At the Nagpur Congress session in December 1920 the leading personalities of the Jugantar group—Jyotish Ghosh, Bhupati Majumdar, Purna Das, Girin Banerji, Kuntal Chakrabarty and Bhupendra Kumar Dutta—met Gandhiji and frankly discussed with him the opposing viewpoints of violent and non-violent struggles against the British Raj. They agreed to accept Gandhiji's non-violent non-cooperation as a strategy for the time being and promised to work it for one year without reverting to violent methods.[10]

The rank-and-file of the revolutionists were, however, still reluctant to give any undertaking. And a powerful section in the Anushilan group, in fact, apprehended that the doctrine of non-violence would demoralize the people. Its leader Pulin Das was vociferously propagating that the country's freedom was unattainable without bloodshed.[11] There were even signs of preparation for an organized opposition to the Non-Cooperation movement. Chittaranjan Das was anxious to counteract this opposition and to win as much support as he could. He, therefore, arranged a 'closed-door' conference in Calcutta in September 1921 between Gandhiji and the Bengal revolutionaries. The outcome of the conference was that all the participants promised to give a full chance to the Congress to strive for *swaraj* and undertook to do nothing to hamper its work.[12]

Apparently the Jugantar group kept up its promise in Bengal and suspended all armed 'actions' for the time being. As subsequent developments showed, they did nothing to impede the cause of the Non-Cooperation movement, and instead, many among them actively joined the Congress agitation. This, however, was not the case with the Anushilan group. Some Anushilan members, under the leadership of Pulin Das, formed a voluntary organization, Bharat Sevak Sangha, in 1920, and in 1921 joined hands with the Citizen's Protection League, an organization of Europeans and loyalist Indians, to oppose the Non-Cooperation movement.[13] They even published a pamphlet called *Haq Katha* (*The Right Words*), denouncing what they thought to be the imbecile ideas of non-violence and sent their representatives to different districts to resist the progress of the Non-Cooperation movement.[14] Behind the facade of militancy, therefore, Pulin Das and company were really serving British interests. It was even alleged that the financial support for their anti-non-cooperation activities was provided by the British mercantile community and the money was distributed 'through the medium of an Indian advocate who did not disclose the source of the funds'.[15] As is natural in such circumstances, many individual members of Anushilan could not support these activities and joined the mass agitation of the Congress in defiance of their party line.[16] The younger section of Anushilan soon remonstrated against Pulin Das's understanding of the Non-Cooperation movement and succeeded in ousting him from leadership by the end of 1922.[17]

Meanwhile, the Non-Cooperation movement progressed in Bengal in a spectacular manner. Lawyers suspended practice, students went on strike and numerous members of the teaching staff in schools and colleges resigned. The number of Congress volunteers swelled quietly and by February 1921, in Calcutta alone, their number exceeded thousands.[18] They busied themselves in making propaganda, collecting donations, boycotting government officials and loyalists, running arbitration courts and national schools. There was opposition in Midnapore district against the payment of taxes under the Village Self Government Act, and Birendranath Sasmal led a no-tax campaign in the face of the official policy of repression. In 1922, the government was forced to withdraw the Act. There was unprecedented labour agitation in the industrial complex around Calcutta. Factory workers, already adversely affected by the post-war trade recession, organized strikes. Tramway workers, out on strike, paralyzed the metropolis and British firms, the largest employers of industrial labour in Bengal, were hard hit. The agitation moved into the mining areas of west Bengal, where trade unionism became popular. A stir was created when coolies in the Assam tea gardens went on strike. As the tea planters (mostly British) refused to fulfil the demands of the striking men, a coolie exodus began from Assam to Chandpur in east Bengal. The authorities called in a Gurkha force to deal with the departing crowds in Chandpur. The consequent 'Gurkha outrage' was so shocking that it led to the Assam–Bengal Railway and Steamer strikes—under the leadership of J.M. Sengupta—disrupting traffic in east Bengal and Assam. In the districts the agitation was becoming intense and in many rural areas the public refused to pay the *chowkidari* tax and even rents to the government and private landlords.[19] Boycott of foreign manufacturers, picketing of shops, selling of imported articles and bonfires of foreign cloth added excitement to the prevailing atmosphere of tension. There were clashes between mobs and the police, and some cases of police firing in Calcutta.[20] The climax was reached on 17 November 1921, the day the Prince of Wales arrived in India. There was a total *hartal* in Calcutta and the government struck in retaliation. The volunteer organization was declared illegal, the Congress and Khilafat offices were ransacked, and public meetings and demonstrations were prohibited. The Prince of Wales was due to arrive in Calcutta on 24 December 1921 and the BPCC was ardently preparing for a showdown. Das was selected as the 'dictator' of BPCC (for the first time in the history of the Indian Congress) to spearhead the agitation. But in the first week of December the government decided upon mass arrests and by the middle of the month most of the leaders, including Das and thousands of non-cooperators throughout Bengal, were thrown into prison.[21]

During all these stormy days of struggle, the Bengal revolutionists—on the whole—were active participants. In places where they did not participate they at least refrained from acts of violence. Some of their leaders came to occupy responsible positions in the District Congress Committees and guided the local *satyagraha* movement. They also exercised a strong hold on the local Congress volunteer organization throughout Bengal and thus played an important role in the mass upsurge. But even when working within the Congress, the Bengal revolutionists generally, barring a few like Shyamsundar Chakravarty, were keen on regrouping and re-organizing their respective secret societies. Those who did not take part in the movement were not sitting idle. They were endeavouring, in all earnestness, to form fresh associations, clubs and libraries with a view to draw their followers together.[22] There was also a greater understanding at this point between Jugantar and Anushilan—otherwise at loggerheads with each other. Thus, during the Non-Cooperation movement, between 1920 and 1922, violent activities were certainly suspended in Bengal, but not the creed of violence and its organization.

Purna Das, a renowned revolutionary of Madaripur subdivision, Faridpur, was one of the Jugantar leaders who attended the Nagpur session and supported Gandhiji's programme of non-cooperation. An organizer of student strikes in Calcutta and Madaripur, he was engaged in agitational propaganda in the villages near Dum Dum cantonment. He also initiated the formation of a *panchayat* in Gurgai village for the arbitration of disputes without the help of British law courts. Simultaneously, he set up an organization in the neighbourhood of Dum Dum cantonment with a view to work towards disrupting local supplies to the troops there when necessary. The secret unit was left under the care of a Jugantar member to act under the instructions of Bhupendra Kumar Dutta—another important Jugantar leader. While supporting and promoting the Non-Cooperation movement, Purna Das always remained busy in the reorganization of his secret machinery. He, along with Basanta Mazumdar, Kiran Mukherji, Kaliprasad Banerji and others, opened an improvized Jugantar centre at Calcutta—ostensibly a fruit shop in the municipal market. The shop was said to have been financed by C.R. Das himself.[23] The venue was generally used for meetings of revolutionists of different groups and districts to discuss their political programmes—present and future. The Jugantar centre at Madaripur, which was so long under Purna Das, was now placed under Pratap Chandra Guha, a local physician and a loyal member of the party. Though openly engaged in political activities in Calcutta, Purna Das often visited Madaripur and held secret discussions in Pratap Chandra Guha's dispensary. According to police reports these secret gatherings planned the removal of weapons to Calcutta and the assassination of a suspected police spy Sushil Dutta, who was an ex-member of the party, and of Rai Bahadur S.C. Mazumdar, deputy superintendent of police, intelligence branch.[24] The assassination plans were, however, not carried out, probably to keep Jugantar's pledge to Gandhiji.

Hiralal Biswas, another leading member of the Jugantar group, had also joined the Non-Cooperation movement prominently while simultaneously setting up an organization at Lalgola, Murshidabad district, affiliated to Jugantar. He was always on the look out for new recruits and in readiness for training them along violent lines. Similarly, Jatin Bhattacharya, an ex-detenu, worked earnestly for both the Non-Cooperation movement and violent activities at the same time.[25] To organize the Congress movement he formed a Congress committee at 61–1 Wellington Street, Calcutta. A number of Jugantar members like Prakas Dey, Suresh Bhattacharya, Rebati Barua and Satindranath Sen became members of this Congress local committee. Yet, even in the thick of non-violent agitation, they all kept lethal weapons in their possession.[26] Santosh Dutta, an adherent of Purna Das, was an enthusiastic participant in the Congress movement. But side by side, he advocated his sympathy for the cult of violence and attempted to collect funds for the *samiti.* Most prominent Jugantar leaders were also continuously holding political discussions and for this purpose, Jyotish Ghosh, Kuntal Chakrabarty, Basanta Mazumdar, Purna Das and others used to assemble frequently at the Saraswati Library at Ramanath Mazumdar Street, Calcutta. Jyotish Ghosh was reported to have maintained contact with local Jugantar members in Mymensingh with the purpose of resuscitating the organization.[27] Bepin Saha and Suresh Burman of Mymensingh, who joined the Non-Cooperation movement, were busy collecting arms. According to police reports, they visited Brahmanbaria in early 1921 for the purpose of storing arms in a secured place.[28]

The growth of a militant organization at Chittagong under the leadership of Surjya Kumar Sen, a teacher of the local National High School, also took shape at this point under cover of the Congress agitation. The Chittagong group, formed about 1918, had no clear affiliation either with Jugantar or Anushilan. In September 1920 the group, however, split on the question of affiliation and Charubikash Dutta and others merged with Anushilan against the decision of a majority, led by Surjya Sen and Anurup Sen, to follow the Jugantar path.[29] But both groups, in spite of their local rivalries, took part in the Non-Cooperation movement. Surjya Sen, in fact, set up a *samyashram* in Gandhian style, ostensibly to assist the Congress movement, but in reality as a centre for secretive get-togethers.[30] They took part in the Congress agitation over the coolie strike, the Gurkha outrage and the Assam–Bengal Railway and Steamer strikes. However, they were careful not to get too involved in the Non-Cooperation movement and miss out on the opportunity of stabilizing their own groups. They collected arms and developed organizationally. There were even plots to assassinate the local district intelligence officer and steal revolvers from the police officials of the town.[31] Eventually, however, the plan was dropped in view of the general policy to avoid violent actions. Both Surjya Sen's group and Charubikash Dutta's followers, on the whole, lived up to the promises given by the Bengal revolutionists to Gandhiji. However, they did not take Gandhiji's claim for *swaraj* within one year seriously, and were trying to prepare for the days when it would be necessary to resume armed activities.[32]

The strong North Bengal organization of Jugantar, with Rangpur as its centre, was active from 1920. The activists established *seva samitis*, football clubs and philanthropic associations in different parts of Rangpur, and emissaries were sent to other centres in Pabna, Rajshahi, Bogra, Kurigram and Jalpaiguri to enliven the local organizations.[33] Kalipada Bagchi of Rangpur, Jatin Roy of Bogra and some others met in January 1921 to determine their future. It was decided, at Jatin Roy's instance, to divide the organization into two branches—one secret, consisting of members unknown to the police, and the other open, composed of ex-detenus and other exposed members. The secret branch would engage itself in collecting arms and training members on the lines of the Sinn-Fein movement in Ireland. The open branch would work through public institutions and try to enlist new recruits.[34] However, all acts of violence were kept in abeyance in accordance with the declared Jugantar policy and a proposed daring action of political dacoity in Mymensingh district was eventually dropped. The north Bengal group also took part in the Non-Cooperation movement when it spread all over Bengal. Their leading members, like Kalipada Bagchi and Sasadhar Kar, led the students' strikes in north Bengal and their activists went to the villages to persuade the cultivators to reduce the cultivation of jute.[35] Side by side, the group continued its own secret work and searched frantically for arms and ammunitions. Two members, Satindra Das Gupta and Jatin Hui, opened up a business concern at Calcutta known as the Indo–Swiss Company. It was meant to smuggle in arms, in the name of importing Swiss articles, with the help of Satindra's brother Biren Das Gupta—then living in Switzerland. Another member, Abinash Roy, initiated a joint stock company for importing medicines from foreign countries. The motive was primarily to establish contacts abroad for arms. The north Bengal group also maintained a close liaison with Jugantar leaders in Calcutta.

Throughout the Non-Cooperation movement the Chandernagore group of revolutionists, too, remained active in organizing their own affairs. Their leader, Motilal Roy, a close associate of Sri Aurobindo, had established a semi-religious organization, the Prabartak Sangha, which in secret maintained close relations with Anushilan.[36] Motilal Roy also had a soft corner for Jugantar and, in fact, arranged shelter in French Chandernagore for the Jugantar absconders, following the passage of the Defence of India Act 1915. He considered Gandhiji's Non-Cooperation movement to be an emotional stir and expected to secure selfless workers for the cause of revolutionary terrorism through it. He had, however, no sympathy for Gandhiji's cause and he was convinced as to the ultimate failure of the movement.[37] The Prabartak Sangha, naturally, played no part in the nationwide agitation. Rather, the Sangha and its leaders concentrated their energies on educational and commercial ventures. The educational endeavour took the shape of an academic institution early in 1921, called the National Institute. Its teaching staff included the revolutionists of Chandernagore like Motilal Roy himself, Manindra Naik and others.[38] The Institute had several branches in Chandernagore and drew a good number of young pupils. The commercial plans of the Sangha resulted in the establishment of a cabinet firm in Barasat, a dye-factory in Narkeldanga and the Prabartak emporium on Cornwallis Street in Calcutta. Soon, however, all these business centres turned into meeting places for secret society workers. The leading revolutionists of Calcutta and Chandernagore gathered in these places for secret meetings and political discussions. The police in Bengal also suspected the Prabartak Sangha of having links with violent elements in other parts of India.[39]

The members of Anushilan were not unanimous in either supporting or opposing the Non-Cooperation movement. Pulin Das and some of his adherents were definitely opposed to the movement, but others were not quite clear about it. When the non-violent agitation was in full cry in 1921 in Bengal, many Anushilan members took part in it in spite of their firm conviction in armed struggle. Satish Pakrashi, the organizer of the Samiti in Barisal, for example, was actually moved by the popular enthusiasm and participated in the Non-Cooperation activities of the Barisal District Congress. But he could not agree to join the Congress when he was asked to sign a pledge announcing his faith in non-violence.[40] Pakrashi, then, with the assistance of an ex-detenu, Fagu Roy, remained active in revitalizing the Barisal Anushilan group. Like Pakrashi, the Anushilan leaders in Calcutta were also impressed by the Non-Cooperation movement, but did not know exactly what to do. Their leaders like Pratul Ganguli, Biren Chatterji, Rabindra Sen, Probodh Das Gupta, Sisir Ghosh and Sachin Sanyal of Benares attended the Nagpur session of the Congress and met Gandhiji. On the way back they held a secret meeting at Jabalpur to decide the future course of action. It was vaguely resolved then that they would try to take advantage of the Gandhian movement with a view to promote their own objective in the near future.[41] Whatever might have been their decision the Anushilan Samiti, like Jugantar, refrained from resorting to violence. They were also busy organizing their followers and, by and large, many of them took part in the Non-Cooperation movement.

In Faridpur, for instance, Narendranath Banerji—an ex-detenu—gathered together the remnants of the Samiti in the town. In the task of reorganization he was later joined by Nibaran Chandra Pal. Both of them with their followers joined the Non-Cooperation movement. They took a leading part in organizing students' strikes, political meetings and demonstrations throughout Faridpur.[42] The broken Anushilan organization in the districts of Comilla and Tripura was reconstituted by Manindra Chakrabarty. Here too, Anushilan activists participated in the nationwide agitation. Manindra Chakrabarty was reported to have been advised by the Calcutta leader, Pratul Ganguli, that their participation in Non-Cooperation was only to gather momentum for a forthcoming revolution in India, due in several years' time. Manindra, therefore, laid stress in Comilla on the training of reliable members and on recruitment.[43] In Rajshahi, the disarrayed Anushilan members were re-grouped by Prakash Lahiri, another ex-detenu. Under him the Samiti apparently joined the Non-Cooperation agitation there. In Dacca, Anushilan members joined hands with a local pleader, Sirish Chatterji, in forming an association for the improvement of agriculture and agriculturists in Bengal. They also participated in the propaganda for the Non-Cooperation movement. So, under the camouflage of the Congress organization and the association—with an agricultural programme—they continued to restore the Samiti to its former strength.[44]

A survey of the activities of the Bengal revolutionists during the Non-Cooperation movement will not be complete without a reference to Hemchandra Ghosh's Mukti Sangha in Dacca, an independent organization set up in 1905. It maintained a close contact with Anushilan and later with Jugantar.[45] Following the Indo–German conspiracy during the First World War, Hemchandra was arrested under Regulation III of 1818. The police repression seemed to have destroyed his organization. But a small section of Mukti Sangha survived due to the exertions of Pramatha Chowdhury, his able friend and colleague. At the end of the war he was joined by Khagen Das, Suren Bardhan, Krishna Adhikari and Alimuddin Saheb, popularly known as 'Master Saheb'. Master Saheb—an able Muslim revolutionist—drew a good number of young men of his community into Mukti Sangha. He, however, did not live long and at his untimely death the revival of Mukti Sangha suffered a setback.[46]

In the middle of 1920, Hemchandra was released along with his comrades—Shirish Pal, Haridas Dutta, Haridas Roy and others. He found it difficult to operate in Dacca in the same old terroristic way. In 1921, therefore, Hemchandra shifted to Calcutta and functioned from there to build up his organization on an all-Bengal level. The Dacca centre was left under Anil Roy—a promising young intellectual—who emphasized social welfare work and founded new satellite associations like Shri Sangha, Shanti Sangha and Dhruba Sangha. All these became important places for recruitment and training for future armed actions. Similarly, organizations developed in various parts of Bengal like Mymensingh, Calcutta, Midnapore, Sylhet, 24 Parganas and Pabna between 1921 and 1929, following the careful planning of Hemchandra.[47] None of these *sanghas*, however, undertook acts of violence in the course of the Non-Cooperation movement. The members, in fact, seriously took part in the movement as volunteers. On the whole, the Congress volunteer organization in almost all parts of Bengal, set up to work out the non-violent Non-Cooperation movement, was dominated by people who believed in violent resistance. They displayed a natural talent for organizing bodies of volunteers which also offered them an opportunity to recruit cadres from amongst impressionable young men. According to government sources, the Bengal revolutionists attained considerable success in recruiting young men who were contacted in connection with the Congress volunteer organization.[48]

Meanwhile, the Non-Cooperation movement in Bengal, following the agitation over the visit of Prince of Wales, continued unabated. Popular enthusiasm and industrial unrest were still very high in the province, in spite of largescale arrests of political leaders. Fear of imprisonment and arrest had completely disappeared from the public mind. Those arrested would often refuse to leave the prison even when freed,[49] and the demonstrators were generally indifferent to indiscriminate cane and baton charges by the police. At this point, in December 1921, the Congress met for its annual session at Ahmedabad. The year in which Gandhiji had promised to bring *swaraj* at the Nagpur session was drawing to a close. The people were turning impatient and preparing for any sacrifice. The Ahmedabad Congress selected Gandhi as the 'Dictator', reiterated its faith in non-violent non-cooperation and advocated civil disobedience. A number of Bengal revolutionists attended the Ahmedabad session and in spite of the unfulfilled promise of *swaraj* within one year, they agreed to the resolution passed there.[50] Individual civil disobedience started soon, to be followed by mass civil disobedience. Gandhiji decided to start this new phase of the movement experimentally through the non-payment of taxes in Bardoli sub-division of Gujarat. On 1 February 1922, he sent an ultimatum to the viceroy, Lord Reading, saying that if the government did not show a change of heart within seven days, mass civil disobedience would start in Bardoli. The government not only refused to give in but actually held the Congress agitation responsible for all disturbances in the country during 1921, including widespread industrial unrest. Feverish tension developed, therefore, over an impending confrontation between nationalist India and the British Raj. Elaborate arrangements were also made for commencing the no-tax campaign in Bengal, UP and Andhra. Isolated cases of spontaneous violence were bound to take place at such times of high tension and unrestrained popular enthusiasm. There were reports of violence from Bareilly and some parts of Andhra. The mood of the people of Calcutta and the rest of Bengal—where the unrest and agitation were beyond the control of the less influential middle-class[51] Congress leaders—also alarmed Gandhiji. He was worried about 'the utter disorganization' in Calcutta and about those volunteers there who were 'not pledged to non-violence'.[52] Gandhiji probably had misgivings, and he was hesitant all through about the outcome of the mass no-tax campaign, but going back on it was certainly difficult. He, however, found a way out of the difficulty on 4 February 1922, when the exasperated villagers of Chauri

Chaura in UP acted violently. The police fired upon the demonstrators at Chauri Chaura and the infuriated mob burnt down the police station along with the policemen inside. Upset, Gandhiji called a meeting at Bardoli of those members of the Congress Working Committee who were not yet arrested, and decided to suspend the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements immediately.[53] It was an unilateral withdrawal on the part of the Indian National Congress, a retreat at a point when public reactions throughout India had almost reached a climax.

There was resentment everywhere against Gandhiji's decision, particularly in view of the promise of the greater success of the no-rent campaign. People began to wonder why the Congress 'Dictator' should have emphasized an isolated incident so much as to frustrate a national offensive.[54] The principal adherents of Gandhiji like Motilal Nehru, Lajpat Rai and Chittaranjan Das shared the sense of frustration from prisons. But nobody seriously discussed the basic issues connected with the withdrawal of the movement—such as the extent to which the continuous mass stirrings could remain non-violent, or the limit to which middle-class politicians could control an impending mass upsurge. Gandhiji at least admitted the limitations through his Bardoli Resolution, others merely evaded the questions behind a screen of rancour. The Bengal revolutionists did no better. Some of them felt relieved that their pledge to Gandhiji of shunning violence had come to an end,[55] and that they were free to act according to their wishes. Others expected that the public would now swing from non-violence to violence.[56] Nevertheless, the revolutionists, as participants, could not be completely free of the nationwide feeling of depression over the relinquished movement. The country stood stupefied and all excitement suddenly subsided. The British Raj lost no time in bringing home their advantage. On 10 March 1922, Gandhiji was arrested on the charge of writing seditious articles in *Young India*. The trial evoked admiration for the leader but created no national commotion. For all practical purposes the Non-Cooperation movement was suddenly over, leaving a thoroughly demoralized people groping in the wilderness.

In the political vacuum thus created abruptly, the militants were certain to become active again on the Bengal scene. The Non-Cooperation movement had afforded them some relief by diverting government attention from the violent to the non-violent front. On their part, they had restrained themselves and kept their promise to Gandhiji scrupulously. All the same, Bengali militants had always been opposed to the acceptance of the Gandhian principles of *satyagraha* struggle. But what they could not completely reject was the popular character of the Gandhian movement. The revolutionists, devotees of individual heroism, were deeply impressed by the mass agitation and gradually came close to it. Its attraction was so strong that they, in fact, took part in it. The participation naturally was partly spontaneous and partly motivated. The Non-Cooperation movement offered them opportunities to set their house in order, following a period of extreme official repression. It gave them the advantage of entering into a legal political body—the Bengal Provincial Congress. Through the Bengal Congress volunteer organization, they contacted new recruits and extended their sphere of influence. They never forgot, even for a moment, their old loyalties or their commitment to the ideas of armed resistance. They ceaselessly continued their search for arms and ammunitions, men and money. They persistently attempted, while working for the Non-Cooperation movement and the Congress, to reorganize their disarrayed *samitis*. At the same time, the revolutionists in were unable to disregard their novel experience of a mass movement. Revolutionism, or the cult of political violence, was revived in Bengal in the aftermath of the Non-Cooperation movement. But it could not retain its exact traditional character—not after having seen the strength of a rising nation.

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Notes and References

[1] Srinivasa Sastri, the liberal leader, commented during the discussions in the Central Legislative Assembly on the Rowlatt Bills, '... if our appeal falls flat, if the Bill goes through, I do not believe there is anyone here who would be doing his duty if he did not join the agitation.' *Central Legislative Assembly Proceedings*, 7 February 1919. Even Sankaran Nair, a member of the viceroy's Executive Council, disapproved of the measure for substituting ordinary laws of the country at the discretion of bureaucrats. Tarachand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. III, p. 473.

[2] D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. VI, p. 365.

[3] J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, p. 152.

[4] P. Roy, *The Life of C.R. Das*, p. 159.

[5] Nalini Kishore Guha, *Banglay Biplabbad* (Bengali), pp. 35–36.

[6] Note on the activity of released political prisoners and detenus, *Home Pol. File No. 379–I* of 1924.

[7] Jadugopal Mukhopadhyaya, *Biplabi Jibaner Smriti*, pp. 450–55.

[8] Note on the activity of released political prisoners and detenus. *Home Pol. File No. 379–I* of 1924.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Bhupendra Kumar Dutta, *Biplabi Gandhi o Bharater Biplabandolan* (Bengali), edited by Sailesh Kumar Bandopadhyaya, *Gandhi Parikrama*, Calcutta, Baisakh 1376, pp. 264–70.

[11] Note on the activity of released political prisoners and detenus. *Home Pol. File No. 379–I* of 1924.

[12] S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p. 60.

[13] Note on the connection between revolutionists and the Swaraj Party in Bengal. *Home Pol. File No. 61* of 1924.

[14] A.C. Guha, *The First Spark of Revolution*, p. 496.

[15] S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p. 60.

[16] A.C. Guha, *The First Spark of Revolution*, pp. 496–98.

[17] Satish Pakrashi, *Agni Juger Katha* (Bengali), p. 145.

[18] J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, p. 209.

[19] *Statesman*, 9 August 1921.

[20] Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, p. 221.

[21] S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, pp. 63–65.

[22] Satish Pakrashi, *Agni Juger Katha*, p. 144.

[23] Note on the activity of released political prisoners and detenus. *Home Pol. File No. 379–I* of 1924.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] *Home Pol. File No. 379–I*, 1924.

[29] Statement by Ananta Singh, 3 January 1925. *Home Pol. File No. 253* of 1925.

[30] Ganesh Ghosh, '*Surjya Sen* (*Mastar da*)'. An article in *Biplabi Mahanayak Surjya Sen Smriti* (Bengali), p. 14.

[31] *Home Pol. File No. 379–I* of 1924.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] A brief note on Prabartak Sangha of Chandernagore, *Home Pol. File No. 249* of 1925.

[37] *Home Pol. File No. 379–I* of 1924.

[38] A brief note on Prabartak Sangha of Chandernagore. *Home Pol. File No. 249* of 1925.

[39] *Home Pol. File No. 379–I* of 1924.

[40] Satish Pakrashi, *Agni Juger Katha*, pp. 144–45.

[41] *Home Pol. File No. 379–I* of 1924.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Rakshit Roy and Bhupendra Kishore, *Sabar Alakshye* (Bengali), pp. 184–88.

[46] Ibid., p. 192.

[47] Ibid., p. 195.

[48] Note on the connection between revolutionists of the Swaraj Party in Bengal. *Home Pol. File No. 61* of 1924.

[49] S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p. 66.

[50] Note on the connection between revolutionists and the Swaraj Party in Bengal. *Home Pol. File No. 61* of 1924.

[51] All the big Congress leaders were in jail at that time.

[52] Mahatma Gandhi to Jawaharlal Nehru, *A Bunch of Old Letters*, Bombay, 1960, pp. 23–24.

[53] J.B. Kripalani, *Gandhi: His Life and Thought*, 1969, pp. 92–93.

[54] S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p. 73.

[55] Bhupen Dutta, *Biplabi Gandhi o Bharater Biplabandolan, Gandhi Parikrama*, p. 276.

[56] Satish Pakrashi, *Agni Juger Katha*, p. 145.

A Review of Revolutionist Operations in India

1927–29

Maya Gupta

Apart from employing constitutional and agitational methods in their struggle against the British Raj, patriotic Indians often used armed resistance. At the beginning of the twentieth century and during the First World War, the protagonists of armed resistance in India were very active indeed. They formed secret societies, smuggled arms, planned insurrections and assassinated hated British officials. The government promptly hit back, letting loose a policy of repression, tracking the rebels in India and abroad, and executing and exiling them.

By the end of the First World War Indian militants seemed to have substantially lost ground against the offensive of the government. Thereafter, they were definitely pushed to the background when Gandhiji led, in 1920, the Non-Cooperation movement. For a time the revolutionists were dazzled, like all other Indians, by the nationwide mass upsurge. There was confusion in their ranks and even hesitation as to the usefulness of scattered armed resistance vis-à-vis the intense popular agitation throughout the country. But once the Non-Cooperation movement had blown over and a sense of national frustration was born following its abrupt withdrawal in February 1922, the revolutionists swung back into action. Their *samitis* (secret societies) came to life once again, smuggled arms and secret bomb factories reappeared, and political assassinations and fund-raising dacoities were resumed. Organized terroristic activities flourished again, particularly in the northern and eastern parts of India. In the United Provinces (hereafter UP) and in the Punjab a secret society called the Hindustan Republican Association was formed with the object of establishing a federated free republic of India through armed revolution.[1] With a similar object, a New Violence Party was organized in eastern India,[2] which was spearheaded by some of the younger but more militant elements of the well-known Anushilan and Jugantar groups of the extremists in Bengal.[3] There were reports about the constant infiltration of Bengali youths with 'terroristic leanings' in Assam and Bihar.[4] Surjya Kumar Sen, the leader of the Chittagong group of revolutionists in Bengal and a member of the New Violence Party, was believed to have visited, between 1924 and 1926, various places in Assam, Bihar and UP, with the purpose of setting up party centres.[5]

As usual, the resuscitation of revolutionary terrorism in 1923–24 was matched by the government determination to suppress it. Even in 1924 the authorities were quick to make use of emergency powers to contain extremist activities. They used Regulation III of 1818 and the newly passed Bengal Criminal Law Amendment (BCLA) Act of 1924 to detain hundreds of suspected revolutionists by the beginning of 1925. The British intelligence network and the police were also active outside of Bengal, particularly in Bihar and UP. Further, the government was able, towards the end of 1925, to inflict two heavy blows on the revolutionists, one in Bengal and the other in UP. In Bengal the members of the New Violence Party made preparations for 'actions', established links with their North Indian compatriots, and founded a small bomb-manufacturing factory in Dakshineswar, Calcutta. In November 1925 the police succeeded in locating the bomb factory and capturing some of the leading figures along with bomb-making materials. Simultaneously the police raided the party's hideout in Shovabazar and arrested some other persons there. Only one of the leaders, Surjya Kumar Sen, somehow managed to escape, but he was detained later under the BCLA. The government set up a special tribunal, tried the accused in the Dakshineswar Bomb Case, and punished them with various long terms of imprisonment.[6]

The Dakshineswar Bomb Case marked a setback to the New Violence Party and there was, for a time, an eclipse of neo-militants in Bengal. Similar developments in northern India practically resulted in an identical result when members of the Hindustan Republican Association, under the leadership of Ramprasad Bismil, held up a train near Kakori in Lucknow in August 1925, and looted government money from it. When the authorities realized it was a political crime, they made frantic efforts to apprehend members of the group. Their exertions in UP and Bihar finally led to the arrest of all except the ever-elusive Chandrashekhar Azad. The prolonged trial of the accused in Lucknow, which led to capital punishment for a dacoity case, stunned the common man and, to his great shock, all the executions were carried out in December 1927.[7] Soon after, in January 1928, the UP and Bihar group of revolutionists attempted to avenge the Kakori Case executions. J.N. Sanyal of Benares and Phanindranath Ghosh of Bettiah, Bihar (who was engaged in secret organizational work in Bihar since 1926), were reported to have planned the assassination of Rai Bahadur J.N. Banerji, deputy superintendent of police, Allahabad, for his notorious role during the Kakori investigations. Manindranath Banerji, who was deputed for this, fired upon the DSP near the Marwari Hospital in Benares. The DSP was badly hurt by the revolver shots, but managed to escape death. Manindra was caught on the spot and sentenced to transportation for life.[8]

To add to the difficulties of the revolutionists, the Kakori and Dakshineswar cases were followed soon by some arrests in Deoghar, Bihar. From the beginning of 1927 British intelligence had been closely following the activities of new suspected extremists like Birendranath Bhattacharya of Dacca. Birendranath was believed to have contacts with militants in Bihar and Assam, as well as in the Punjab, through a Punjabi student in Calcutta named Indra Chandra Narang.[9] By watching the movements of Birendranath, the authorities came to know about the existence of a revolutionist centre in Deoghar. In October 1927 the police raided a boarding-house in Deoghar occupied by Birendranath, and seized some arms and ammunitions. The police also discovered a large number of extremist propaganda papers and a notebook containing (in cypher) the names and addresses of 68 revolutionists of Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa, Punjab and UP.[10] The discovery led to searches in many places and arrests of numerous persons. The searches revealed a stock of revolutionist literature, explosives and arms at various centres. In the house of Sailendranath Chakravarty in Allahabad alone, two revolvers, 200 cartridges, gunpowder, explosives, cypher addresses, entrenching tools, proscribed books and revolutionary leaflets were found.[11] Soon the government instituted the well-known Deoghar Conspiracy Case by framing charges against twenty persons. When the judgement on this case was finally delivered in July 1928, some of the accused, including Sailendranath Chakravarty, Upendra Chandra Dhar, Surendranath Bhattacharya and Birendranath Bhattacharya, were subjected to various terms of rigorous imprisonment.[12] Incidents similar to Deoghar took place in the heart of Bengal and resulted in the discovery of some arms and ammunitions in Sukea Street, Calcutta, in January 1927, and in Salkia, Howrah, in August 1927. The extremists involved in both the Sukea and Salkia Bomb Cases were tried by special tribunals and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

The detentions of 1924–25, the setbacks of Kakori and Dakshineswar, and the revelations in Deoghar and Calcutta clearly dampened the spirit of the Indian extremists, but did not deter them in any way. Those who successfully managed to evade British vigilance soon attempted to form themselves into new groups. These groups tried once again to contact each other, searched for arms and finances, and toyed continuously with daring schemes. In northern India the absconding Chandrashekhar Azad played a pivotal role in reorganizing the militants and reaffirming their faith in armed struggle. Armed action against the enemies of the people, against the British Raj, was believed to be indispensable for arousing the nation.[13] Bhagat Singh, a youthful revolutionist, was active among the militant young men of Punjab and formed the Naujawan Bharat Sabha in 1927. Its objectives were to uphold the principle of armed resistance, propagate socialist ideas and serve as a recruiting centre for the revolutionist party.[14] Unlike their comrades in northern India, extremists in eastern India appeared to be rather quiet between 1927 and 1928. Nevertheless, the rival organizations of Anushilan and Jugantar remained intact, arms were carefully preserved in secret places, and the number of new recruits increased. The New Violence Party partially disappeared from the scene with the continued detention of its key men. But the programme that it stood for, namely, the creation of a front of militants on the basis of armed actions, persisted. There developed a desire among some militants for unity between Anushilan and Jugantar, and an anxiety for concerted action. Opinions on these lines were constantly advocated among the revolutionists, in and outside prison.[15]

In August 1928, the revolutionists in northern India decided to set up a new party, amalgamating their provincial organizations in the Punjab, UP and Bihar and coordinating activities with their compatriots in Bengal. Accordingly Chandrashekhar Azad, Phanindranath Ghosh, Bijoy K. Sinha, Bhagat Singh, Shiv Verma, Sukhdev and some others secretly met at the ruins of Ferozeshah Tughlaq's fort in Delhi on 8 and 9 September. Deliberations in this meeting resulted in the formation of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA) in all the provinces except Bengal—where immediate recurrence of violence was considered to be inopportune.[16] A central committee was formed with provincial and district committees under it. Sukhdev, Shiv Verma and Phanindranath Ghosh respectively, were placed, in charge of the Punjab, UP and Bihar units. The avowed object of the HSRA was declared to be the establishment of a socialist state in India. Socialism was accepted as 'an ideal . . . to rebuild society after the capture of power'.[17] As the militants had lost faith in the existing nationalist leadership, terrorism was adopted as the policy of the HSRA. While determining the immediate course of action, the HSRA favoured inviting explosives experts from Bengal to instruct its members in the manufacture of bombs, attempting to free the Kakori Case prisoners from jail, and some other daring actions.[18]

When the HSRA was thus being organized, a nationwide furore arose over the visit of the 'all-white' Simon Commission to India to examine India's constitutional progress. The Commission met with hostile demonstrations everywhere it went. Many of these protest demonstrations were forcibly dispersed by the police. While dispersing one such demonstration at Lahore the police made a severe *lathi*-charge injuring many, including Lala Lajpat Rai—the leading figure of the demonstration. Lalaji subsequently succumbed to his injuries and the entire nation was plunged into grief and mute anger. The revolutionists, who took part in the boycott of the Simon Commission, were eager to give violent expression to the popular feeling. On 8 September 1928 a powerful explosion in the Allahabad Express, approaching Manmad from Bhusawal, took a toll of three lives. Harendranath Bhattacharya and Manmohan Gupta, who were arrested in this connection, admitted that they were carrying explosives with the object of attacking the train in which the Simon Commission was to travel. Both the accused were tried and sentenced to seven years' rigorous imprisonment.[19]

Some time later the HSRA decided, on 10 December 1928, to avenge Lala Lajpat Rai's death by assassinating the person responsible for the *lathi*-charge on him—Mr Scott, the superintendent of police, Lahore. Accordingly, a plan of action was chalked out and Mr Scott's movements were closely watched by the HSRA members. On 17 December, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Bhagwati Charan and Chandrashekhar Azad assembled near DAV College and by the side of the superintendent's office. When J.P. Saunders, the assistant superintendent of police, came out of this office on a motorcycle at about 4.30 pm, Rajguru mistook him for Mr Scott and fired at him. Saunders fell on the ground and Bhagat Singh rushed towards him firing consecutive shots to kill him. After the incident both jumped over the wall of DAV College and escaped on bikes previously kept near the college gate. The head constable, Channan Singh, and another policeman—who were chasing Bhagat Singh and his comrades—were held back by Chandrashekhar Azad. Azad covered the escape route by firing several shots and killing Channan Singh on the spot.[20] On 21 December, hand-written posters (written up earlier by Bhagat Singh) appeared in various public places at Lahore stating: 'Saunders is dead; Lalaji is avenged.'

Apparently the revolutionists, who wanted tit for tat, had no cause to regret the killing of Saunders in place of Scott. Their intention, after all, was the assassination of an official representing and symbolizing the oppressive British regime. A hue and cry followed the incident and the police promptly detained sixteen persons who had links with the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and the Lahore Students Union.[21] But these arrests produced no result, and in spite of all local enquiries, little light was shed on Saunders's murder. By 10 January all those arrested were released on bail and the government admitted that its investigations were practically fruitless.[22] Meanwhile, Chandrashekhar Azad was reported to have left for UP and Bhagat Singh reached Calcutta in January 1929 to contact an explosives expert there. For some time the HSRA had been looking for a suitable person to train its members in northern India in the manufacture of bombs. Jatindranath Das was finally contacted for this purpose and was brought to Agra forthwith. In February 1929 an organized attempt to manufacture bombs was started by the HSRA at Agra under Das's guidance. Similar activity was also said to have commenced at Lahore under the supervision of Sukhdev and Kishorilal.[23]

In Bengal, detenus were released in the latter half of 1928 in batches. They were, however, subjected to surveillance and British vigilance allowed them very little scope for secret activities. Nevertheless, the Bengal revolutionists were eager to revive their old contacts and regroup the rank-and-file. For this organizational work they urgently needed legal cover and consequently they lost no time in rallying round the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. The BPCC at this point was a divided house, with Subhas Chandra Bose and his followers contending with Jatindra Mohan Sengupta and his allies for supremacy. The revolutionists, in their turn, were also not united and the traditional rivalry between Jugantar and Anushilan still persisted. Both these groups soon became involved in the prevailing factional conflict which resulted in a combination of Bose and Jugantar on the one side, and Sengupta and Anushilan on the other. It should be noted here that Sengupta had no previous links with Anushilan, while Bose was reported to have been sympathetic towards Jugantar for long. In spite of the factionalism, there was a strong desire among the younger elements of Jugantar and Anushilan for concerted activities. They also held several secret meetings in Calcutta with the object of devising a common programme, but apparently without much success. The deadlock created by personal jealousies and strong group feelings, particularly among the senior members of both Samitis, proved difficult to break.

The Calcutta session of the Congress (December 1928), meanwhile, was drawing near. The occasion provided the Bengal militants with an opportunity to come to Calcutta from districts like Dacca, Barisal, Chittagong, Mymensingh, etc. Talks for an understanding between Anushilan and Jugantar once again started and representatives of the HSRA (Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad) were said to have visited Calcutta with plans for simultaneous action in Bengal, UP and Punjab.[24] But in the end it proved impossible to achieve any progress towards forging unity and frustration was unwittingly allowed to grow in the ranks of both groups. The younger elements of Anushilan held a secret meeting at Park Circus in Calcutta and actually condemned the inert, selfish attitude of the party bosses.[25] Both Anushilan and Jugantar members individually, however, worked for the success of the Calcutta Congress session and assisted Bose in organizing the Congress Volunteer Corps. They also solidly supported Bose in his Resolution in favour of Complete Independence for India against the Nehru Committee's recommendation for India's Dominion Status.[26] Although defeated in the Congress session, Bose's Resolution in support of Complete Independence and the dazzling performance of the militaristic Volunteer Corps under his leadership created great enthusiasm throughout Bengal. Unfortunately, these successes could not overshadow the factionalism in Bengal politics. Group clashes continued after the Calcutta session with fanatic zeal, resulting even in murder at times.[27]

The revolutionalists in northern India were comparatively more active at the beginning of 1929 than their compatriots in Bengal. The HSRA at this point was quick to read the significance of a new turn in the political situation—an apparent change from moderation to militancy. The Congress in its Calcutta session had threatened the British authorities with mass agitation for Complete Independence if Dominion Status was not conceded to India within one year. Coinciding with this ultimatum trade unionism, communist ideology and industrial unrest grew. The authorities, particularly disturbed at the growth of the working-class movement, ordered largescale arrests of communists and trade unionists, and prepared themselves for dealing with all radical developments. They introduced, in the Central Legislative Assembly, the Public Safety Bill to contain revolutionary enthusiasm, and the Trade Disputes Bill to curb the working-class agitation. The HSRA, which was always socialistically inclined, promptly resolved to oppose the government's high-handedness and to stir the popular sentiment against it. The party entrusted Bhagat Singh and Batukeswar Dutta with the task of exploding bombs 'to make the deaf hear' in the Central Legislative Assembly, when it was due to discuss the Trade Disputes and the Public Safety Bills. Accordingly the two, on 8 April 1929, hurled bombs on the floor of the Assembly hall, shouted slogans and threw leaflets. Bhagat Singh and Dutta made no attempt to escape and were arrested on the spot. They did not intend to kill or hurt anybody, but to protest 'against the institution which, since its far-reaching power for mischief . . . exists only to demonstrate to the world the Indian humiliation and helplessness and . . . symbolizes the overriding domination of an irresponsible and autocratic rule'.[28] Bhagat Singh and Dutta were soon brought to trial before a special tribunal and were sentenced to transportation for life on 12 June 1929.[29]

Picking up threads from the Assembly bomb explosion case, the British police carefully laid its net for capturing the HSRA leaders. The authorities kept a day-and-night watch on numerous suspects believed to have connections with the HSRA. They finally spotted and raided, on 15 April 1929, a house rented by Bhagwati Charan, on Macleod Road, Lahore. There the police seized a live bomb, eight bombshells, a good amount of chemicals, bomb formulae, a Webly Scott pistol, books and other documents. Sukhdev, Kishorilal and Jai Gopal were arrested from this centre of the HSRA.[30] The authorities now strongly suspected a close link between the Saunders murder case and the Assembly bomb case and so started a largescale investigation around Lahore, Delhi and Kanpur.[31] One of the three arrested in Lahore (Jai Gopal), meanwhile, confessed to the police and indicated the existence of another revolutionary centre at Sahranpur. On 13 May a Sahranpur house was raided by the police, leading to the arrest of Shiv Verma and Jai Dev. Six live bombs, three bomb-shells, three loaded revolvers, ammunitions, books and papers were also seized. Gaya Prásad, unaware of the raid, returned to the Sahranpur house and was arrested.

All these arrests led to further clues and more arrests. Interrogation of those arrested and employment of third-degree methods resulted in some cases in 'confessional statements' implicating many others. The involvement of Bhagat Singh and his comrades in Saunders's murder was revealed to the police. The entire organization by this time stood exposed and there was a rout among the ranks of the HSRA. Some key figures, including Chandrashekhar Azad, however, managed to evade arrest and went underground with some close associates. In July 1929, the government instituted the well-known Lahore Conspiracy Case against all the arrested persons, as well as against Bhagat Singh and Dutta—who were already serving a life sentence.[32] The trial continued for fifteen subsequent months and the prosecution was helped by seven approvers, two of whom were members of the central committee of the HSRA.[33] This considerable number of approvers, nevertheless, could not diminish the glory that came to be associated with the HSRA and the Lahore Conspiracy Case. The accused in the case, under Bhagat Singh's inspiring leadership, decided to use the courtroom as a platform for the propaganda of their revolutionist cause, or what Sukhdev later termed as 'action for propaganda'.[34] They demonstrated burning patriotism, ridiculed British justice, voiced radical sentiments, shouted '*Inqilab Zindabad*' (Long Live Revolution), and appeared completely fearless about their own destiny. Tension mounted at this point over the Lahore undertrials' epic struggle for the political prisoner's rights and privileges. It led to a long-drawn hunger strike by Bhagat Singh and his comrades in jail and the unforgettable starvation death of Jatindranath Das.[35] Excitement over the Lahore trial reached a high pitch when the accused refused to be handcuffed in the courtroom, leading to a fierce fight between the unarmed undertrials and the armed policemen. The defiant, spirited attitude of the HSRA prisoners, their stubborn resistance and the mockery of the *ex-parte* justice[36] bestowed upon them without defence witnesses, defence counsel and without even the accused—soon made them the idols of the people. Their efforts, after all, were not in vain. 'It was a good thing that everything came to light, to the people,' Sukhdev rejoiced, 'I consider my arrest as good luck only for this reason.'[37]

The arrest of the leading HSRA members and their historic trial at Lahore effected a serious setback for the North Indian revolutionists. Chandrashekhar Azad, nonetheless, tried to rally the disintegrating party with the help of Bhagwati Charan, Yashpal, Kailashpati, etc., and planned for renewed action. On 23 December 1929 the HSRA, in fact, made a daring attempt on the life of the viceroy of India. Yashpal and Bhagwati Charan planned to wreck the special train in which the viceroy was scheduled to pass through Delhi. A mine which contained TNT explosives was laid under a sleeper and connected by over 300 yards of wire to a battery and switch. It missed the viceroy's saloon and no serious damage was done to the viceregal party.[38] Though not fruitful, the attempt created panic among senior British officials and the police was alerted far and wide for the capture of Azad. Azad, as usual, lived dangerously, averting one arrest after another, and was reported to be planning ceaselessly for freeing the Lahore Conspiracy Case accused and for laying the foundation of a mass-based revolutionary organization.

Throughout 1928 and 1929 the revolutionists were also active in Bihar and created problems for the authorities there. A group of militants was originally organized by Phanindranath Ghosh of Anushilan at Bettiah, who later joined the central committee of the HSRA and merged his group with it. There was nothing startling about the activities of this Bihar group till Jogendra Sukul of Muzaffarpur appeared on the scene. Sukul had spent some years in Punjab and UP and was already well-known among the revolutionists in northern India. He came back to Bihar in 1928 and built up a centre under the cover of Hajipur Gandhi Ashram. Assisted by Rambinode Singh and Satyanarayan Singh, Sukul operated in various parts of Bihar and carried out a number of daring political dacoities between 1928 and 1929. Notable among these were the dacoities committed at Vasidpur and Maulania. The police vaguely suspected Sukul's complicity with these occurrences, but had no evidence or definite information against him. When Phanindranath Ghosh was arrested in connection with the Lahore Conspiracy Case, he made a confessional statement to the police. In the course of this statement he gave out the names of Jogendra Sukul and his associates as the men responsible for the dacoity and murder at Maulania. Sukul promptly went underground and, while absconding, remained active—recruiting new followers and training them. Eventually, however, he was arrested and sentenced to ten years' rigorous imprisonment for the Maulania incident in December 1929, along with three of his followers.[39]

Not only in Bihar, the echo of the Lahore Conspiracy Case was heard even in western India. In September 1929, when the police were searching the Allahabad Express at Bhusawal station for contraband goods, Bhagwan Dass and Sadashiv Raghunath refused to allow their belongings to be examined. When the search party tried to force its way Bhagwan Dass whipped out a revolver, opened fire and tried to escape with his friend. They were chased and arrested by the police, who recovered two revolvers, three bombs and some ammunitions from Sadashiv's trunk.[40] Investigation revealed that Bhagwan Dass was involved in Saunders's murder in Lahore and that both he and Sadashiv were connected with the HSRA bomb factory at Agra. A Bhusawal Bomb Case was instituted against them in October 1929 at Jalgaon. The case continued till the first half of 1930 and it was associated with dramatic developments and outbursts of public fury.[41]

In the rest of India, militant activities at this point appeared to be of very little significance. In Assam some noted revolutionists like Birendra Bhattacharya and Prabhat Chakravarty were known to be busy for some time in organizing extremist cells in districts that adjoined Bengal. A Hailakandi Conspiracy Case, in fact, commenced in this connection, but was allowed to be dropped later. Nothing significant seems to have taken place in the Central Provinces between 1927 and 1929. However, the police authorities believed that an extremist organization was formed in Madras in 1927 with its headquarters at Madurai. The members of this group were suspected to have collected some arms from the neighbouring French territories. It was alleged that they were secretly training themselves in the use of arms and collecting funds from sympathizers. But the enthusiasm of this group was confined mainly to attempted political robberies at Nagapatam in 1928 and Trichinopoly in 1929.[42]

The Bengal militants, on the whole, remained quiet throughout 1929, except for a few stray incidents. One such was the assassination of the notorious police sub-inspector, Jyotish Chandra Roy, in

Barisal. On 20 March 1929 Roy was stabbed to death by Ramesh Chandra Chattopadhyay—a young lad of fourteen years. Ramesh could not escape and was caught red-handed. The incident created great commotion in Barisal and led to the arrest of twenty-two local young men.[43] Ramesh was first sentenced to death by the special tribunal which tried him in April 1929. Later, on hearing the appeal, the high court reduced the sentence to transportation for life, considering his age. In September 1929 six young men in Rajshahi attempted a daring political robbery and attacked a mail van. The armed guards in the van resisted and it led to a fairly heavy exchange of fire. The attackers were eventually rounded up, tried and convicted.[44] Behind the lull and the apparent group rivalry, the revolutionary young Bengali men were, however, preparing for brave actions. They wanted to rise above factionalism and terroristic conventionalism and to inaugurate a new phase of armed resistance. If necessary, they wanted to do this by defying their senior leaders. Their attitude was gradually revealed in 1928–29 through a spate of organizational activities, an acceleration of the youth movement, and the growth of numerous youth associations, libraries and physical culture clubs. The government became suspicious enough to watch all these and its anxiety was manifested in official reports on the political situation in Bengal between 1928 and 1929.[45] Towards the end of 1927 the authorities even vaguely apprehended that the revolutionists in Bengal were perhaps preparing for a series of armed risings.[46]

In Barisal at this point the youth movement was being organized by men like Himangshu Bhusan Basu-Roy, Sachin Kar-Gupta and Dhirendranath Sen. The association known as the Shankar Math group, affiliated to Jugantar, was revitalized and was soon engaged in a number of educational and social welfare activities. Anushilan members in Barisal like Manoranjan Gupta, Aswini Kumar Ganguli, Jitendra Kusari, etc., formed the Tarun Sangha—a formidable organization of the youth.[47] Similarly, the Chittagong revolutionists, under the leadership of Surjya Kumar Sen and behind the cover of the Chittagong District Congress, were also preparing themselves organizationally. A number of physical culture clubs, a *juba samiti* or youth organization, and a students' association were formed simultaneously.[48] On 11 and 12 May 1929 these organizations held three conferences in Chittagong—the District Congress Conference under the chairmanship of Subhas Chandra Bose, a Youth Conference under the chairmanship of Jyotish Ghosh and a Students' Conference.[49] When Jatindranath Das died, the young men of Chittagong took out an emotionally charged procession through the streets of the town and held a meeting in the J.M. Sengupta Hall. In this meeting Loknath Bal called the youth to rise and destroy an oppressive, alien government. Ananta Singh talked about 'blood boiling at feverish pitch'. Ganesh Ghosh said, 'Let the blood of Jatin Das flow in our veins, creating the strength of hundreds and thousands of Jatin Dases and striking terror at the heart of the tyrannical Government.'[50]

In 1928–29 the young people in Calcutta also appeared to be politically very active. While impressed by the Communist ideology and trade unionism on the one hand, they were also attracted to the idea of nationalist armed struggle in the Irish style. Almost simultaneously grew the Young Comrades League and a neo-revolutionist group under the leadership of Niranjan Sengupta. The latter established its centre at Machuabazar Street. It was said that this Calcutta group had contacts with the Chittagong, Barisal and Mymensingh groups and they held secret meetings among themselves. They discussed the possibility of a simultaneous rising in their respective areas[51] and distributed 'red leaflets' asking young men to be ready for the liberation struggle.[52]

The Calcutta group, however, could not function for long and the police, being informed by traitors within the group, raided the Machuabazar centre on 18 December 1929. Niranjan Sengupta, Satish Pakrashi, Ramen Biswas and Sudhangshu Dasgupta were arrested while in possession of arms and documents, including a list of activists. Consulting the list, the police thereafter arrested nearly twenty persons in various districts.[53] Soon a Machuabazar Bomb Case was commenced against Niranjan Sengupta, Satish Pakrashi and twenty-five others. The trial continued for some time and resulted in the conviction of seventeen of the accused. Sengupta and Pakrashi were sentenced to seven years' rigorous imprisonment while others were sent to prison for three to five years.

Although it marked a setback, the Machuabazar Bomb Case was, in a way, a signal for the Bengal revolutionists to go for 'actions'. They suddenly realized that a concerted revolutionist upsurge in some parts of Bengal was difficult. Long-drawn planning and meticulous synchronization of details for such an ambitious project were not possible without being detected by the police or betrayed by traitors. The alternative was to act avoiding delay and to hit hard wherever it was possible. The Chittagong group decided to proceed in this direction and others followed its lead. Militant nationalist armed actions reached their bloodiest proportions in the succeeding years, 1930 and 1931, and the revolutionists in Bengal surpassed all their previous records as well as the limits set by others in the rest of India.

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Notes and References

[1] The Hindustan Republican Association, Constitution, *Home Pol., File No. 31*, 1928, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI).

[2] *Secret Report of Abstract of Intelligence, Bengal Police*, Vol. XXXX, cited in Ananta Singh, *Agnivara Chattogram*, Calcutta, 1969, p. 219.

[3] The premier secret revolutionary societies, Anushilan and Jugantar, were formed in the wake of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905). These two rival organizations were of federal character with affiliated autonomous groups in different localities.

[4] *Terrorism in India 1917–1936*. Compiled by the Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India, Simla, 1937, Chapters IV and V.

[5] Ganesh Ghosh, 'Surjya Sen (*Mastar da*),' in *Surjya Sen Smriti, Biplabtritha Chattogram Smriti Samstha*, Calcutta, 1971, p. 17.

[6] Two of those sentenced in the Dakshineswar Bomb Case, Anantahari Mitra and Promode Ranjan Choudhury, later killed a hated intelligence officer in prison and were eventually hanged for it.

[7] Those sentenced to death were: Ramprasad Bismil, Rajendranath Lahiri, Thakur Roshan Singh and Ashfaqullah Khan.

[8] Deoghar Conspiracy Case Judgement, *Home Pol., File No. 31*, 1928, NAI.

[9] *Terrorism in India 1917–36*, compiled by the Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India, Simla, 1937.

[10] Deoghar Conspiracy Case Judgement, *Home Pol., File No. 31*, 1928, NAI.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ajoy Kumar Ghosh, *Articles and Speeches*, Moscow, 1962, pp. 151–56.

[14] Rules and Regulations of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Meerut Conspiracy Case, S.T. No. 2 of 1930, NAI.

[15] Niranjan Sen, '*Bir Biplabi* Surjya Sen', in *Surjya Sen Smriti, Biplabtirtha Chattogram Smriti Samstha*, Calcutta, 1971, p. 68; and Satish Pakrashi, *Agni Juger Katha*, Calcutta, 1971, pp. 160–61.

[16] H.W. Hale, *Political Trouble in India 1917–37*, Allahabad, 1974, p. 59.

[17] Ajoy Kumar Ghosh, *Articles and Speeches*, Moscow, 1962, p. 17.

[18] Hale, *Political Trouble in India*, pp. 59–60.

[19] Ibid., p. 101, and K. Ghosh, *Jagoran o Bisphoran* (Bengali), Calcutta, 1972, p. 504.

[20] Saunders Murder Case, *Home Pol., File No. 417*, 1930, NAI.

[21] Viceroy to Secretary of State, 20 December 1928, *Home Pol., File No. 4/7*, 1930, NAI.

[22] Home Dept. Foreign, Government of India to the Under-Secretary of State for India, 21 February 1929, *Home Pol., File No. 4/7*, 1930, NAI.

[23] Hale, *Political Trouble in India*, pp. 61–62.

[24] Satish Pakrashi, *Agni Juger Katha*, pp. 166–67.

[25] Ibid.

[26] K. Ghosh, *Jagoran o Bisphoran*, Calcutta, 1972, pp. 501–54, and Rakshit Ray and Bhupendra Kishore, *Sabar Alakshye*, Calcutta, 1969, pp. 56–58.

[27] A despicable group clash occurred in Chittagong during the District Congress Committee elections. The supporters of Sengupta and Bose fought openly against each other, resulting in the death of Sukhendu Bikash Dutta, a pro-Bose member of Surjya Sen's group.

[28] Statement of Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutta, 8 June 1929, in J.N. Sanyal, *Sardar Bhagat Singh*, Allahabad, 1931, Appendices.

[29] Judgement on Assembly Bomb Case, 12 June 1929, *Home Pol., File No. 192*, 1929, NAI.

[30] Report on the Assembly Bomb Outrage by A. Fryer, Superintendent of Police, 19.4.1929, *Home Pol., File No. 192*, 1929, NAI.

[31] Report by A. Fryer, Superintendent of Police, 10.5.1929, ibid.

[32] Rajguru and Bijoy Sinha were arrested after the trial had begun. Bhagwan Das and Sadashiva were arrested at Bhusawal and sentenced to long terms. Some others were caught in Bihar and tried separately there.

[33] Ajoy Kumar Ghosh, *Articles and Speeches*, Moscow, 1962, p. 19.

[34] Sukhdev's unfinished letter, 7 October 1930, *Home Pol., File No. 139*, 1931, NAI.

[35] Jatindranath Das's death, following a 63-day hunger strike, deeply touched the nation. A huge crowd gathered outside the Lahore Borstal Jail when Jatin's dead body was handed over and Hamilton Hardinge, the superintendent of police, bared his head, bowing in reverence before the man whom all the might of the British empire had failed to defeat (Ajoy Kumar Ghosh, *Articles and Speeches*, Moscow, 1962, p. 24). 'If ever a man died a hero and a martyr to a noble cause, that man is Jatindranath Das', wrote *The Tribune* of 14 September 1929, 'and the blood of the martyr has in all ages and countries been the seed of higher and nobler life, better social and political order.' When Jatin's body was brought from Lahore to Calcutta for cremation, people assembled 'in their thousands and tens of thousands' at every railway station to pay their homage to the hero (Subhas Chandra Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, Calcutta, 1967, p. 162).

[36] The clashes between the police and the accused or the accused and the court officials were said to have led the viceroy to promulgate Ordinance No. III in 1930, by which a special tribunal was set up to decide the case hurriedly.

[37] Sukhdev's unfinished letter, 7 October 1930, *Home Pol., File No. 139,* 1931, NAI.

[38] Hale, *Political Trouble in India,* pp. 88–90.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Tel. Divisional Superintendent, Railway, Bhusawal, to the Secretary, Railway Board, 11 September 1929. *Home Pol., File No. 304,* 1930, NAI.

[41] In February 1930 the two approvers of the Lahore Conspiracy Case, Jai Gopal and Phanindranath Ghosh, were brought to Jalgaon to give evidence in the Bhusawal Bomb Case. During their evidence, the approvers—traitors in the eyes of HSRA men—were attacked by the accused during the lunch recess. Bhagwan Dass, who somehow managed to secure a pistol, fired repeatedly at both the approvers. Jai Gopal and a police sub-inspector from the Punjab were injured and Bhagwan Dass was subsequently overpowered by the guards. The incident created a stir in the small town and a big excited crowd, sympathetic towards the accused, gathered in the court compound. The crowd gradually became violent and booed and jeered the police and the court officials. When the accused were being shifted from the court to the prison, the crowd became particularly hostile and started pelting stones at the police and shouted slogans in favour of Bhagwan Dass and Sadashiva. Those who, in the meantime, had been arrested by the police, were forcibly released by the mob. The mob thereafter attacked the court premises, as well as the bungalow of the district magistrate. This dangerous situation was brought under control only when heavy reinforcement from all neighbouring police posts arrived in the town. (District Magistrate, East Khandesh, to the Secretary, Government of Bombay, Jalgaon, 23 February1930, *Home Pol., File No. 304,* 1930, NAI.)

[42] Hale, *Political Trouble in India,* p. 110.

[43] Viceroy to the Secretary of State, 19 May 1929, *Home Pol., File No. 144,* 1929, NAI.

[44] Hale, *Political Trouble in India,* p. 16.

[45] Reports on the political situation during 1928 and 1929. *Home Pol., File Nos. 10–18,* 1928 and 1929, NAI.

[46] Historical note on the proposals made from time to time to deal with terrorist revolutionary movement. *Home Pol., File No. 4/41,* 1932, NAI.

[47] Hiralal Dasgupta, *Swadhinata Sangrame Barisal,* Calcutta, 1972, p. 297.

[48] Judgement on First Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932. *Home Pol., File No. 714,* 1932, NAI.

[49] Ibid. Also Ananta Singh, *Agnigarva Chattogram,* Calcutta, 1968, pp. 259–62.

[50] Judgement on First Chittagong Armoury Raid Case.

[51] Satish Pakrashi, *Agni Juger Katha,* p. 188.

[52] *The Bengalee,* 18 February 1932, National Library.

[53] Hale, *Political Trouble in India,* pp. 189–90.

The Easter Rising in Bengal, Chittagong

18 April–7 May 1930

Amit Kumar Gupta

Broadly, the Irish and Indian peoples were subjected to the same alien rule, a similar exploitative system[1]—irrespective of arbitrary imperial justice—and both aspired to attain an identical objective. Yet surprisingly the Irish struggle for freedom, till its hour of victory, left only a faint mark on Indian nationalism. The reason certainly was the wide difference between the two countries as regards size, population, resources, ways of life and the structure of society. Besides, the Irish Parliamentary Party had little to offer to its counterpart in India by way of a model. Moreover, Indian acquaintance with insurgent Ireland was severely restricted partly by strict British censorship and partly by the secretive nature of Clan-na-Gael and Sinn Fein. However, the revolutionary developments in Ireland could no longer be suppressed when Irish freedom was recognized in 1921–22, coinciding with the Non-Cooperation movement in India which began with a bang and ended in a whimper. In the frustrating aftermath of a relinquished agitation Indian nationalists tended to revive old formulas in the name of new lines of political action.

With Gandhi languishing in jail, the orthodox non-cooperators took refuge in the philanthropic reformism of the *charkha* (spinning wheel), *swadeshi* (indigenous products) and the campaign against untouchability—(no-changers.) Others found comfort in the labyrinth of parliamentary processes, imagining that they could compel the British to accept a settlement through legislative wrangling—(pro-changers.) Both, in consequence, evaded the means of mass movement, leaving the reactionary forces of communalism enough ground to flourish. The disillusioned youth returned to the ways of individual terrorism and to the vicious circle of a clandestine search for arms, 'political robberies' for funds and absconding to avoid arrest. Yet, at this hour of bewilderment, the militant nationalists' faith in armed struggle must have been strengthened by the Sinn Fein's success in Ireland. Eamon de Valera also wanted to convey to the Indians that it was 'only through the influence of fear and the presence of force' that Britain had ever been brought to consider the claims of others.[2] Indistinct links renewed at this point between stray Indian extremists and Irish Americans. Even the would-be Marxists, before planting Bolshevism in India, toyed sometimes with the Sinn Fein style.[3] But no one in India was really interested in the civil war sweeping Ireland from 1922 or in the controversy raging there between Michael Collins and de Valera. The militant nationalists of India, in fact, looked profitably for emulative Sinn Fein examples in the preceding years of Irish history. A group of revolutionists under Surjya Kumar Sen in Bengal discovered such a suitable model in the Easter Rising of Dublin, of April 1916.[4] Sinn Feinism was thus inspirational in the daring stormy outbreak in Chittagong, Bengal, during the Easter of 1930.

Over and above the difference of magnitude (as was natural between semi-armed Ireland and practically disarmed India) there was no objective resemblance between the circumstances of the Irish and Chittagong risings. The theme of the Irish rising was based on the First World War situation in which Germany—the enemy of Britain—became an ally of the insurgents who hoped to thrive on German military aid. Besides, Ireland speedily developed a volunteer organization which supplied the material as well as the forum for insurgency. Again, the Gaelic revivalist movement and the legacy of Wolfe Tone, John Mitchel, Thom Davies and O'Donovan Rossa developed the mood and offered an emotional justification for the Irish rising. Moreover, the Irish labour militants and a section of Irish socialists played crucial roles in the organization of the revolt.[5] All these were typical Irish developments of 1916 and they had no parallels in India in 1930 or in Bengal where Surjya Sen's men rose. In the broader national context Bengali regionalism, though remarkably alive throughout the 1920s and 1930s,[6] was a retarding force rather than a resurgent one. The existence of a volunteer force (Seva Dal), created in the country as early as in 1923 to aid the Indian National Congress, was too innocuous and committed to peaceful functions to be of any use for insurgency purposes. It is, however, true that a show of militarism on the Irish or the 'Black Shirt' model, by the Bengal Congress Volunteers under Subhas Chandra Bose, during the Congress session in Calcutta in 1928, did grip the imagination of young Bengal. But socialism was yet a much misconstrued far-cry raised by novices and desperados. They copied trade-unionist economism in a predominantly agriculturist society, but hardly had the vision to fit it into any anti-colonial armed struggle.[7]

Subjectively, however, the two risings were similar as regards rebel reactions to the prevailing political panorama. Both groups were impatient of the supposed national inaction, angry at what they considered the imbecility of public figures, and intensely hateful of colonial rule. Both were essentially middle-class romantic revolutionists who hoped to set heroic examples of organized armed struggle and wanted to act as 'a prophetic shock minority' to arouse an apathetic nation. The martyrs of the Irish Easter Rising resented this stable period of Irish nationalism dominated by the Irish parliamentary party, ruled by the triumvirate of Redmond, Dillon and Devlin—away from the people and relying on constitutional intrigues. Irish constitutionalism reached its peak when the tottering British liberal government of 1905 was forced to pass the Third Home Rule Act in exchange for the support of the Irish parliamentary party. Thus, apparently Redmond and his followers made a good show in British parliament preparing for a transfer of power to the Irish middle class and landed gentry. Feinism in this context appeared to be a moribund force, armed struggle a quixotic exercise, and the horizon of nationalism the mere skylight of Home Rule. Virile and romantic Ireland seemed 'dead and gone . . . with O'Leary in the grave',[8] even before the coming of the Great War bringing an artificial boom of prosperity to Irish farmers and traders. But in reality the Irish—anglicized, illusioned and fettered in chains of gold—were living on doles of concessions and not as a distinct people with rights. The certainty of the north remaining in the Union, the shelving of Home Rule during the war as 'a promissory note payable after death',[9] and the exploitation of Irish valour for imperial security, betrayed irreparable holes in Redmond's constitutional facade. Was it not an opportune moment for the daring to remonstrate and act for a new vision?

A different situation in Bengal produced an almost similar mental urge. Pro-changer C.R. Das—whose Swaraj Party outclassed a grumbling group of no-changers—was unable to give Bengal any new direction. The difficulty of maintaining a motley Swarajist rank-and-file, the distribution of privileges in the Calcutta corporation, the attempted communal adjustment between Hindu and Muslim elites, and the digressions of a futile *satyagraha* (non-violent civil resistance) against the *mohunt* (priest) of Tarakeswar temple sapped all Das's energies. The extremists[10] in the province—busy reviving old methods of individual killing (like Day's murder by Gopinath Saha in January 1924) and 'political robberies' (like the Sankharitola Post Office dacoity in August 1923)—were also unable to break the colourless political monotony. Das's death in 1925 was followed in Bengal by a long-drawn succession struggle. J.M. Sengupta inherited Das's 'triple crown' (presidentship of the Bengal Provincial Congress, leadership of the Swaraj Party in the Bengal legislative assembly and mayorship of Calcutta municipal corporation) with the support of Gandhi (who came to Calcutta following the death of Das) and when other contenders were in disarray—Byomkesh Chakravarti becoming a 'responsivist cooperator' and Subhas Chandra Bose suffering in a Burma jail. Another contender, B.N. Sasmal, led the opposition and continued the fight for leadership. At that point the schism appeared to have resulted in a virtual split when two sets of Congress candidates contested for the Calcutta corporation elections in March 1927 in which Sasmal's party lost.[11] But the casualty was merely Sasmal, who never fully recovered, and factionalism continued unabated.

The so-called C.R. Das-bred Big Five[12] also resented 'the intruder from Chittagong', J.M. Sengupta, and patronized the newly-released Bose, Sarat Chandra Bose's most beloved youngest brother. Bose—promising militancy and vague radicalism—was a favourite among the revolutionary elements who invariably took refuge in the organizational set-up of the Bengal Provincial Congress. His hobnobbing with the Jugantar people in the Congress led to the rancorous Anushilan members rallying behind Sengupta. Thus developed two formidable line-ups, a Jugantar and Big Five-supported Bose confronting Anushilan and Gandhi- (no-changers originally) supported Sengupta, with the Swarajists and Congressmen evenly divided. Thereafter it was all mud-slinging for some time, showing bourgeois political opportunism at its worst and the two groups publicly accusing each other of nepotism, insincerity to the national cause and the use of questionable sources for raising resources.[13] There was hardly any ideology involved in the squabbles—though Bose himself wanted posterity to imagine that Sengupta's 'unquestionable obedience to the Mahatma' was the root of all troubles.[14] The guns at Chittagong roared at this point, drowning the vulgarity and the helplessness of the hour.

It would, however, be wrong to presume that the sentimental revolutionists of Chittagong had refused to swim with the political current. They could not have probably done so as participants of the middle-class-dominated national politics. The facts that Surjya Sen's group in 1929 noisily fought for control of the Chittagong District Congress Committee, invited Bose to preside over their District Congress Committee ignoring the local hero Sengupta, entangled themselves in factional feuds leading to litigations, injuries and death (of Sukhendu Bikash Dutt), prove that they were compromising with the existing political situation. Such compromises and deviations were but natural. Did the Irish Republican Brotherhood not compromise with Redmond's demand in June 1914 to admit his nominees to their governing body of Irish Volunteers? Did Pearse not speak from a Home Rule platform immediately before his joining the IRB in 1912? There is no doubt that the Chittagong group of revolutionaries had a soft corner for the aggressive Bose[15] and that, too, on account of their understanding with Jugantar.

A glimpse into the growth of a revolutionary organization in Chittagong should further clarify its position vis-à-vis the extremist politics in Bengal, as well as its object in preparing for an adventurist solo rising. A secret society sprang up in Chittagong round about 1918[16] when tensions caused by the planned insurrection of 1915–16 were still alive.[17] The group was small, obviously local, and yet uncertain as to its affiliation to federal bodies like Jugantar and Anushilan. The group even then was dominated by Surjya Sen, a teacher of mathematics in National High School (and hence popularly known as 'Master *da*'), and a few others like Anurup Sen, Nagen Sen and Charubikash Dutta. It also included important names like Ambika Chakravarti, Nirmal Sen and Anantalal Sinha. The organization was not formed on the typical Hindu revivalist line and thus attracted young Muslim men like Afsaruddin and Dalilur Rahaman. Ganesh Ghosh also joined the group soon thereafter. These militants—though firmly committed to the ideals of armed struggle—participated in the political agitation of the time in Chittagong centering round the coolie strike in the Sylhet tea gardens in May 1921, the Gurkha outrage in Chandpur, the looting of guns from the Assam–Bengal Railway and the steamer strikes. This chain of incidents threw Chittagong into the ferment of the Non-Cooperation movement. By 1920 Surjya Sen, in fact, founded a Gandhian-style *samyashram*, which was apparently designed to assist the Congress's politics but was in reality a shelter for secretive get-togethers.

The first crisis developed in the group on the question of its affiliation and a split resulted in September 1921 when Charubikash Dutta and some others joined Anushilan against a majority decision to collaborate with Jugantar.[18] Thus, two parallel organizations grew in Chittagong, led by Charubikash Dutta and Surjya Sen respectively, ostensibly for the same purpose but at loggerheads with each other, as is usual in such cases. Surjya Sen's group, like its rival in Chittagong, kept to its promise—given by the revolutionists in Bengal to the Mahatma—about restraining adventurism during the Non-Cooperation movement.[19] They, however, carefully avoided arrests, trained cadres militaristically, searched for smuggled arms and desperately looked for money. They did not take Gandhiji's promise of *swaraj* (self-rule) within one year seriously, and tried to remain in readiness for an armed struggle. But how to launch an armed struggle, in what direction and with what plan? On these there was no light, no ray of hope. They were impressed by the Non-Cooperation movement, but could not uphold non-violence. They upheld violence, but did not know where and in what magnitude to inflict it. In this uncertain circumstance, means were mistaken for ends and revolutionist energies were squandered in political dacoities and in subsequent legal defence. The looting of the house of a moneylender in Paroikora village in 1922 and the snatching of Assam–Bengal Railways' money in 1923 amply illustrate the point. The money, of course, acquired smuggled guns—but guns themselves could not produce any worthwhile revolutionary programme. The flight of Surjya Sen and his followers on 24 December 1923 from '*suluk bahar*' (their hideout on the outskirts of Chittagong town) to the neighbouring hills, the hot pursuit by armed British police, their heroic resistance on Nagarkhana Hill and their eventual arrest[20]—were all very impressive but intrinsically futile. Fortunately, all of them were released due to the brilliant handling of the case by their defence counsel, J.M. Sengupta, and the ridiculous muddling of evidence by the police. The Chittagong heroes came out of confinement only to grope in the wilderness.

The Jugantar revolutionaries—whose leadership the Chittagong group always looked up to—were not forthcoming with any concrete line of action. In fact, the hard core of Jugantar was swinging between the pretence of violence and the credo of non-violence. The *dadas* (elder brothers) of Jugantar and Anushilan were more interested in somehow maintaining their groups than running into risks. In their urge to devise a practicable future programme (and as no programme was practicable in the existing disunity) some in the rival camps started a move for an understanding among revolutionists in Chittagong. But before it could make any real progress the government struck with ordinances and the cream of the Chittagong revolutionaries entered into prisons in batches in October 1924. However, Surjya Sen managed to escape from the police not only in Chittagong but also in the Shovabazar hideout in Calcutta when a good number of extremists were arrested in connection with Dakshineswar Bomb Case in November 1925. A year later Surjya Sen was finally arrested in Calcutta in October 1926. The two years of his absconding life, between 1924 and 1926, were surrounded by mystery as little was known beyond the fact that he visited places in Bengal, Assam and the UP with a view to organize revolutionary activities.[21] The real nature of Surjya Sen's exploits is now anybody's guess. But in all likelihood Sen was probably trying to assess if the various secret societies were thinking about a concerted armed rising in the fashion of what had previously been attempted by Rashbehari Bose and Jatin Mukherji in 1915. The authorities were aware of the formation of a New Violence Party in which Surjya Sen's name featured along with Sachin Sanyal of the UP and Charubikash Dutta of Chittagong Anushilan. The party was formed as a measure of attempted unity between the youngsters of Anushilan and Jugantar following the arrests of 1924. The younger men of both sides wanted to continue violent activities in defiance of their senior leaders—who favoured a cessation of all acts for some time. In fact some literature in this connection was also uncovered by the police from the Shovabazar hideout.[22] The prospect of any concerted action must have appeared very dim in 1925 with arrests in the Dakshineswar Bomb Case in Calcutta and the Kakori train robbery in the UP. But Surjya Sen continued his plea for unity and a unified programme throughout.[23] It remained, however, a fond hope, wishful thinking—unlikely to be fulfilled in the partisan environment of the Bengal militants.

By the end of 1928, Surjya Sen and his followers returned from prison one after the other.[24] In December 1928 they attended the Congress session in Calcutta and supported Bose's move for India's claim of Complete Independence as against the Nehru Report advocating India's Dominion Status. They were impressed by the performance of Bose's volunteers in Calcutta and accepted the Jugantar idea of dominating the local Congress organization—though they never really believed that this could be an end in itself. They also attended a secret meeting of Jugantar and Anushilan to forge a compromise formula which, however, would not materialize in the background of a growing Anushilan–Sengupta and Jugantar–Bose rift. In February 1929, the Chittagong group began controlling the District Congress Committee when Surjya Sen was elected as its secretary. In May 1929, they organized the District Congress Conference with a dazzling marchpast of volunteers under Ganesh Ghosh. In September 1929, they elected delegates to the Bengal Provincial Congress Conference and in the conference itself, in November 1929, voted on the Jugantar line in favour of Bose against Sengupta. Beneath the surface, however, the group had already become impatient of the old guards' tall talk, tired of inaction in the name of organizing the Congress, disgusted at the disunity, stereotyped dacoities, treacheries, assassinations and arrests. Their plan for a rising in April 1930 was, thus, as much an attempt to strike a blow on British authority as to rise above terroristic traditionalism.

The actual plan of the rising was preceded by some general preparation. For the newly-released Chittagong leaders it was setting their house in order and making up for their absence. Old contacts were renewed, arms left behind in a hurry traced, and recruitment commenced. The occupation of the town District Congress office provided them an excellent venue and a suitable disguise. Physical culture clubs (like those of Sadarghat, Rahmatganj, Chandanpura, Asadganj, etc.), youth organizations (like the Juba Samiti led by Ganesh Ghosh) and a Students' Association (led by Lokenath Bal) were brought into existence simultaneously. Demonstrations of physical exercises were continually arranged (in which Lokenath Bal used to stop running automobiles and Ananta Sinha used to twist iron bars), to impress the youth.[25] Emotionalism, expressed through rhetorical extravagance, was also used to sway the youth. Conferences, in May 1929 (of the District Congress, the youth, students and women), were utilized for this purpose. Bose, in his presidential speech at the District Congress Conference, was reluctant to believe that Gandhi's non-violence could achieve Indian independence. Jyotish Ghosh and Nripen Banerji in their presidential addresses to the youth and students appealed fervently to their audiences to come forward in the service of the motherland. Posters depicting ideas like 'the agony under foreign rule', placards bearing mottos like 'the country first and thereafter justice and religion', a call to young men—'Yonder is the altar to the goddess of shackles—Will it remain upright forever?', and debates on issues like 'the sword is mightier than the pen', indicate the careful nursing of a rebellious mood. It was again apparent in a leaflet inviting the youth to awaken, for the unhappy motherland 'eagerly awaits the employment of energies slumbering in the young'.[26] The climax was reached on 15 September 1929 when the group mourned the death of Jatindranath Das[27] by taking out a delirious procession of nearly 2000 people through the streets of Chittagong town carrying banners like:

> He went away, trampling with his feet the fear of death
> And called upon everyone to clang the shackles.

Jatindranath's photographs (in the volunteer uniform of 1928) adorned the District Congress office with the message:

> A soldier's life is the life for me
> A soldier's death so India is free.

The occasion was reminiscent of O'Donovan Rossa's funeral in Ireland in September 1915, when electrifying speeches were delivered by Pearse and Connolly with tremendous impact. In the memory of Jatindranath, the Chittagong group (most of whom personally knew him, especially Ganesh Ghosh, and were thus deeply upset at his loss) attempted to create a similar effect on the audience when Lokenath Bal spoke of 'fire in hearts for the destruction of British Government', Ananta Sinha talked about 'blood boiling at fever pitch', and Ganesh Ghosh called for the strength of a thousand Jatindranaths 'to strike terror in the heart of the tyrannical Government'.[28] The difference between incidents relating to O'Donovan Rossa and Jatindranath was one of degree and stature and not of content or the desired effect. An environment propitious for what Surjya Sen later described as 'terroristic romance',[29] was fast developing. It was a prelude to the 'death programme' of Surjya Sen and his men.

The theme of the 'death programme' was a sudden rising by a determined lot occupying the vantagepoints of Chittagong town, declaring a free Chittagong and then trying to defend the freedom—however shortlived—with their lives. It was in tune with the 'heroic, tragic lunacy of Sinn Fein'[30] or the 'poetic license' of the Easter rebels.[31] Following some elaboration, the plan aimed at attacking the establishments of the police and Auxiliary Force of India (an irregular British army wing, heavily armed to deal with military emergency), ransacking their armouries, disrupting the railway and telegraph communications, brutally massacreing the town's European population to avenge the age-long British oppression as symbolized in the butchery at Jallianwalla Bagh (13 April 1919), and proclaiming a republic. Then the rebels would take possession of the town, distribute arms among the people and dig out defensive rings centering around a headquarter. When the British army would attempt to regain control over the town in full strength the rebels would withstand the pressure and finally collect themselves at the headquarters and resist to the last man. The site for the finale was decided to be the centrally located collector's *cutcherry* at Fairy Hill.[32] Its relatively high altitude and the existence of a water reservoir determined its selection in Chittagong, to essay the role played by the General Post Office building in Dublin in April 1916. For this military adventure it was decided to form the branch of an imaginary Indian liberation army—not yet in existence but expected to be born some day. Its name, Hindustan Republican Army (Chittagong Branch), was reminiscent of the Irish Republican Army of the post-Easter Rising days. A revolutionary council of five, similar to what the Irish Easter rebels had in 1916, was created, with Surjya Sen as president and Ambika Chakravarti, Nirmal Sen, Ananta Sinha and Ganesh Ghosh as members. But how did the plan come about and who originated it?

Ananta Sinha, who in his books always over-narrated his own role in the rising, has no hesitation in ascribing the plan to Ganesh Ghosh.[33] Ghosh, in his turn, is inclined to share the credit of planning collectively by saying that all the leading figures were thinking, more or less, in the same direction, and that Ananta Sinha and he himself might have taken some initiative. Ghosh's version was generally true and all the leaders, following their return to public life, were impatient to undertake a daring 'action'. But the cue certainly came from Ghosh, who spent his stay in Midnapore jail in intellectual company and in reading the history of national military exploits in general and rebellious Ireland in particular. Books on Irish revolutionists in prisons in Bengal must have been few[34] but still enough to excite his imagination. A study of the Irish Rising and the Volunteer Organization revealed that a sudden organized attack by a disciplined band of revolutionists could achieve limited objectives and demoralize the ruling forces.[35] All the Chittagong leaders, in one form or the other, went through a phase of intense introspection in jail. They were finding it increasingly difficult to comprehend and organize violent armed struggles, simultaneously planned and worked out, in various parts of the vast country. They were realistic enough to realize that any grand project was beyond their capabilities and, thus, decided to select for themselves a moderate but exemplary role with a limited object in view. Their object was to remind the Indian people of the glorious tradition of anti-colonial armed struggle, to create a symbol for the brave to strive towards, and to appeal to the virility of the nation. Ganesh Ghosh, therefore, had no difficulty in devising a blueprint. He then exchanged ideas with Ananta Sinha and together they sold to Surjya Sen, on 15 October 1929,[36] the scheme of a collective rise and fall. If death in Dublin came through an inflaming impulse, death in Chittagong was to come through cool calculation.

Once the plan was agreed upon, the group sprang into 'sudden' and 'unusual life' in the beginning of 1930, meeting constantly in some places, including the District Congress office.[37] A target date was fixed which, in fact, turned out to be around Easter 1930—not Easter Monday as it was in 1916, but on Good Friday.[38] A fresh search for smuggled arms was followed by an elaborate curriculum for the recruits. Secret societies invariably adhere to some ritualistic patterns of initiation. The Irish Republican Brotherhood administered a solemn oath 'in the presence of Almighty God', swearing allegiance to the Irish republic and subservience to the 'commands of superior officers'.[39] The custom followed in the secret societies of Bengal also had melodramatic religious touches like swearing before the image of goddess Kali (who symbolizes strength) and offering her blood from a small self-inflicted wound. The Chittagong group, in 1928–29, recovered from this religiosity and emphasized only the oath of secrecy and loyalty to the party.[40] Surjya Sen—who always shunned ritualistic exhibitionism—was an idealist and not a materialist.[41] He certainly rose above terroristic conventionalism by stealthily recruiting women to his group, much to the annoyance of others, who still clung to a 'one Helen caused the ruin of the whole of Troy'-like notion.[42] Naturally, no Countess Markievicz of Dublin was associated with the rising in Chittagong of 1930.[43] But there were young heroes as reckless as the

Irish rebels of 1916. They were screened for the 'death programme' with an eye to their militancy, reliability and young age. Youth was obviously the most cherished quality as only the young could be indifferent to worldly attractions, romantically ready to spill their blood for a cause, and irresponsible enough to defy death. The average age of the insurrectionists in Chittagong was 22 years and some were below 16. They were trained to ride horses, use guns, drive automobiles and respond to military discipline. They were indoctrinated through available emotion-rousing patriotic material including books,[44] and hardened to kill and die.[45]

A mobilization chart was made, plans of attack on military targets were accurately drawn and timings were exactly synchronized to derive the maximum effect of a sudden attack. The idea of political robbery was scrupulously avoided and it was resolved to raise funds through collections among members themselves and, if necessary, by stealing family properties.[46] Leather ammunition bags, khaki uniforms and sparkling badges to suit the military occasion were prepared. Numerous implements as well as automobiles for use were arranged. But the incredible feature during this phase was the success of the rebels in building an armour of secrecy which British intelligence could not penetrate. The police was always anxious to keep a watch on the Chittagong detenus after their release and meticulously arranged a twenty-four-hour surveillance system by twenty-two men.[47] The authorities in Calcutta were reported to have secured a clue as to the apprehension of a rising along Irish lines either in Chittagong or in Barisal.[48] It is not clear how seriously they treated the information but police vigilance certainly increased in Chittagong and the superintendent of police himself took over the supervision of watchers, under the special instruction of the deputy inspector general, Calcutta.[49] Yet, no useful intelligence about the plans of Surjya Sen and his followers was forthcoming although the group was visibly all abustle. The Chittagong police then decided to relax the watch between 13 and 18 April to lure the Chittagong rebels. It was thought that they, 'in a state of fancied security might, by their movements, convey some inklings as to their intention'.[50] The stroke of duplicity eventually proved fatal as the rising was scheduled precisely on 18 April. Throughout, the Chittagong police did not know that their watchers were being watched by a counter-espionage group of the rebels. This system, in fact, enabled the rebels to successfully hide Ramkrishna Biswas and Tarakeswar

Dastidar, who were injured while manufacturing bombs during the preparatory phase. The group was also following a method of closely watching each other, or 'mutual vigilance', as an insurance against internal treachery. Surjya Sen further saved the situation when he decisively opposed a move by the majority of his council to take into confidence an old and well-known comrade who deliberately chose to visit Chittagong—following a long absence—just before the rising.[51] But the police was most misled when Surjya Sen and his group carried out an ingenious plan.

A leaflet signed by Surjya Sen, Ambika Chakravarti and Ganesh Ghosh invited the people of Chittagong to enrol themselves as *satyagrahis* (non-violent civil resisters) and disobey sedition laws, in view of the commencement of the nationwide Civil Disobedience movement.[52] The leaflet was issued on 17 April—a day in advance of the planned rising—and supplied the police with a satisfying *raison d'etre* for the movements of the group. Thus all governmental precautions failed, not due to any negligence but, as discovered later on, due to 'the abnormal cunning and craft of the conspirators'.[53] When a question was raised in British parliament about the failure of Indian intelligence concerning the outrage, Samuel Hoare, the secretary of state for India said, as did the men in Dublin Castle in 1916, that the authorities in Chittagong were poised for large-scale arrests on 20 April and thus could not predict the rising.[54] The '*Satyagrahi* Leaflet' reminds one of the 'Castle Document' widely publicized in republican circles practically on the eve of the rising on 19 April. The Document, appearing like a decoded British message, conveyed the intolerable suggestion that the Dublin authorities were ready to round up all Irish leaders, moderates and radicals. However, the Castle Document was forged to impress upon those who would rise, the necessity of a rising, and the *Satyagrahi* Leaflet was fabricated to convince the authorities that the rebels did not mean to rise. It should be accepted that both tricks worked.

On 18 April the Hindustan Republican Army (Chittagong Branch) struck exactly at ten at night.[55] The action commenced with the distribution of three kinds of leaflets. The first was an appeal to the youth to join the ranks of the army in its hour of victory. The second was a call to the people to produce 'dead or alive' at army headquarters, 'all Englishmen or white-skinned Anglo-Indians hostile to national aspirations'. But the third and the main leaflet was a glorious declaration of the rebel cause and a passionate justification of their action. The Hindustan Republican Army (Chittagong Branch), 'who claimed the allegiance of every Indian people', pledged their lives to 'the freedom, welfare and exaltation' of the motherland. They wanted to affirm that '... the right of ownership of India and the control of her destiny belong to the Indian people only and the long usurpation of that right by a foreign power and government has not extinguished that right nor it ever can'. To establish this, the rebels were in readiness 'to prove themselves worthy of the august destiny to which they are called'.[56] Apart from a few details the declaration ran on identical lines to the proclamation of the Irish republic, issued by the Easter rebels in 1916.[57] There is no doubt whatsoever that this leaflet reveals to the full the profound influence of the Irish Easter Rising on the Chittagong outbreak—just as the watchwords of the American Declaration of Independence echoed France in 1789.

By midnight on 18 April, the administration in Chittagong was paralysed by systematic blows. The first attack, led by Ambika Chakravarti, was launched on the Central Telegraph and Telephone Office, and resulted in its complete destruction. The Assam–Bengal Railway main line was uprooted in Nangalkot (76 miles from Chittagong) and in Dhoom (41 miles from Chittagong), leaving the town disconnected with the outside world except by wireless links from ships in the jetty. An attack on the police line soon followed under the leadership of Ganesh Ghosh and Ananta Sinha, first- and second-in-command of the operations, respectively. With the presence of 71 policemen[58] on the spot, the group anticipated the stiffest resistance there. But in practice the place was occupied with comparative ease along with its armoury full of revolvers and musketry. The attack on the European Club led by Naresh Roy was abortive as club members, contrary to expectations, did not keep late hours on Good Friday night. Nirmal Sen and Lokenath Bal led the attack on the Auxiliary Force of India headquarters, ransacked the armoury and burnt it down. Here too British sentries could offer no resistance. All parties thereafter collected at the police line where Surjya Sen formally proclaimed a republic at about midnight, and inaugurated a provisional government in the midst of firing of volleys and shouting of revolutionary slogans. The military achievement so far was impressive considering that only 71 men were employed with merely fifteen revolvers and breech-loader guns, seventeen grenades (not used) and some swords, daggers and iron bars. They killed seven men altogether (including Sergeant Major Farrell, one sentry and one armed police constable) and inflicted injuries on some others. But behind the first flush of victory lurked an ominous danger. The rebels had counted far too much on the acquisition of ammunition and Lewis guns or light machine guns from the Auxiliary Force of India armoury, which was ingeniously broken open with the help of automobiles. They also anticipated that ammunitions would be stacked in the armoury itself, unknowful of the fact that the magazine room, according to army arrangements, was invariably away from the armoury.

When a frantic search failed to reveal ammunition, in despair, they destroyed the Lewis guns and magazine rifles which seemed burdensome and useless to carry. Thereafter, the armoury was set on fire and—as it was found later—the magazine room 'had providentially been completely overlooked by the raiders'.[59] When the group raiding the armoury informed the main body at the police lines as to their failure, the leaders naturally felt disheartened. They could no longer hope to take care of two other Lewis guns in Pahartali and Double Mooring jetty of which they had been aware all through.[60] Their momentary consolation that the broken guns at the Auxiliary Force of India headquarters would render the British helpless in the town was hardly justifiable when guns in other places remained intact. While the rebels thus wasted their chance of raiding Pahartali and Double Mooring jetty, the authorities recovered remarkably to wrest the initiative. The district magistrate, Wilkinson, and Captain Taitt, adjutant of the auxiliary forces—who escaped death near the armoury by inches—went to the railway station, commandeered an engine, reached Double Mooring jetty, dispatched messages from a ship, and brought the Lewis guns and men to the armoury to make use of the spared magazine room. A party under the superintendent of police, Johnson, soon made a short excursion to the police lines, where the rebels were still in close command.[61] Their Lewis gun attack was repulsed by the rebels with the newly-acquired police musketry. Johnson's party retreated following brisk firing and apprehending the danger of being overpowered. But unknowingly they had inflicted vital damage. Surjya Sen's men were taken aback by this abrupt machine-gun fire and their leaders felt demoralized at the prospect of an unequal fight between musketry and machine guns. At this point they decided to destroy the police armoury, guard room and magazine room. It was neither possible physically for 71 persons to carry 400 magazine rifles to any distant area nor practical to find a suitable hiding place. It is true that the original plan envisaged distribution of arms to the people following the occupation of the town. But that part of the plan was rendered difficult when the rebels were unable to discover the .303 bore cartridges (to be used for both the magazine rifles and Lewis guns). Arms, in such circumstance, were more a liability than an asset. The .303 bore cartridges thus proved to be tragically crucial to the whole rising. But did the rebel leaders think that everything would go their way and according to plan? Did they not make allowances for mistakes and exigencies?

While setting fire to the police lines one of the insurgents (Himangshu Sen) received severe burns. He was taken into a car in which Ananta Sinha and an ailing Ganesh Ghosh also sat, joined by two others (Ananda Gupta and Jiban Ghoshal). The car left for the heart of the town, presumably to arrange for the injured person's treatment and to transport the ailing Ghosh[62] to Fairy Hill. There would have been nothing wrong if an advance party moved towards the point where the whole army planned to rally. But the unusual feature was the inclusion of two field commanders in the advance party 'without informing even *Master da* (Surjya Sen)', as one of their comrades put it.[63] However, Ganesh Ghosh distinctly remembered that Surjya Sen and others had requested him to travel by car towards the town in view of his indisposition.[64] Ananta Sinha, however, was acting independently—he mentioned that he had had no previous consultation with other leaders.[65] While in town they expected the main body to arrive within a reasonable time. When it did not do so, the advance party tried to meet them half-way and later by returning to the police lines, but without any success.[66] This is certainly the correct description. But why did the main party not wait for some time at the police lines for the return of the advance group?[67] Was the advance group under instruction to come back after dropping the injured to a secure place? There evidently was some confusion somewhere. The absence of two field commanders undoubtedly weakened the collective thinking of the leadership. When the whole party was waiting at the police lines under cover, an automobile happened to flash lights upon them from a distance. The leaders, already startled by the Lewis gun fire, presumed it to be the signal for yet another machine-gun onslaught. Ambika Chakravarti took an instinctive decision and promptly led a general retreat towards the neighbouring hills and jungles.

Thus arose an incredible situation in which the victorious army left an unprotected town (the authorities had meanwhile retired, following their abortive Lewis gun attack, to Pahartali, the European quarters, preparing for a limited defence and awaiting reinforcement to arrive from Dacca) without attempting to deploy men at strategic points. Their march to the hills was not a melée, no general *suave qui pent,* as the rank-and-file remained 'a compact and disciplined body'[68] without knowing, of course, what was happening. The overall plan at this point was known only to Surjya Sen, Nirmal Sen and Ambika Chakravarti—who must have been thoroughly confused. Otherwise they had no business to tamper with an agreed plan and decide against rallying in the town. The Hindustan Republican Army (Chittagong Branch) were not prepared for roaming around the hills, they had no provisions, water or compass (whereas food for 71 men had been reserved in a restaurant in the town). Why did the three leaders, particularly Surjya Sen, who was 'head and shoulders above others in intelligence',[69] not realize that they were throwing away the initiative which they had so laboriously snatched? Surjya Sen and his men had planned the aggression meticulously but not the consolidation. Tactically the whole rising almost ended at this juncture, though the phase of heroism had only begun.

Between 19 and 22 April the group moved about for nearly 85 hours among the hilly Chittagong tracts—roughly fifteen miles away from town. These were hours of extreme hardship when food and drink became scarcely available and constant marching proved most exhausting. The runaway army hopelessly failed to establish contact with the town or with their lost comrades. Besides, the leaders must have, by this time, felt tormented with guilt upon observing the indomitable spirit of the rank-and-file. In fact, resentment was brewing among the followers who insisted on attacking the town instead of moving around aimlessly.[70] They were obviously right, for the initiative—though lost—was not lost forever. On 21 April, when the group was on a hill near Fatehabad, a local daily newspaper (*Panchajanya*), secured by chance, conveyed information about the arrival of British troops in Chitttagong and the imposition of curfew in the town. It thus became an uphill task for the rebels to enter the army-occupied town. Yet, there was hardly any choice. They decided to attack the town in four small batches. They commenced marching towards their destination from the Fatehabad hill. But seeing the impossibility of reaching the town before dawn they decided to take shelter for the day in Jalalabad Hill and wait for darkness on 22 April.[71] Before dusk on 22 April, however, they were attacked by the British army and fought the battle of Jalalabad Hill.

This battle was a confrontation of unequals, with the revolutionists particularly at a disadvantage. The hill was lower than the surrounding hills, especially the one in front of it on the east. The bushes and trees on the top offered only inadequate cover and the hill was dangerously close to a railway line. There was no supply of water and the rebels had no food. They numbered 51 and their weapons consisted of police musketry and revolvers. They faced British army regulars (including Eastern Rifles and Surma Valley Light Horse Brigade) carrying magazine rifles, Lewis guns and Vickers machine guns. The British numbers were overwhelmingly superior to the insurrectionists' strength.[72] Besides, the advantage of abrupt action lay this time with the government forces. However, the vigilant rebels were not as surprised as they could have been, and thwarted all the attempts of the British army to occupy the hill—even when incessant machine-gun fire was directed towards their position from a higher hilltop on the east. Soon thereafter, the rebels faced Lewis gun attacks on their left and right flanks. But they continued to try and silence the enemy guns.[73] The engagement, commanded by Lokenath Bal, lasted from 5.30 pm to 8 pm—three hours of glory for the insurrectionists. Their 'united and determined attempt to annihilate' the British army forces[74] alarmed the authorities in Bengal. The British army hurriedly left the battlefield soon after darkness fell, officially on account of scant visibility and under orders to return to ensure the safety of the town at night,[75] but practically under the pall of defeat. The authorities searched for the main body of rebels for more than forty-eight hours. Why should the British force have retired, after discovering the rebels and engaging them in a body, instead of picketing the hill and waiting for the next morning? The British army did return to Jalalabad Hill in the morning on 23 April. But certainly they did not expect the revolutionaries, squatting patiently at the hilltop, to court arrest. The fact is that the British army failed in its objective and the rebels maintained unusual fire power. Bullets, slogans and abuses were hurled by the 51 men in such fury that they appeared to be an army at least 100 strong.[76] There were moments of glory at Jalalabad Hill, when dying men told comrades to fight to the last, passing over blood-stained musketry and bidding bantering farewells to each other. The casualties on the rebel side were eleven dead and one mortally wounded (who eventually died).[77] As regards casualties on the British side, the exact number cannot be ascertained.

According to the government records the army suffered no casualties.[78] This is difficult to believe in view of the fact that the British officers employed their men several times to scale the hill and were forced to call them back when fired upon from close range. It was a common sight for the rebels on Jalalabad Hill to find British soldiers—who were hit—fall, rolling down the slope.[79] The renowned historian, Dr R.C. Majumdar, mentions British losses as 65 dead.[80] But this figure is based on questionable evidence. Archival material is totally devoid of any direct mention of the number of casualties among the government forces. This is not unusual, as knowledge of British losses would have impaired their reputation and inspired their subjects. The only remote evidence that the official documents offer is the reaction of the director of intelligence, Government of India, in May 1932, when he learnt that none of the accused in the first Chittagong trial was to be executed. He was very upset at this leniency to those who were responsible for 'twelve murdered and unavenged policemen and soldiers'.[81]

Throughout the Easter rising in Chittagong only two policemen (of whom one died later, on 7 May 1930) and two soldiers were known to have been killed at the hands of the rebels, apart from some civilians. The other eight could, therefore, be taken at least tentatively to be soldiers who died in the action of Jalalabad Hill.[82] About the injured soldiers, again, no information is available. However, one cannot summarily dismiss Ananta Sinha's suggestion that Captain Taitt's sudden departure from the scene of action with some of his men at 7 pm and the unusual delay in the retreating British army's arrival by train at Chittagong town (covering fourteen miles in nearly three hours) can only point to hurried arrangements for the injured and the dead in the railway hospital.[83]

The battle of Jalalabad Hill was the climax of the Chittagong uprising. Surjya Sen, the leader, truthfully and dispassionately summed up the insurrectionary phase of his struggle in a few modest yet incisive sentences:

> After six months of extensive preparation the Chittagong Revolution manifested itself on the night of 18 April 1930. On 22 April there

> was a fight for about two-and-a-half hours with the British soldiers at Jalalabad Hill and the British army was vanquished at last. . . . We sustained twelve casualties. After the Jalalabad fight we came down and concealed ourselves.[84]

The 'concealment' of Surjya Sen and his men and their subsequent activities till 1934, flowed in a different direction and with entirely new promises. These naturally had no tactical resemblance to the Easter rising and thus should not be covered in this essay. However, we cannot but take into account the trail of the Chittagong whirlwind till at least May 1930.

Soon after the battle of Jalalabad Hill the detached group of rebels, including Ganesh Ghosh and Ananta Sinha—unable to establish contact with the main body—proceeded towards Calcutta in utter confusion. Intercepted by the police at Feni railway station, they managed to escape following a daring and violent clash. Though Ananta Sinha gave himself up soon to the police in Calcutta for abstruse emotional reasons,[85] others—joined later by Lokenath Bal—remained free till they were overwhelmed in French Chandernagore on 1 September 1930, by a strong armed contingent under the Calcutta police commissioner, Charles Tegart. When the group made an abortive attempt to break through the cordon Jiban Ghosal was shot dead. In Chittagong, meanwhile, on 24 April, the police and the army spotted Amarendra Nandi, who was deputed by Surijya Sen prior to the battle of Jalalabad Hill to get in touch with the detached group. Finding himself hopelessly surrounded, Amarendra chose to kill himself rather than surrender. However, the most poignant was the drama enacted at Kalarpole on 7 May 1930. While leaving Jalalabad Hill Surjya Sen's army broke up into several small groups and took refuge in various shelters in the rural areas. One such group of six young men (Rajat Sen, Manoranjan Sen, Deva Prasad Gupta, Swadesh Roy, Fanindra Nandi and Subodh Choudhury) decided to suddenly attack the European club there.[86] It may be recalled that the original plan of massacring Europeans on 18 April did not materialize. But the task was attempted rather irresponsibly, without much preparation and precaution as were necessary in a military infested town. Surjya Sen, who was informed of this reckless adventure, was reported to have cautioned the group against its dangers.[87] The only merit of this half-baked plot lay in the possibility of demoralizing the administration through a snap guerrilla action and its accompanying propaganda value. The authorities got intelligence soon after the group arrived in the town on 6 May, and there began a hunt for the rebels by the police under Deputy Inspector General Farmer, the Eastern Frontier Rifles under Lieutenant-Colonel Dallas Smith, and the villagers under the instigation of police agents. There were clashes during the night-long chase during which the rebels killed a villager and a police constable and the police managed to hold two prisoners (Subodh and Fanindra). On the morning of 7 May, the other four exhausted and injured young men were finally encircled by the military and the police in a jute field at Kalarpole, near Jhulda village. As the British soldiers crawled in close there was a brief but furious exchange of fire, followed by a lull when the rebels were asked to surrender. This they refused to do and Manoranjan shouted back that he knew no surrender.[88] Then they excitedly pleaded with one another for the shooting of each by the other. It was done when consecutive revolver shots pierced the silence.[89] The soldiers, on coming near the dead bodies, found Deva Prasad still gasping for breath. Asked if he wanted to convey his last wish to the *burra sahab* he expressed regret at his inability 'to kill Mr Lowman'.[90] Obviously he mistook Farmer for Inspector General Lowman.

The Chittagong rising, like the Irish Easter Rising, was meant to be a heroic failure. The Irish Easter rebels, true to their own knowledge, suffered a military defeat but won—beyond their expectation—a complete political victory. The Irish nation, awakened by gunfire, never looked back to parliamentary irrelevance. The executions and imprisonments made all the difference in favour of revolutionary republicanism. The commoners suddenly became aware of the dreams dreamt by MacDonagh, Macbride, Connolly and Pearse and their death.

> All changed, changed utterly
> A terrible beauty is born.
>
> ('Easter 1916', Yeats)

The Chittagong rebels, on the contrary, fought favourably at Jalalabad Hill and managed to retain their freedom. They averted a military defeat but arrested political success. Their performance was impressive but not decisive. Their legacies were pricking memories, not 'utter changes'.

> ... we haven't forgotten Dharamatala
> I have no rest,
> Chittagong always goads my mind.
>
> (*Charam Patra*, Sukanta Bhattacharya)

They proved to be heroes but not prophets.

> They are heroes
> They used to raise storms in the heavens
> Their stories still sound thrilling
> Haloed by the blood of executed alien rulers
> Guns, bullets and burst of bombs.
>
> (*Janotar Mukhe*, Sukanta Bhattacharya)[91]

But why was it so?

The Chittagong rebellion broke out at a time when the country was passing through the Civil Disobedience movement. The rising of the popular temper in stages, the Gandhian image of a messiah delivering the goods to his people, his much-advertised and prolonged Dandi march, the emergence of women as civil resisters, the epic struggle at Dharsana, the indomitable 'Red Shirts' of Abdul Gaffar Khan—all these created an electrifying situation throughout India. Civil Disobedience was the more mature of the Gandhian movements, drawing more people to its fold than was possible during the Non-Cooperation movement. Gandhi, who most unqualifiedly condemned the Chittagong rising,[92] as did Redmond in the House of Commons (on 2 April 1916) in respect of the Irish rebels, was a political leader of his own kind with a distinct programme of mass movement—however controversial its characterization might be. Surjya Sen and his men were challenging with their lives, the form and content of the Gandhian agitation, condemning, as they revealed later, the politics of 'emasculated non-violence'.[93] It resembled in spirit the Irish revolutionists' challenge to Redmondian constitutionalism. But Redmond in Ireland could hardly match Gandhi in India, just as the rising in Chittagong was not comparable in extent to the rising in Ireland.[94] Besides, the Irish rebels struck when Redmond's position was dwindling, but Surjya Sen's men attacked when Gandhi's fame was soaring. The timing of the Chittagong rising, coinciding with a massive Gandhian movement, was certainly disadvantageous. History takes note more of what takes place than what could have taken place. But would the outcome have been the same had the Chittagong rising occurred a year later, between February and December 1931, the period when Gandhi was negotiating for entering into a pact with the viceroy, and then returning from England without any promise?

Surjya Sen and his band, unfortunately, had no choice. They decided upon a plan, prepared for it and were all set for action. Postponement would have revealed the plan, leading to their wholesale arrest. They could not go back, just as the Easter rebels refused to do on the night of 23 April 1916. Consequently, the impact of the Chittagong rising on the people in India and in Bengal substantially diminished. In Bengal the Civil Disobedience movement and the Chittagong rising neutralized each other to a certain extent, keeping the temperature down on both the violent and non-violent fronts. It is not altogether true that the Bengal Congress's 'poor response to the Civil Disobedience movement was drowned in the roar of the terrorist's gun' blasting from Chittagong.[95] According to the Bengal Congress, the number of arrested persons between April and December 1930, was 13,000, and daily approximately 200 persons were arrested during the movement.[96] Even if one makes an allowance for partisan exaggeration, it must be said that the number was considerable and only comparable to the United Provinces, where 10,000 people were arrested. It was not, of course, what could be expected of the most politically agitated and socially fluid province in India. The intensity of feeling—as seen perhaps in Gujarat—was definitely lacking in Bengal. The enthusiasm was not as intoxicating as in the Non-Cooperation (1920–22) days and the Government of Bengal, at least in 1930, in fact, discovered 'a tendency to return to normalcy' and considered picketing as 'sporadic and ill-organized'.[97] This state of restrained or arrested political agitation in Bengal during the Civil Disobedience movement can only be explained by the recurring schism (between Bose and Sengupta) in the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee and the revolutionary example set forth by the Chittagong rebels. In reality the disunity in the Congress Committee was probably of less consequence than the Chittagong rising, as both Bose and Sengupta must have been keen to go to jail and had more to gain than to lose in doing so—at least in the public eye. On the other hand, Gandhi's revised opinion in December 1946 that the Chittagong rebels were heroes whose bravery could not 'infect others',[98] was merely a distinguished understatement. Otherwise, how can one explain the series of terroristic activities between 1930 and 1935 in Bengal, the crowd of untried Bengali detenus in distant British prison camps—political 'untouchables' who could not be brought under the umbrella of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact for release like Congressmen were, the virtual British military rule in Chittagong, and the semi-military government in the whole of Bengal? That the rising in Chittagong inspired the public, particularly the youth, in Bengal, cannot be doubted, and tales of Chittagong passed from one generation to another. The Bengali press, which could have reflected this, had been already gagged by the ordinance and the panicky English press circulated only censored news. The only newspaper, *Swadhinata*, which had the temerity to hail the rising on 22 April 1930, was promptly banned and prosecuted[99] on the same day—but not before three editions were exhausted by the over-enthusiastic buyers. The hardened revolutionists in Bengal also felt proud and elated.[100] But the rising on the whole was not as inspiring as its authors had envisaged and the message was not clear amidst the noise of the Civil Disobedience movement. There is another point to ponder too—the proceedings did not go according to plan. Who can say what would have been the effect if Surjya Sen's army had fought in Chittagong town before a populace, rather than at Jalalabad Hill before nobody? What would further have happened if the Hindustan Republican Army's (Chittagong Branch) suicide squad had operated, away from obscure Chittagong, in the nerve-centre of India, Calcutta? After all, the Irish rebels rose in Dublin and not in Kilkee or Kinsale.

But if the voice of Chittagong was not echoed throughout the nation it certainly had a deafening effect on the British authorities. The Hindustan Republican Army (Chittagong Branch) aimed at demoralizing the British by a swift and dazzling aggression, and in this they remarkably succeeded. The Government of Bengal grimly informed the central authorities about the 'considerable success' of the rising of 18 April[101] and its impact on the young people of Chittagong, who marvelled at Surjya Sen and were only 'too glad to place themselves under such a hero'.[102] The home secretary of the central government, H.W. Emerson, was alarmed to find 'a serious demoralization of the official and non-official residents in Chittagong'.[103] The Government of India reported to the secretary of state that 'Chittagong was in a bad shape . . . morale is very low and initiative has been lost. . . . Government authority is very weak. Vigorous action is necessary to bring the district to order.'[104] Demoralization perhaps reached its peak when the commissioner, Chittagong division, and the district magistrate reported to the provincial government that '. . . the local civil authorities consider that the situation [in Chittagong] has passed beyond their control and that they cannot hold themselves responsible for the security of life and property in the district without the immediate introduction of martial law'.[105] Thus Surjya Sen's men achieved, as far as the ruling authority was concerned, more than what they perhaps ever conceived.

If one searches for any softening of the government attitude, any compromising trend in their policy as a result of the Chittagong rising, one would be sorely disappointed. Armed struggle is not like a *satyagraha* or like parliamentary pressure to reach the conference table and effect suitable adjustments. It is a challenge of force for state power, a fight to the finish, and in its process the conference table is at the end and not half-way. The existing authority which is challenged, and which enjoys all the advantages of loyalties and organization, also fights back, hits hard, crushes and oppresses the rebels and the people from whom they emerge. So, it finally involves the common man and woman who, when cowed down, retreat from an insurrection, and when defiant, spread it. The Chittagong rebels also counted on the involvement of the people. Soon after their rise they apprehended retaliatory measures on the part of the government and 'a severe oppression of the people' which would commit the common man and woman to sympathize and actively support the revolutionists. This would turn the occasionally bomb-making secret societies into open revolutionary parties. They even visualized that in such a state of affairs the government might be forced to think about a settlement, as was the case in Ireland.[106] Their anticipations were not wholly wrong and at least an articulate middle class was caught up in the whirlpool and suffered in Bengal. More than 1000 young men from this section were languishing in jail by March 1931 and 3374 persons were interned by May 1932.[107] Punitive exercises were resorted to against this section and a collective fine was imposed on the community as a deterrent to the rebellious mood. Serious restrictions were put on the movements of middle-class youth in Chittagong, such as curfews and carrying of identity cards.[108] Their parents were warned and victimized, and the population was terrorized by the police and the army. Interrogation and torture were practised beyond all limits. And 1932 saw the arrival of Sir John Anderson, experienced in counter-insurgency in Ireland, as governor of Bengal, with contingents of British infantry to tackle a rebel Bengal. The educated middle class—away from the vast majority of the society—was always susceptible to being terrorized by the authorities. Unfortunately, the Chittagong rebels were yet to discover a scientific ideology which would appeal to all classes of people and draw them close. The rebels had little to offer except patriotism, to sustain the morale of 'Heroic Chattagram', 'untrammelled' by attacks.[109] A simple sentimental nationalist revolt—without the advantage of a revolutionary ideology—always has an element of gamble in it. In 1916 in Ireland it paid rich dividends, and in 1930 in Chittagong it did not.

What position will history ascribe to the Chittagong rebellion? The Easter rising in Chittagong was organized by a group of romantic revolutionists whose faith in armed struggle was not shared by the vast majority of their countrymen, and whose ardent patriotism could not make amends for the lack of a revolutionary ideology. But on the whole the buoyant Chittagong heroes achieved what generations of Indian militants had always aspired for. They, for the first time, broke the monotony of abortive conspiracies, stereotyped robberies and ineffectual assassination of individuals. In the context of nationalist India theirs was the unique example of an organized military campaign against the mighty British government. Objectively, the Chittagong rebels—extremists among the Indian petty bourgeoisie—showed the way for the highest form of anti-colonial struggle, namely, armed confrontation, irrespective of their prejudices and fantasies, weaknesses and errors. They left behind a model which could have been suitably adopted by those who were concerned about an anti-imperialist social revolution in India throughout the 1930s. The doctrinaire Indian socialists and communists, shocked at the sight of high adventurism in Chittagong, forgot that the talk of perfect social revolution was invariably utopian and that the armed struggle against an established authority must always be perilous. They, who theoretically opposed all sorts of national oppressions, thus ignored 'the heroic revolt of the most mobile and enlightened section of certain classes in an oppressed nation against their oppressors'.[110]

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Notes and References

[1] *Indu Prakash*, 7 March 1881, compared the lot of Irish peasants with that of the Indian *rayats. Bombay Native Newspaper Report,* 1881.

[2] 'India and Ireland', address by Eamon De Valera, delivered at the India Freedom Dinner of the Friends of Freedom for India, 28 February 1920 Central Opera House, New York.

[3] S.A. Dange, 'Comrade Ghate: Our First Secretary', in *S.V. Ghate: Our First General Secretary*, a memorial volume, Communist Party publication no. 10, August 1971, New Delhi, pp. 5–6.

[4] The Easter Rising of 1916 took place during war-time turmoil in which the Irish militant nationalists, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Citizens Army wanted to take up arms against British rule with the aid of Germany. The plot thickened when the revolutionists arranged for German arms to be secretly brought to Ireland and planned a rising in Dublin on the day of the Easter Parade (Sunday, 23 April) of illegally-armed Irish Volunteers. However, the German ship *Aud*, carrying the arms, failed in its mission as Roger Casement—the go-between for the rebels and the Kaiser's government—was caught upon landing on Irish shore. The news led to an order countermanding the Volunteers' Parade issued by their chief, MacNeil, whom the rebel leaders did not take into confidence. The British authorities also sensed danger and prepared for arrests of politically suspicious characters. Since the original plan thus misfired there was no point in proceeding with the rising. But the Revolutionary Military Council, which suspended the rising on 23 April, unanimously decided at the height of the 'the delirium of the brave' to commence the rising at 12 noon on Easter Monday (24 April). It all began at the appointed hour when the General Post Office, occupied by the main body, was turned into the rebel headquarters and an Irish Republic was solemnly proclaimed. Splinter groups took positions in various other parts of the city like Four Courts, St Stephens Green, Mt St Bridge, Westland Row Station, etc. Martial law was imposed in Dublin but the British troops were unequal to their task until the arrival of reinforcements under Sir John Maxwell. On 29 April the rebels surrendered after a week-long resistance and only when the British threatened large-scale destruction of the city. Then followed the execution of rebel leaders in batches, the deportation of their ranks and the oppression of the populace by the British. The rising failed but as Pearse, the rebel commander-in-chief, reportedly remarked: 'When we are wiped out, people will blame us for everything, condemn us.... After a few years they will see the meaning of what we tried to do.' This prophecy was vindicated when the released prisoners were accorded a hero's welcome in Dublin the following year. Thereafter, the vast majority of Irish people unquestioningly followed the Easter Rising tradition and supported the Sinn Fein (the political heir of the Easter rebels) till the hour of its final victory.

[5] Irish trade unions, especially the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, were strongly embedded in national politics since 1914. The

socialist James Connolly and his Citizens' Army were among the leaders and participants of the Rising of 1916.

[6] *Banglar Katha*—a weekly brought out by C.R. Das—in its first edition of 30 September 1921, displayed characteristic Bengali regionalism by writing about a Bengali's 'special place in the world', his 'mission to perform' and his duty 'to become a true Bengali'. See J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, Los Angeles, 1968, p. 220. Also, the concern for a greater Bengal—'Bengali in race, language and culture'—was apparent in the resolution that J.M. Sengupta sent to the Congress Committee on the re-drawing of provincial boundaries for consideration. See *Advance*, 28 July 1931, cited in Bhola Chatterji, *Some Aspects of Bengal Politics in the Early Nineteen Thirties*, Calcutta, 1969, p. 20.

[7] It must, however, be conceded that working-class participation in the Indian national movement was visible during the anti-Simon Commission agitation of 1928–29 and in the Congress session in Calcutta in 1928, when the jute mill workers occupied the venue to register their demand for India's attainment of complete independence.

[8] This was W.B. Yeats's version in his poem, *September, 1913.*

[9] It was a comment of Roger Casement, one of the organizers of the Rising of 1916.

[10] The secret revolutionary societies of Jugantar and Anushilan had commenced functioning since the days of the Swadeshi movement. These rival organizations were of a federal character with various affiliated groups in different localities acting almost independently.

[11] Subhas Chandra Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, Calcutta, p. 123.

[12] Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, Shri Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, Shri Tulsi Chandra Goswami, Shri Nirmal Chandra Chunder and Shri Sarat Chandra Bose.

[13] Bhola Chatterji, *Some Aspects of Bengal Politics*, p. 4.

[14] S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p. 112.

[15] An interview in Calcutta with Ganesh Ghosh, a renowned revolutionary and a well-known communist (CPM) leader at the time, dated 18 June 1971.

[16] In 1918, Surjya Sen returned to Chittagong after obtaining his B.A. degree from Behrampore College.

[17] In the wake of the Swadeshi movement and through Aruobindo Ghose's efforts, revolutionary politics were said to have been introduced in Chittagong. However, the picture of this initial phase is rather obscure.

[18] According to Ganesh Ghosh (during an interview in Calcutta on 17 June 1971), the group remained independent maintaining 'cordial relations' with some Jugantar leaders. Anantalal Sinha, in his book *Agnigarva Chattogram* (Calcutta, 1969), also gives a similar impression. But in his confessional statement in Burdwan jail on 3 January 1925 (Home Pol. File No. 253 of 1925)—an enlightening document as regards the details of the newly-formed Chittagong group—Ananta Sinha specifically mentioned that they joined Jugantar. Police records also often refer to Surjya Sen as the leader of a Jugantar group.

[19] S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p. 60.

[20] Surjya Sen, Ambika Charavati, and Rajen Das, in utter exhaustion and fearing arrest and torture, swallowed potassium cyanide. Being oxidised the poison could not kill them and the police found them unconscious. The rest of the party—Ananta Sinha, Upen or Abani Bhattacharya and Deben De—managed to escape, though Ananta was eventually arrested in Calcutta. The involvement of Nirmal Sen, whose 'unpunctuality' led to his missing the whole 'action', and other participants could not be established by the police. It should also be stated here that the group soon murdered the police sub-inspector, Prafulla Roy, who was responsible for Ananta's capture.

[21] This is what Ganesh Ghosh mentioned in his article 'Surjya Sen (*Mastar da*)', in the memorial volume, *Surjya Sen Smriti*, edited by the Biplabtirtha Chattogram Smriti Samstha, Calcutta, 1971, p. 17. This is also confirmed by UP revolutionaries like J.C. Chatterji (in his book, *In Search of Freedom*, Calcutta, 1967, p. 337) and Prof. N.K. Nigam (of the Third Delhi Conspiracy Case fame) during conversations with the author in May 1971 in New Delhi.

[22] Abstract of Intelligence Report, Bengal Police, Vol. XXXX, 1926. Cited in Ananta Sinha, *Agnigarva Chattogram*, p. 219. In his book *Chattogram Astragar Lunthan*, Charubikash Dutta also referred to this move.

[23] Satish Pakrashi in his book *Agni Juger Kahini*, and Nirajan Sen in his article '*Bir Biplabi Surjya Sen*', in the memorial volume, *Surjya Sen Smriti*, mentioned Surjya Sen's concern for unity in unequivocal terms.

[24] The dates of release of the Chittagong detenus: (a) Ganesh Ghosh on 19.9.28; (b) Ananta Sinha on 8.9.28; (c) Lokenath Bal on 18.9.28; (d) Ambika on 27.11.28. From the Judgment on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932, Home Pol. File No. 7/4, 1932.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid. Also, Ananta Sinha, *Agnigarva Chattagram*, pp. 256–62.

[27] Jatindranath Das, arrested for complicity in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, was detained in Lahore Central Jail. He went on a hunger strike against the brutal treatment of political prisoners and died in jail 63 days later, on 13 September 1929.

[28] Judgment on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[29] Statement of Charubikash Dutta (ex-detenu in Chittagong prison), recorded on 15.5.30. Home Pol. File No. 335, 1930.

[30] Yeats's comment in his letter to Lady Gregory, 8 May 1916. F.X. Martin, *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916*, London, 1967, p. IX.

[31] Plunkett Pearse and MacDonagh were poets, and Connolly was the visionary with a forceful pen.

[32] An interview in Calcutta with Ganesh Ghosh, 17 June 1971.

[33] Ananta Sinha, *Agnigarva Chattogram*, p. 282.

[34] In the interview Ganesh Ghosh could recall reading Daniel Breen's *My Fight for Irish Freedom* and a 'few other books'. The biography of another Irish leader—*Michael Collins and the Making of Modern Ireland*—was quite

popular at that time. Besides, old issues of journals like *Contemporary History* and *19th Century and After* were also available. Moreover, police searches following the rising in Chttagong resulted in the discovery of *Life of Eamon de Valera* from Ganesh Ghosh's house and the copy of a speech of M. Henry Barbousse titled 'Against Imperialism' from the District Congress Office in Surjya Sen's exercise book. (Judgment on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.)

[35] Interview in Calcutta with Ganesh Ghosh, 17 June 1971.

[36] Ananta Sinha, *Agnigarva Chattogram*, p. 283.

[37] Judgment on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[38] The Chittagong leaders maintain that this was not deliberate. Ananta Sinha in his book *Agnigarva Chattogram*, and Ganesh Ghosh in his interview on 17 June 1971, agreed that the date of the rising kept shifting (as preparations were found to be incomplete), till it was finally fixed for 18 April. However, one should remember that a vital part of the whole plan, namely, the killing of Europeans, was drawn on the assumption that the 'white' people would assemble in their club premises on the night of Good Friday. How could the entire rising fortuitously take place on Good Friday if a part of it was thus predetermined?

[39] F.X. Martin, 'Mc Cullough, Hobson and Republican Ulster', in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising*, p. 97.

[40] Statement of Fakir Sen, 7, 8 and 9 May 1930, Judgment on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[41] Surjya Sen's last few letters to his sister-in-law immediately before his execution on 12 January 1934, clearly bear this out. These letters were recently found and published in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 12 January 1971.

[42] When Surjya Sen's young wife Pushpakuntala Devi, who suffered the ignominy that her charms could not hold Sen to the household, died in 1928, Sen's followers literally congratulated him at his 'relief' and 'freedom'—a queer but spontaneous reaction. After all, the ideal of a patriot in India was predominantly ascetic!

[43] Leading ladies like Pritilata Waddadar and Kalpana Dutt appeared only in the later stages of Surjya Sen's activities in Chittagong, 1931–33, and thus are beyond the scope of this study.

[44] These include very digestible Bengali books like *Aandaman Kahini, Desher Katha, Dwipantarer Katha* and *Nirbasiter Atma Katha*, biographies like *Deshabandhu Smriti, Barindrer Atma Kahini, Kanailal* and *Garibaldi*, and serious books like *Anandamath, Swaraj Gita* and *Banglar Biplabbad*. Statements of Sahairam Das, Fakir Sen and Lalmohan Sen, Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[45] In groups they often had elaborate discussions on their own deaths (statement of Fakir Sen, Judgment on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932) and the manner in which they should annihilate the enemy (interview with Ganesh Ghosh). To get adjusted to the sight of blood they watched surgical operations and visited places where animals were sacrificed or butchered (Ananta Sinha, *Agnigarva Chattagram*, p. 303).

[46] In this connection the guardians in Chittagong lodged several complaints to the police against their wards. A typical example was Madhav Sen's complaint of 8 April 1930 against his son, Fakir Sen. Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[47] Ibid.

[48] DGI Police, Bengal, to Bengal government, No. 13750, 28 November 1929, Home Pol. File No. 4/9, 1931.

[49] Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ananta Sinha, *Agnigarva Chattogram*, pp. 448–49.

[52] Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Reply of Sir S. Hoare, Secretary of State for India, to Mr Molson, M.P., 21 March 1932, Home Pol. File No. 4/9, 1931. Also, Hansard 263, H.C. Debate, 5 Ser. Col. 675.

[55] The rising was scheduled at eight in the night but was deferred to accommodate last-minute preparations.

[56] Leaflets issued by HRA (Chittagong Branch) on 18 April 1930, Home Pol. File No. 4/9, 1931.

[57] A comparison between this leaflet and the *Poblacht Nalle Eireann*, signed by Clarke, Macdiarmada, Pearse, Connolly, Macdonah and Cenant, and read out by Pearse on 24 April 1916 to an indifferent small crowd in front of the General Post Office, Dublin, will adequately prove the point. The striking similarity in places is quite obvious.

[58] This is the figure the government recorded: Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932. But Ananta Sinha in his book *Agnigarva Chattogram* (p. 345), calculated the number of policemen to be 200.

[59] Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[60] Interview with Ganesh Ghosh in Calcutta, 19 June 1971.

[61] Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[62] On 18 April Ganesh Ghosh had symptoms of chicken pox and was running a fairly high temperature.

[63] The version of Benode Choudhury, tape-recorded in Calcutta and acquired for the Oral History Project, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, on 21 January 1971.

[64] Interview with Ganesh Ghosh in Calcutta, 19 June 1971.

[65] Ananta Sinha, *Chattagram Juba Bidroha*, Part I, Calcutta, 1968, p. 151.

[66] Interview with Ganesh Ghosh in Calcutta, 19 June 1971.

[67] It was gathered, in fact, that the main body of rebels waited in the police lines for approximately twenty minutes. Ananta Sinha, *Chattagram Juba Bidroha*, p. 189.

[68] Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[69] Ganesh Ghosh always emphasized this point in his interview in Calcutta, 17 June 1971.

[70] Ananta Sinha, *Chattagram Juba Bidroha*, p. 199, and the version of Benode Choudhury (tape-recorded).

[71] The version of Benode Choudhury, (tape-recorded).

[72] No definitive British statement as to the number of government troops is available. The British accounts (e.g., Report of Lt. Col. Dallas Smith, 24 April 1930, and Judgment on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932) are often contradictory and full of discrepancies. From these one can only deduce a very rough estimate. The British troops arrived near Jalalabad Hill in various phases. First, the DIG, Mr Farmer, arrived in an automobile accompanied by one LG Section (roughly ten men), three officers and five other men from Eastern Frontier Rifles. Then came Capt. Taitt, also in an automobile, with a detachment of the Surma Valley Light Horse Brigade (approximately thirty-five persons) and thirty-one men from the Eastern Frontier Rifles. Receiving a message for reinforcements, another group came in automobiles, under Lt. Francis, with two sections (roughly twenty men) of the Eastern Frontier Rifles. Finally came Lt. Col. Dallas Smith and the ASP Mr. Lewis, with troops in an armoured train. There is no indication as to the number that arrived by train, but it could not have been less than one company (about 150 persons). This modest calculation makes a total of nearly 250 soldiers. More confusion exists as to the time of arrival of the armoured train near Jalalabad Hill. Dallas Smith said in his report (Lt. Col. E.D. Dallas Smith, OC Special Duty, to Inspector General of Police, Bengal, No. 2, 24 April 1930, Home Pol. File No. 335, 1930) that it came at 7 pm, when the battle was almost over. But the rebels categorically stated that the train came before the battle started. In fact its halting near the hill attracted their attention and enabled them to prepare for a fight (the version of Benode Choudhury, tape-recorded, and Ananta Sinha, *Chattagram Juba Bidroha*, p. 286).

[73] Lokenath Bal's account, cited by Swami Satyananda (pen-name), *He Atit Katha Kao* (Calcutta, 1969, p. 239), and the version of Benode Choudhury, tape-recorded in Calcutta.

[74] Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[75] Lt. Col. E.D. Dallas Smith, OC Special Duty Detachment, to Inspector General of Police, Bengal, No. 2, dated 23 April 1930, Home Pol. File No. 335, 1930.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Harigopal Bal, Tripura Sen, Nirmal Lala, Pulin Ghosh, Sasanka Dutta, Madhusudan Dutta, Pravas Bal, Naresh Roy, Bidhu Bhattacharya, Jiten Dasgupta, Moti Kanungo Roy and Ardhendu Dastidar.

[78] Lt. Col. E.D. Dallas Smith, OC Special Duty Detachment, to Inspector General of Police, Bengal, No. 2, dated, 23 April 1930, Home Pol. File No. 335, 1930.

[79] The version of Benode Choudhury, tape-recorded in Calcutta.

[80] While assaulting imprisoned prisoners, Sir Charles Tegart was reported to have mentioned this figure. R.C. Majumdar, *History of Freedom Movement*, Vol. III, Calcutta, 1963, p. 499. Also, Kalpana Dutt, *Reminiscences*, Bombay, 1945, p. 7.

[81] H. Williamson, DIB Government of India, note dated 4 May 1932. Home Pol. File No. 7/4, 1932.

[82] Military records, not yet transferred to the National Archives of India, may in future throw further light on the subject.

[83] Ananta Sinha, *Chattagram Juba Bidroha*, p. 328. Capt. Taitt's withdrawal and the delayed train journey from Jalalabad Hill are mentioned in Lt. Col. Dallas Smith's report and in the Judgement on the 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case.

[84] Exhibit no. 189 (by Surjya Sen). Judgement of Special Tribunal in Chittagong on Surjya Sen and others, Home Pol. File No. 42/7, 1933.

[85] Ananta Sinha, *Chattagram Juba Bidroha*, Part II, Calcutta, 1968, pp. 151–59.

[86] Ibid, p. 105.

[87] Ganesh Ghosh, 'Surjya Sen (*Mastar da*)', in *Surjya Sen Smriti*, p. 31.

[88] Ananta Sinha, Ananta, *Chattagram Juba Bidroha*, Part II, p. 139.

[89] According to the civil surgeon's report, the four young men injured by bullets of the British forces, 'obviously' killed each other. J.C. Farmer, DIG Bakharaganj Range, Chittagong, to IG Calcutta, 10 May 1930, Home Pol. File No. 335, 1930.

[90] SP Chittagong, Mr S.R. Johnson, to IG Calcutta, Mr Lowman, No. 1001/44–30, 8 May 1930, Home Pol. File No. 335, 1930.

[91] Sukanta, unlike Yeats, was not a contemporary of the rebels and he became a poet of the 1940s rather than the 1930s. But his esteem for the Chittagong heroes is clear from the letter he wrote to Bhupen Bhattacharya, 12 September 1946: *Sukanta Samagra*, Calcutta, 1969, pp. 356–57.

[92] *Young India*, 24 April 1930.

[93] Leaflet no. 1, issued by HRA (Chittagong Branch), 26 September 1932, Home Pol. File No. 4/54, 1932.

[94] More than a thousand people took part in the Easter Rising in Dublin. In Chittagong the number of participants was not even one hundred.

[95] Bhola Chatterji, *Some Aspects of Bengal Politics*, p. 8.

[96] 'Congress Review of Civil Disobedience Movement', a bulletin issued by the All-India Congress Committee, January 1931, in N.N. Mitra (ed.), *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol. 2, 1930.

[97] Ibid.

[98] *Harijan*, 1 December 1946.

[99] Bhupendra Kumar Dutta, who originally wrote the article '*Dhanya Chattagram*', very kindly supplied the author with a copy.

[100] A sample is the opinion of Bhupendra Kumar Dutta. He expressed this feeling of pride to the author during his stay in New Delhi in November 1971.

[101] R.N. Reid, Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal, to Secretary, Home Dept, Government of India, No. 149–P.S.D., 10 October 1931, Darjee-ling, Home Pol. File No. 291, 1931.

[102] Note on the situation in Chittagong, ibid.

[103] Note by H.W. Emerson, Secretary, Home Dept, Government of India, 23 April 1931, on Bengal government's letter no. 215–P.S.D. of 20 April 1931, Home Pol. File No. 291, 1931.

[104] Government of India to Secretary of State, telegram no. 2712–S, 6 November 1931, Home Pol. File No. 291, 1931.

[105] Government of Bengal to Government of India, no. 215–PSD, 20 April 1931, Home Pol. File No. 291, 1931.

[106] Statement of Sahairam Das, 25 April. Judgement on 1st Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1 March 1932.

[107] S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p. 216, and N.N. Mitra (ed.), *The Indian Annual Register*, p. 6.

[108] 'A report on Terrorist Activities and Government Action in Chittagong, 9 March 1932 to 31 March 1933', by S. Handoo, District Magistrate, Chittagong, 13 April 1933, Home Pol. File No. 45/7, 1933.

[109] 'Chattagram: 1943' by Sukanta Bhattacharya, in *Sukanta Samagra*, p. 60.

[110] V.I. Lenin, 'The Irish Rebellion of 1916', in *Collected Works*, Vol. XIX (1916–17), London, 1942, pp. 303–04.

The Executions of March 1931, Gandhi and Irwin

Amit Kumar Gupta

The withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation movement subsequent to the great mass agitation of 1921–22 effected a stupefying silence over the whole nation. Gandhi's arrest, his imprisonment and his temporary retirement did not disturb the stillness of the country till the coming of the Simon Commission in 1928 sparked off a chain of events leading to the massive Civil Disobedience movement of 1930. There were ripples, of course, in between which rose and fell in the form of the factionalism of the pro-changers and no-changers in the Congress, the birth of the Swaraj Party, the meagre infiltration of socialist ideas and the revival of 'the bomb cult'. The nation stood in dismay when the political gentry in the Congress, led by Chittaranjan and Motilal, decided to shift their attitude from determined non-cooperation to unwilling cooperation with the British Raj in India. They fell to the lure of parliamentarianism with the exaggerated hope of diplomatic success in wrecking the limited and irresponsible Constitution of 1919 by working from within.

While the pro-changers were at least toying with a course of action, namely, obstructing the government by entering into the legislatures, the no-changers, like Rajagopalachari, Ansari and Vallabhbhai, were too helpless to devise any programme of action during Gandhi's absence. Chittaranjan and Motilal formed the Swaraj Party, entered the legislatures and even succeeded in obtaining Gandhi's blessings at Belgaum in December 1924. But the Swarajist participation in councils strengthened the Constitution of 1919 as a mark of recognition and did not weaken it. Soon a section of 'cooperating non-cooperators' desired, as natural in such circumstances, to become responding cooperators. Parliamentarian wrangling and the consequent disenchantment promptly fostered middle-class opportunism, rival communal claims and inter-religious frictions. The Khilafatists drifted towards fanaticism and the Hindus were hardened by revivalist trends. Only sporadic but violent youthful reactions to these dreary national politics broke the monotony from time to time. The executions of March 1931 originated in this political background.

The martyrs of March 1931—Bhagat Singh and his comrades—symbolized the revival of terrorism as a method of struggle for independence, following a period of its recession. Bengal had given the signal in 1924, when Gopinath Saha was hanged for a political crime. Next came the famous Kakori trial in the United Provinces in 1925, and thereafter bomb outrages and 'political dacoities' were rehabilitated in vital parts of the country. Though somewhat different in aspirations from earlier movements, the revival of terrorism in the mid-1920s was neither very special nor spectacular. Organized conspiratorial terrorism was as much a phenomenon in the history of Indian nationalism as constitutional overtures. The only difference between the old and the new terrorists lay in the changing times. Again, Europe was the centre of all transformations with its post-war impoverishment, trade unionism and militancy.

The smuggling of scant socialist ideas from Europe by hoodwinking British vigilance, was a new element in India of the twenties. The basic change in the political climate was effected, however, by the triumph of the Russian revolution and the impact of a socialist regime. But the receptive Indian youth and the terrorists were at a disadvantage as proscribed socialist literature trickling into the country was far too inadequate. Thus, the terrorists of the mid-twenties, despite their earnestness, could ideologically only become at the most utopian socialists, not scientific socialists or Marxists.[1] They were, however, touched by socialist slogans and inspired by socialist objects. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha of the Punjab of 1926, with which Bhagat Singh was associated, had a distinct socialist political aim. The terrorist organization of northern India, the Hindustan Republican Association, was changed into the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association in 1928, with socialism as its object. The religious rituals of traditional terrorists of Bengal and Maharashtra were dropped.[2] Organizations were tidied up and the formation of army wings like the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army in North India and Surjya Sen's army in Chittagong was emphasized. There were also scrappy discussions among the new terrorists about the ways and means of achieving socialism, some vague talk about revolution, exploitation and imperialism. Yet they clung, in spite of all their professions, to the method of individual and group armed actions. They did not realize the importance of mass upsurge in course of the Non-Cooperation movement. They took no notice of the historic strikes of workers in Bombay, Calcutta and Kanpur during the late twenties. They generally preferred to remain 'a party of middle-class revolutionists looking upon action by individuals as the highest form of struggle, operating in isolation from the people'. Such a party 'could not only not rouse the nation but was dependent even for its internal security and morale on the personalities of its leaders'.[3] Terrorist leaders like Bhagat Singh and his comrades were undaunted heroes, no doubt, and they did stir the nation through their heroic sacrifice. This stirring of the nation was also their sole objective, irrespective of the halo of socialism added to it later on.

What Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru actually attempted to achieve in their short lives was a projection of national attention on their ideals and tactics. Their ideals were the end of foreign rule in India and the inauguration of some sort of a socialist state. But more important for them in the then prevailing situation was to popularize their tactics, namely, violent and organized struggle as opposed to Swarajist constitutionalism or Gandhian non-violence. They wanted to infuse '. . . revolutionary ideals and tactics in the public' and the expression of such ideas sounded more glorified from the mouths of those who stood on the gallows for their cause.[4] For advocating these ideas they thus indulged on a fatal course of destruction and self-destruction, or what they themselves termed, 'actions for propaganda'. The idea was to strike selected blows on notorious government officials on fitting occasions. The test of such a fitting occasion was the consideration, as one of them pointed out, '. . . that our actions should fulfil the desires of the public and should only be in response to those grievances against the Government which might attract public sympathy and support'. It is interesting to note that one of Bhagat Singh's comrades was critical about violence without much propaganda value. He disapproved of his Bengali compatriots' love for political dacoities and even of the Chittagong upsurge of April 1930.[5]

A very suitable occasion for 'action for propaganda' presented itself before the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army when Lala Lajpat Rai died on 17 November 1928, as a result of injuries received in a clash with the police on the day the Simon Commission arrived in

Lahore. The Simon Commission, composed entirely of British parliament members, was scheduled to investigate, under the Constitution of 1919, the Indian political system. The very fact that an all-white Commission would attempt to sprinkle parliamentary justice over brown Asiatics was sufficient to insult the whole nation, and the people sprang in a spontaneous boycott of the Commission. Lalaji's death added insult to injury. The Hindustan Socialist Republican Army thought this 'a very good opportunity' to act, and a plan was accordingly laid to murder Mr Scott, the superintendent of police of Lahore, to whom Lalaji's injuries were attributed. Bhagat Singh and Rajguru, aided by Chandrasekhar Azad and abetted by Sukhdev, acted daringly on 17 December—a month after Lalaji's death—and killed J.P. Saunders, the young probationer deputy superintendent of Police, Lahore, by mistake.[6] The mistake did not matter much as the killing of an English official was merely symbolic of a vengeful act. In their posters (written by Bhagat Singh prior to the occasion) the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army merely changed the name of the victim to announce revenge for Lalaji's death. But the posters neither received much publicity in the press nor as much attention from the nationalist leaders as Bhagat Singh and his friends anticipated. Their intention to advertise the fact that Saunders' murder was political, and that it had been undertaken to avenge national humiliation, thus did not succeed.[7]

A new plan was soon thought of with the change of situation in the country. In the Congress a struggle ensued between the veterans and the youth, over India's Dominion Status and Independence. In the Calcutta session of the Congress the youth, in fact, committed the country to a struggle for Independence if the government did not concede Dominion Status in a year. Apart from this Congress ultimatum, the government was taken aback by widespread industrial unrest and the visible growth of political extremism. It prepared carefully for a showdown, instituted large-scale arrests of trade unionists on the trumped-up charges of a plot of international communism in India, introduced the Public Safety Bill to contain terrorism and the Trades Dispute Bill to undermine the working-class movement. The time in 1929 for 'action for propaganda', by the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, could not be more propitious. Again Bhagat Singh, accompanied by Batukeshwar Dutta, was entrusted with the task of 'making the deaf hear' through explosions of bombs in the Central Legislative Assembly on 8 April 1929. This time it worked like a dream and Bhagat Singh and Batukeswar made full use of the opportunity through their passionate statement from the dock. They were sentenced to transportation for life, but the point reached home and the country listened in mute silence to what they said.

Thereafter followed a series of incidents—the accidental discovery of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army bomb factory in Lahore, the arrest of the terrorist rank-and-file, the linking of Bhagat Singh with Saunders's murder, and the tragic spectacle of revolutionists competing with each other for becoming approvers. In July 1929 began the famous Lahore and United Provinces Conspiracy Cases, taking the country over fifteen months to a high pitch of tension. The nation saw demonstrations of raw patriotism and contempt for justice, hunger strikes for political prisoners' rights and an epic race for death by starvation, police battling with handcuffed prisoners and, finally, judges administering *ex-parte* justice without defence witnesses, defence counsels and without even the accused.[8] In all these Bhagat Singh, along with a number of his comrades, shone high. Besides being the principal accused, he led the whole show with his precocity, intelligence and impetuousness. At his instance his comrades were involved in a well thought-out final 'action for propaganda'. As Sukhdev recalled with some satisfaction: 'It was a good thing that everything came to light to the people. Dear Brother, I consider my arrest as good luck only for this reason.'[9] Apart from efforts to save those who could be saved, Bhagat Singh and his comrades offered little defence. By refusing to deny the charges against them, they disregarded and ridiculed British justice. It was not surprising that, on 7 October 1930, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were subjected to capital punishment. But the country stood tense and exasperated.

Bhagat Singh's biggest contribution to the cause of his country was his death, and the only productive part of his short life[10] was the period between his arrest and execution. His heroism whilst on the dock, and his refusal to become a party to his father's false plea for his life,[11] left a profound impression on his countrymen and worked as an intoxicant on the youth. Bhagat Singh became a legend and a symbol which some people might have found difficult to accept but nobody could ever deny. Selfless individual heroism at its best can always sway the public sentiment. Bhagat Singh did this even at a time when Gandhi's return had enlivened Indian politics, when, at the expiry of the Congress ultimatum, he led the country in 1930 to Civil

Disobedience, and when his non-violence and *satyagraha* were in full cry. Even ardent Gandhians had to concede that just before his execution Bhagat Singh's name was 'as widely known all over India and was as popular as Gandhiji's'.[12] Gandhi himself, before he could in any way be pressed by pro-Bhagat Singh demonstrations, recorded that Bhagat Singh was an 'undoubted' brave man.[13]

A defence council composed of eminent public men was set up to fight for the lives of the condemned. But their application to the Privy Council challenging the legality of *ex-parte* justice, was rejected on 10 February 1931. There was, thereafter, not much left between the martyrs and their martyrdom. Petitions appealing to the viceroy's prerogative for mercy were showered on the government, newspapers and public meetings clamoured for the lives of the heroes, and the youth issued inflammatory posters in disgust. In the course of these agitations 'Congressmen themselves were anxious to explore the goodwill prevalent all-round for securing the commutation'.[14] It was this exploration volunteered by the Congress that added some elements of drama to the executions of March 1931, apart from the helpless anger that the executions evoked.

The Congress pledge of independence, the government inaction and the return to active politics of Gandhi—the only leader who had a programme of mass movements—gradually prepared the country for a bitter battle. In March 1930 Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience movement on an innocuous breach of the salt laws.[15] The movement grew large with Gandhi's leisurely Dandi march and assumed serious proportions with an air of universal defiance. In spite of occasional police excesses, the only liberal Tory viceroy of British India managed to maintain his composure and give 'authority the cloak of courtesy and restraint'.[16] By committing the government to India's attainment of Dominion Status Irwin proved himself to be, as far as political battle was concerned, a worthy opponent of Gandhi. Soon signs of exhaustion were visible on the warring sides and with the expressed willingness of both, very personal negotiations between Gandhi and Irwin commenced on 16 February 1930, to formulate a pact. The Churchillian description of 'a seditious fakir, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceroy's palace' to parley on equal terms with the representative of the British empire, amply expressed the significance of the incident. While discussing the fate of the country behind closed doors, Gandhi and Irwin also had occasion to discuss the fate of Bhagat Singh and his comrades. The sympathizers of the condemned remained breathlessly expectant as to the outcome of the discussions. Such popular expectation seems unusual as it then appeared to Irwin, dismayed when 'the apostle of non-violence pleaded for the devotees of violence'.[17] It is relevant to recall here Gandhi's opposition to Chittaranjan's move to praise the heroism of terrorist martyr Gopinath Saha in June 1924 at Ahmedabad. In Bhagat Singh's case in particular, Gandhi unhesitatingly denounced Saunders's murder.[18] However, the situation of a deal in terms of equality for an armistice was in itself unusual in Indian politics. This unusual situation naturally led people to hope that in his eagerness to reach an amicable settlement, the viceroy might commute the sentence of the condemned, on Gandhi's request. Besides, Bhagat Singh had already become too strong an emotional factor in politics to be casually dispensed with. Gandhi's creed of non-violence logically had no place for an eye for an eye, especially when patriotism was concerned and when death of the condemned could only result in the furtherance of violence. Irwin, on his part, was also 'well aware' of the interest that the public had taken in Bhagat Singh's case.[19] Neither of them could rule out the fact that an understanding between them, if at all reached, would be seriously impaired if Bhagat Singh's execution irritated public memory.

Gandhi and Irwin did talk about Bhagat Singh and his comrades, while discussing their pact, though not at great length. But their conversations, to the dismay of the nation, had ultimately no effect on the condemned. Originally, the authorities wanted the executions to take place some time at the end of October 1930.[20] They, however, changed their mind and decided to wait in view of the appeal to the Privy Council. When the Privy Council rejected the appeal it was thought that the executions should be over by the end of March 1931. The Punjab government, in fact, proposed the deadline of 24 March.[21] On 17 March the viceroy rejected all petitions of mercy.[22] The following day the Punjab government decided that the executions should take place at 7 am on March 23.[23] The decision was kept a top secret, as the government apprehended agitations and trouble all over India and began preparing carefully for a law-and-order breakdown. The news was scheduled to be broken only on the morning of 24 March. All happened as expected on the fixed date and at the appointed hour. Only the threat to law and order was proved to be unfounded. People generally were more idolatrous than rebellious. They bent their heads and sobbed, and then they idolized Bhagat Singh and his comrades. Of course, there were commotions and youthful outbursts over the executions, like the angry demonstration of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha against Gandhi when he was arriving for the Karachi session, presenting him black cloth flowers and raising slogans like 'Down with Gandhism' and 'Gandhi's truce has sent Bhagat Singh to the gallows'. The Karachi session itself was full of animated discussions and it was said that the excited arguments over the Congress resolution on Bhagat Singh were no less arresting than the main resolution ratifying the Gandhi–Irwin Pact. All, including Gandhi, spoke highly about Bhagat Singh's bravery and everyone believed that Irwin had made a mistake by disregarding Gandhi's plea to save Bhagat Singh's life, especially when Gandhi explained on 26 March 1931 in the Congress *pandal* at Karachi, in some detail, his efforts to spare the lives of the three young patriots. As a political uproar the Bhagat Singh affair virtually subsided thereafter.

Curiously, however, nobody took adequate care to investigate fully the most important part of the whole episode, namely, the Gandhi–Irwin conversation on the executions. One wonders why. After all Bhagat Singh had been idolized for his defiant death and the urgency to avoid such death was discussed at the highest level. Thus, what transpired at the viceregal palace, even if abortive, must have been of great significance. Newspapers of the time were so busy in commercializing patriotism and selling half-baked rumours that they hardly throw any clear light. Contemporary individual accounts so far constitute the only source of information. They roughly state that in the course of negotiations Gandhi and Irwin had 'prolonged and repeated talks on the commutation of the death sentence' on Bhagat Singh and his comrades. The viceroy agreed, without committing himself, to take the matter up with the local Punjab government, as he himself was unable to exercise his prerogative of mercy for political reasons. But the Punjab government refused to yield, on political considerations again.[24] Irwin's official biographer took immense pride in the viceroy's 'adamant' attitude on this point while Gandhi 'in vain pleaded for the reprieve'. Not only did Irwin refuse to grant a reprieve, but he also extracted a pledge from Gandhi that he would condemn terrorism at the Karachi session.[25] A historical finding also runs on similar lines—that Gandhi discussed the case of Bhagat Singh and his companions and the viceroy promised serious consideration. Later, however, Irwin was found to be convinced that the judicial decision was fair and reluctant to alter it for political considerations.[26] All these fomulations must have been based on what Gandhi and Irwin themselves divulged. In his speech in the Congress *pandal* at Karachi on 26 March 1931 Gandhi emotionally explained: 'I pleaded with the Viceroy as best as I could. I brought all the persuasion at my command to bear on him.' Even at the very last moment, he said, he wrote a letter to Irwin, he 'poured' his 'soul into it, but to no avail'.[27] Irwin, also at considerable length, attempted to clarify his refusal to commute the sentences which created 'real difficulty for Gandhi and his associates'. According to Irwin, the viceroy should exercise his clemency on definite principles, e.g., that there was miscarriage of justice and that new facts were brought to light. Such was not the case with Bhagat Singh and even the petitions for the reprieve did not suggest so. In this circumstance he found it 'wholly wrong' to allow his judgement to be influenced by political considerations.[28]

When Irwin spoke about assuming responsibility for creating 'real difficulty' for Gandhi and his followers, he meant that his refusal placed Gandhi at a great disadvantage so far as the ratification of the pact was concerned, at the Karachi session. Bhagat Singh's hanging could lead to tumultous opposition at Karachi against Gandhi and the pact—though it actually did not do much. As a safeguard against this apprehension, it was suggested in a Machiavellian way, said Irwin, to suspend or postpone the executions till the Congress session at Karachi was over. But such a suggestion, Irwin felt, 'would have made the immediate atmosphere at Karachi easier, but only at the cost of enabling Congress to say with justice that it had been treated by the Viceroy and the Government with complete lack of candour'.[29] Incredibly, the British taste for diplomacy was restrained and Irwin decided that the executions must proceed with all their attendant difficulties, as he recalled the incident in his autobiography in later years. He had no option, he said to Gandhi, when he was unable to commute a sentence so thoroughly deserved by law and when the suspension or postponement of the sentence, which might raise a false hope of remission, 'was not straightforward nor honest'.[30] Gandhi had to swallow the British advice about honesty and straightforwardness! But why? Where did the suggestion of suspending executions come from?

Irwin referred to the press originating the suggestion of suspending the sentence.[31] However, a British viceroy in India, even in the 1930s, was hardly likely to exercise himself on a mere suggestion from the press. Historical enquiry on Irwin's viceroyalty does not throw much light, except bearing out the greatness of both Irwin and Gandhi in agreeing to the dishonesty of postponing the executions.[32] Contemporary opinion speculated as regards the party more likely to play the game of duplicity and ascribed the suggestion to Irwin himself. It is said that Gandhi not only discarded the viceroy's proposal of postponement to ease proceedings at the Karachi session, but also 'definitely' stated that if the executions must take place, they ought to take place before the Congress session than after.[33] Gandhi and Irwin held their talks in private and nobody was present with them except Hubert Emerson,[34] the secretary, Home Department, Government of India. But both Gandhi and Irwin kept a record of their talks separately at the end of each session, Gandhi by reporting verbally to his secretary and Irwin by writing notes himself. It is now possible to discover clues about the Gandhi–Irwin discussion on Bhagat Singh from these authoritative sources.

The issue of impending executions came up for discussion when Gandhi raised it on 18 February 1931. According to Irwin, Gandhi did not plead for commutation, although he would, being opposed to all taking of life, take that course himself which would also have an influence for peace. However, he (Gandhi) 'did ask for postponement in present circumstances'. To this Irwin replied that 'whatever might be the decision as to the exact dates [of execution]' he was unable to imagine that there was any case for commutation.[35] Gandhi's own account corroborates Irwin's, adding more sidelights. He said he raised the issue very politely by requesting the viceroy to suspend Bhagat Singh's execution 'to make the present atmosphere more favourable'. He himself would have released Bhagat Singh which, however, he could not expect of any government. He also reminded the viceroy that this point had no connection with their discussion about an agreement and that he would 'not take ill' if the viceroy refused to have any further talk about it. This Irwin gracefully did not do, and replied, 'I am very grateful to you that you have put this thing before me in this manner. Commutation of sentence is a difficult thing, but suspension is certainly worth considering.'[36] So it was not Irwin but Gandhi who wanted suspension or postponement of the executions. Irwin, on his part, was eager to consider the proposal as it was not in his interest to jeopardize a possible agreement in any way. He even wanted to sound the local government in charge of executions on this proposition. The Home Department, Government of India, pointed out to the Punjab government the difficulty which might arise if Bhagat Singh was hanged before the Karachi session. They felt that it would be embarrassing for Gandhi in the Congress, which might even overthrow the agreement. So they suggested that 'the possible course is to wait until a few days after the Karachi session was over'.[37] On 15 March the government of India pressed the Punjab government for a decision on this point.[38] The Punjab government recognized the difficulties but felt that the Congress at Karachi would most probably be content if the executions preceded the session, to mourn the deaths. But if the executions did not take place, there was the danger that commutation of the sentences would be made a condition of future Congress cooperation with the government.[39] The voice of the Punjab government might have carried decisive weight with Irwin, who finally discovered his own obstacles in obliging Gandhi.

The next time that Gandhi and Irwin had an opportunity to talk over the issue was on 19 March 1931—well after their pact had been finalized. Between raising the issue on 18 February and the final discussion on 19 March, Gandhi was curiously vocal about Bhagat Singh's fate, making vague public pronouncements suggesting even a veiled impression of a reprieve. On the conclusion of the pact on 5 March, Gandhi appealed to the terrorists in his statement to the press to let them preserve their precious lives and '. . . let them give to the Congress an opportunity of securing release of all political prisoners and maybe even rescuing from the gallows those who are condemned to death as being guilty of murder'. He, however, wanted to remain cautious: 'It is for us to make the effort. The result is in God's hands.'[40] On 7 March in a public meeting in Delhi Gandhi again talked, when asked, about all the pressures that he had brought on the viceroy in connection with Bhagat Singh and commented:

> But it is still open to us to secure the release of all . . . and that can be done only if you will implement the settlement . . . if God willing, Bhagat Singh and others are alive when we have arrived at the proper stage, they would not only be saved from the gallows but released.[41]

In the third week of March, Gandhi, at a civic reception in Bombay, faced red-flag-waving Communists, who asked what he had done in his truce regarding Bhagat Singh and his comrades and the Meerut

Conspiracy Case prisoners. Gandhi in his reply said, '... And I may tell you that I am striving my best to get them released and if only you will cooperate with me by creating a calm atmosphere we may be able to get all of them released.'[42]

On 19 March, Gandhi and Irwin talked for the last time about Bhagat Singh. According to Irwin, Gandhi raised the topic as he was leaving for the day. Irwin reiterated his stand on commutation and informed Gandhi of his considered refusal to postpone the executions till after the Karachi session. His rejection was based on three grounds —first, that postponement of the executions merely on political considerations was improper; second, that it was inhuman to suggest to friends and relations of the condemned that the viceroy was considering commutation; and finally, that the Congress would legitimately be able to complain—when the executions took place at a later date—of being tricked by the government. 'He [Gandhi] appeared to appreciate the force of these arguments, and said no more.'[43] This obviously was the last interview which Irwin recalled in his autobiography, though with a faded memory as to the exact date. He narrated that Gandhi's last plea was made at 'a particularly unfortunate' moment as he had rejected appeals for reprieve the other day and Bhagat Singh was to be hanged on the day scheduled. However, when he explained his arguments against the suspension, Gandhi did utter a significant sentence, 'Would Your Excellency see any objection to my saying [before the public?] that I pleaded for the young man's life?' Irwin said that he saw none if Gandhi would also add that the viceroy had no other course to follow.[44] This was about all the secret conversation that Gandhi and Irwin had on Bhagat Singh.

There was finally a last-minute correspondence between the two. Understanding from Dr Sapru that on 22 March Irwin was yet disturbed about Bhagat Singh, Gandhi in the early hours of 23 March wrote a letter, to Irwin appealing frantically to stop the executions. In this letter, while urging for suspending the sentence Gandhi mentioned also the commutation of the sentence as a public demand 'rightly or wrongly'. Besides, Gandhi, for the first time, attempted to back up his plea by hinting to an understanding with 'the revolutionary party' to the effect that they would stop violence if the condemned were spared. So Gandhi felt '... suspension of sentence pending cessation of revolutionary murders becomes in my opinion a peremptory duty'.[45] This information furnished by Gandhi was probably true.[46] But it did not cut much ice with Irwin who, on the same date, rejected Gandhi's final request after thinking 'carefully over everything' that Gandhi had written.[47]

But why did Gandhi at all ask for postponement of the executions instead of a forthright appeal for reprieve? To be fair to Gandhi one could argue with some force that a mere appeal for commutation to the viceroy in February 1931, following a Privy Council ruling, was foredoomed to failure. After all, Bhagat Singh's patriotism was not on trial. The tribunal had decided on what was a political crime and a premeditated murder. Nobody denied Bhagat Singh's legal guilt and Bhagat Singh and his comrades were the last persons to do that. On the question of reprieve and the death penalty Bhagat Singh's own opinion was unequivocal: '... according to the verdict ... we are said to have been waging war and are consequently war prisoners. Therefore, we claim to be treated as such; we claim to be shot dead instead of being hanged.'[48] Under this circumstance, judicial mercy from a British viceroy stood little chance, and Gandhi's understanding of law clearly grasped this. The only alternative to save the condemned from death was to exert political pressure. Political pressure in the form of public opinion already existed, otherwise it would not have been a point of discussion between Gandhi and Irwin.

Gandhi could have, as he himself said,[49] made commutation a condition of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, which, of course, he was unwilling to do. His unwillingness is understandable in the context of the promise of a historic pact which occurred only rarely in a nation's lifetime. A nation's fate could not be staked for the fate of some individuals. Besides, Gandhi and his Working Committee could not, with justice, champion the case of violence by departing from their declared devotion to non-violence. In fact, much contemporary criticism of Gandhi on this point seems unreasonable. Thus, when pressure through preconditions appeared illogical, Gandhi probably desired to add political manoeuvre to public opinion. He might have thought that if he could, by some remote chance, secure the suspension of executions, the government would face great difficulty in carrying out the executions at all. The hope of ultimate success in a bargain is sometimes greater if demands are kept low at an initial stage. Gandhi was probably calculating that his apparently innocent request might be treated favourably by a viceroy anxiously preparing for a truce. That the whole manoeuvre did not work was not due entirely to Gandhi's failure but to Irwin's success in correctly anticipating the opponent's moves. But did Gandhi merely rely on Irwin's weaknesses without taking into account the viceroy's strengths? All such discussion, however, is only conjectural. There is no proof of any ill-conceived, chessmen-like manoeuvres on the part of Gandhi, no indication of his proceeding step by step on the issue of Bhagat Singh or his preparation for an encounter of wits.

Indications point, rather, in a relatively straight direction. Public interest was so spontaneously all-encompassing that neither Gandhi nor Irwin could avoid discussing the issue during their parleys. As narratives of their conversations suggest, they discussed it without attaching any great importance to it.[50] Only on the second day of their private meeting did Bhagat Singh and his comrades feature in the discussion. It never came up for another consideration till 19 March, when the pact had already been entered into. Gandhi's only concern throughout was the negotiated pact scheduled to be discussed and ratified in the Karachi session of the Congress beginning on 25 March 1931. The timings of the executions and the Congress session were awkward and embarrassingly close. Gandhi foresaw this from the beginning and called for postponement to make 'the present atmosphere' more favourable.[51] Irwin made no mistake in reading the hint and realizing the need for flexibility as to 'the exact date' for executions.[52] The object of suspending the sentence, as understood by Irwin and his officials, was apparent when they pointed out to the Punjab government 'the difficulty' which the executions could cause in the Karachi session. Their apprehension, like Gandhi's own, was that 'the extreme left' in the Congress would oppose Gandhi and the pact at Karachi.[53] This 'extreme left' must have been the younger section of the Congress, including some self-styled socialists and a handful of Marxists, led by Subhas and Jawaharlal. Gandhi even admitted before Irwin that Subhas, though not a member of the Working Committee, is 'my opponent and will denounce me'.[54] What Gandhi had in mind in requesting a postponement of the executions became abundantly clear on 19 March. On that day Gandhi pleaded for suspension by saying that the newspapers were predicting the date of the executions as 24 March—a day later than when they actually took place. The information disturbed Gandhi as this date 'coincided with the arrival of the new President of the Congress at Karachi and there would be much popular excitement'.[55] At a press interview on 21 March, when

Gandhi was asked if he expected to hold the nationalist Congress to the terms of the truce with Irwin, he was shaky in his affirmation. 'Yes,' he replied, 'but if Bhagat Singh is hanged, as it now seems almost certain, it may have highly unfavourable repercussions upon the younger elements of the Congress.'[56] By this time Gandhi's hope to tide over commotions at Karachi by postponing the hangings, was almost dead. But he must have presumed troubles at Karachi in a vastly exaggerated manner. His letter of 23 March 1931 to Irwin was pathetic and desperate from this point of view. He wrote: 'Since you seem to value my influence, such as it is, in favour of peace, do not please unnecessarily make my position difficult as it is, almost too difficult for future work.'[57] A revolt of the youth at Karachi in the wake of the executions loomed very large before Gandhi's eyes. Irwin himself was well aware of this, but unable to play the game. On the same day he replied, declining the request and lamenting that the last thing he wished to do was 'to make your [Gandhi's] task, especially at this juncture, more difficult.'[58] Difficult it undoubtedly was for Gandhi at Karachi, but not insurmountable as he feared. Did Gandhi, in retrospect, reproach himself for his futile, and probably uncharacteristic, gamesmanship in February and March 1931? There is no earthly evidence available whatsoever to substantiate this.

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Notes and References

[1] It is fashionable to depict terrorist heroes like Bhagat Singh, as Marxists. This is what Gopal Thakur has done in his book, *Bhagat Singh: The Man and His Ideas* (Bombay, 1953). It is said that Bhagat Singh at a very late stage was leaning towards Marxism through readings in the prison. By mere conjecture he could also have joined the communist ranks, as many of the terrorists did later on. But neither his ideas immediately before his death nor his assumed possibility of becoming a communist had anything to do with what he and his comrades did or wanted to do.

[2] Curiously, G.S. Deol, in his book *Shaheed Bhagat Singh: A Biography* (Punjabi University, Patiala, 1968, pp. 80–81), enthusiastically attempted to bear out Bhagat Singh's devotion to Sikhism. Bhagat Singh's colleague, Ajoy K. Ghose, in *Bhagat Singh and His Comrades* (Bombay, 1945, p. 12), however, confirmed that the martyr was 'an avowed atheist'.

[3] Ajoy K. Ghose, *Bhagat Singh and His Comrades*, pp. 30–31.

[4] Sukhdev's unfinished letter, 7 October 1930. Home Pol. File No. 139/31, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI). This letter, originally written

in Hindi and addressed to 'Dear Brother', was recovered when he was searched prior to his transfer from Borstal Jail, Lahore, to Lahore Central Jail, following his death sentence on 7 October 1930. The government preserved this letter as a confession of his political crime. The police identified the 'Dear Brother' as one Desraj of Tilak School of Politics, Lahore. The photostat copies of the original letter and its English translation are in the file, NAI.

[5] Ibid. It is not clear why the Chittagong upsurge should appear lacking in generating revolutionary inspiration. Was it due to the terrorist jealousy that the limelight was shared by Chittagong with Lahore, or mere ignorance of facts?

[6] K.L. Gauba, in his book *Famous and Historical Trials* (Lahore, Chapter VII, 1946, pp. 139–175), gives a faithful account of the incident.

[7] As far as propaganda was concerned the original plan was more daring. It was first decided that one man should kill Scott and give himself up with a statement that national insult must be avenged in this way. Sukhdev's unfinished letter, 7 October 1931, Home Pol. File No. 139/131, NAI.

[8] In view of the 'wilful obstruction' of the accused and the prevailing state of emergency in the country, the viceroy promulgated Ordinance No. III of 1930, by which a special tribunal was set up to promptly decide the case with authority to dispense with even vital judicial procedures.

[9] Sukhdev's unfinished letter, 7 October 1931.

[10] Bhagat Singh was a mere 23-year-old at the time of his execution.

[11] Bhagat Singh's letter to his father (Kishan Singh), published in *The Tribune*, 4 October 1930, MS, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

[12] Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *The History of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. I, 1946, p. 456. Sitaramayya on the same page recorded a glimpse of Gandhi's prevailing popularity. On 25 March 1931, at the beginning of the Karachi session, people paid four annas each to see and hear Gandhi, and the collection amounted to Rs 10,000.

[13] Gandhi–Irwin conversation, Mahadev Desai's manuscript diary, 19 February 1931. Courtesy, *Gandhi: Collected Works*, Vol. 45.

[14] Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *The History of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. I, p. 442.

[15] Ironically, the salt tax still exists in independent India.

[16] S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Irwin*, Oxford, 1957, p. 61.

[17] 'Indian Problems', speech at Chelmsford Club, 25 March 1931, in *Speeches by Lord Irwin*, London, 1932, p. 297.

[18] *Young India*, 27 December 1928. Cited in S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Irwin*, p. 115.

[19] 'Indian Problems', in *Speeches by Lord Irwin*, p. 299.

[20] Emerson, Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, to Boyd, Chief Secretary, Government of Punjab. Sec. D.O. No. D7754/30, 20 October 1930, Home Pol. File No. 4/21/31, NAI.

[21] Punjab Government to Home Department, Government of India, 16 March 1931, Home Pol. File No. 4/21/31, NAI.

[22] Ibid., 17 March 1931.

[23] Ibid., No. XX796–S, 17 March 1931.

[24] Ibid., 18 March 1931.

[25] A. Campbell-Johnson, *Viscount Halifax: A Biography*, London, 1941, p. 313.

[26] S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Irwin*, p. 115.

[27] D.G. Tendulkar, 'Mahatma', *Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, Vol. III, 1961, p. 79.

[28] 'Indian Problems', in *Speeches by Lord Irwin*, pp. 298–99.

[29] Ibid., pp. 299–300.

[30] Earl of Halifax, *Fullness of Days*, London, 1957, p. 150.

[31] 'Indian Problems', in *Speeches by Lord Irwin*, p. 299.

[32] S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Irwin*, p. 115.

[33] Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *The History of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. I, p. 442.

[34] Campbell-Johnson, in *Lord Halifax: A Biography*, p. 313, quoted Emerson as suggesting that Gandhi and Irwin were engaged in a discussion of the sanctity of human life when they agreed that 'Bhagat Singh must be executed.' It is well known, however, that the executions were not included as an issue in the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, nor was Emerson permitted in the parley except when his help was sought for drafting some clauses of the pact. Besides, one cannot fully rely on the later comment of a person who was hardly a party to the secret discussions.

[35] Gandhi–Irwin conversation, 18 February 1931, in *Irwin Papers*, Photostat No. G.N. 8947, Gandhi Museum.

[36] Gandhi–Irwin conversation, 19 February 1931, Mahadev Desai's diary. Courtesy, *Gandhi: Collected Works*, Vol. 45.

[37] Emerson, Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, to Boyd, Chief Secretary, Government of Punjab, semi-official, undated, Home Pol. File No. 4/21/31, p. 22.

[38] Tel. No. 788-S, Government of India, Home, to Punjab Government, 15 March 1931, Home Pol. File No. 4/21/31.

[39] Punjab Government to Home Department, Government of India, 16 March 1931, Home Pol. File No. 4/21/31.

[40] D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. III, p. 59.

[41] Ibid., p. 62.

[42] Ibid., p. 70.

[43] Gandhi–Irwin conversation, 19 March 1931, in *Irwin Papers*, Photostat No. G.N. 8958, Gandhi Museum.

[44] Earl of Halifax, *Fullness of Days*, p. 150.

[45] Gandhi to Irwin, 23 March 1931, in *Irwin Papers*, India Office Library, Photostat No. C.W. 9342. Courtesy, *Gandhi: Collected Works*, Vol. 45.

[46] This is a very interesting point, though evidence of it is not readily available. By 'revolutionary' party Gandhi must have meant the Hindustan Socialist Republican Party, the leader of which—Chandrasekhar Azad—was reported to have requested the intervention of non-violent leaders to save the lives of his colleagues. However, Azad died in February 1931 and the

Hindustan Socialist Republican Party in March 1931, with all its leaders in prison or near the gallows, must have been a moribund force in the eyes of the government.

[47] Irwin to Gandhi, 23 March 1931, in *Irwin Papers*, India Office Library, Photostat No. C.W. 9344. Courtesy, *Gandhi: Collected Works*, Vol. 45.

[48] *The Tribune*, 25 March 1931. Bhagat Singh's last letter to the Governor of Punjab, MS, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

[49] D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. III, p. 79.

[50] S. Gopal in his book, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Irwin*, p. 115, fn. 8, refers to an official opinion that Gandhi was not particularly concerned about the matter. However, he is reluctant to accept this view as it merely 'does not seem fair to Gandhi'.

[51] Gandhi–Irwin conversation, Mahadev Desai's diary, 19 February 1931. Courtesy, *Gandhi: Collected Works*, Vol. 45.

[52] Gandhi–Irwin conversation, 18 February 1931, in *Irwin Papers*, Photostat No. G.N. 8947, Gandhi Museum.

[53] Emerson to Boyd, semi-official, undated, Home Pol. File No. 4/21/31, p. 22, NAI.

[54] Gandhi–Irwin conversation, Mahadev Desai's diary, 19 February 1931. Courtesy, *Gandhi Collected Works*, Vol. 45.

[55] Gandhi–Irwin conversation, 19 March 1931, in *Irwin Papers*, Photostat No. G.N. 8958, Gandhi Museum.,

[56] Gandhi's interview to the press, 21 March 1931, Delhi, published in *The Hindu* on 22 March 1931. Courtesy, *Gandhi: Collected Works*, Vol. 45.

[57] Gandhi to Irwin, 23 March 1931, in *Irwin Papers*, India Office Library, Photostat No. C.W. 9342. Courtesy, *Gandhi: Collected Works*, Vol. 45.

[58] Irwin to Gandhi, 23 March 1931, in *Irwin Papers*, India Office Library, Photostat No. C.W. 9344. Courtesy, *Gandhi: Collected Works*, Vol. 45.

A Colony, a World War and a Patriot

Amit Kumar Gupta

Subhas, of all the forerunners of the Indian liberation movement, remained a relatively straightforward character for posterity to understand. Since the days of the Non-Cooperation movement when, in 1921, he resigned from his position in the Indian Civil Service, till at least January 1941, prior to his dramatic disappearance from Calcutta, he was consistently polemical, uncompromising and outspoken. He never displayed traits such as the enigmatic vagueness of the Mahatma, the Hamletian hesitancy of Jawaharlal or the disconcerting quietude of the Sardar. But, curiously enough, the last leap of the 'springing tiger' was more staggering than intelligible.

There was hardly any trace of astonishment upon Subhas's arrest in July 1940, his commencement of a fast unto death in protest against continued detention and subsequent internment in the Elgin Road house. An interlude of rumours soon followed, about Subhas devoting himself entirely to meditation. He was reported to have declined to see visitors, family members and servants, and submitted himself to the scriptures, the rosary and potraits of saints. But this was not altogether a surprise in a region where revolutionaries were also religiously inclined. After all, the public was familiar with the rebel Aurobindo's renunciation following the minor political hazard of an arrest warrant. So Subhas's political future suddenly appeared predict-ably simple. Was he not devoted to the spiritual values of the country? Did he not idolize Swami Vivekananda? While people were thus trying to grasp Subhas's spell of spiritualism, there came the startling news of his mysterious escape from house arrest on 16 January 1941. National stupefication continued till his broadcast to the nation on 19 February 1942, over Azad Hind Radio, defying all gossip as to his whereabouts and even a British assertion about his death in an air-crash. Subhas abruptly seemed to change into a half-known, hazy character, unpredictable and almost unreal. But was he?

The clue lies in the periodic factionalism of the Indian National Congress as revealed in 1939, reminiscent of the bickerings of the moderates and extremists in 1907, or the pro-changers and no-changers in 1922. But the battle between Gandhi and Subhas in 1939, and thereafter, was more intense, ruthless and vindictive (on both sides) than all similar incidents. It all started with Subhas's excessive eagerness for a showdown with the British Raj and Gandhi's extreme caution in a fight. The latent difference between this militancy and moderation existed as early as February 1931 when Gandhi confidentially remarked to Viceroy Irwin that Subhas was his 'opponent' and capable of 'denouncing' him.[1] This Subhas actually did with venom, along with Vithalbhai, in Vienna in May 1933. The storm was gathering and Subhas turned into an exuberant critic of Gandhi in the succeeding five years. He was impatiently spoiling for a fight with the British Raj for India's complete independence, and with Gandhian leadership for the radicalization of the Congress. Subhas was an enthusiastic fighter but not particularly strong in political manoeuvring. Neither in political image nor in diplomatic guile could he compete with the Mahatma. Behind the facade of militancy, Subhas was still hovering in search of a distinct political programme.

The situation considerably eased when Gandhi became a guest of the Boses in Calcutta in October 1937 and Congress presidentship was offered to Subhas at Haripura to satiate his ambition—a trick that had paid rich dividends with Jawaharlal in the past. For a time it was apparently all smooth sailing till Subhas sought re-election in 1939. Gandhi never expressly opposed Subhas's move or publicly suggested his own nominee. But discreetly he prompted his *satyagrahis* to resist Subhas on the plea of unanimous presidential election.[2] As expected, Subhas discovered a confrontation of the old guard, imagined a plot of their compromise with the British government, fought grimly for victory in the presidential contest with Sitaramayya and finally won a defeat. The 'morally sickening atmosphere' in Tripura in March 1939 grew with Gandhi's injudicious call to the minority to come out of a Subhasist Congress and the Working Committee's resignation in protest against the president's alleged lack of confidence in them. It progressed with the throwing overboard of Subhas's pet theme of serving the ultimatum of mass civil disobedience on the

British government. It ended with Pant's shrewd vote of no-confidence against the president through a demonstration of religious reliance on Gandhi, who was conveniently away in Rajkot throughout. By Pant's resolution Subhas was forced to ask for cooperation from the promulgator of non-cooperation over the selection of a Working Committee bearing Gandhi's confidence. Much was then said about the ridiculous proposition of a homogenous leadership in a heterogenous party. It was an incredible situation on the whole and Subhas had to resign. Gandhi's political oligarchy in the Congress was saved anyhow.

Subhas was great in attack but weak in defence. Gandhi amply demonstrated in 1939 that Subhas's intrinsic strength was limited and that he had not much to fall back upon. He was a favourite of the masses but not their leader. He had an all-India name but no all-India base. He rejected the Gandhian creed but could not devise his own plan of mass movement. Ideologically he was yet groping for National Socialism, Sinn Feinism and Bolshevism in turn. He was the mouthpiece of the New but not the acclaimed representative of the Left. He had little link with the peasants and workers and he controlled merely the sentimentalist, youthful middle class. At the hour of his defeat Subhas must have become aware of his limitations. But he did not let his opponents pass unchallenged and replied by forming the Forward Bloc and rushing forward for a left consolidation inside the Congress. Neither of these made much headway but both contributed to Subhas's expulsion from the Congress in August 1939. However, the showdown was by no means the end of the show and Subhas continued his lone fight. He undertook tours, addressed meetings and wrote powerfully—all against the Gandhian claim of spinning away to freedom. Unlike many public figures of the day, Subhas's professions and practice were more or less compatible.

Meanwhile, two developments took place which finally led Subhas to determine his future, namely, the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 and his arrest in July 1940. The former offered him the hint of a different dimension and the latter gave him the opportunity to ponder over a new course of action. Following Britain's entry into the war, India was declared a belligerent country by a government announcement. When the Congress leadership was brooding over its bargaining position against the British government in return for the utilization of Indian resources in the war, Subhas pleaded in his characteristic manner for striking when the iron is hot.

He repeated his advocacy for an ultimatum of civil disobedience to the British government in order to take full advantage of Britian's difficulty in an imperialist war. Following the Anti-Compromise Conference in March 1940, he—all by himself and his Forward Bloc—attempted a 'countrywide' *satyagraha* against the war effort and 'nefarious designs' of British imperialism, a cudgel taken up two years later by a half-hearted Congress leadership in a left-handed manner. In the Nagpur conference of the Forward Bloc in June 1940, Subhas marvelled at Germany's blitzkreig, the capitulation of central Europe and the Battle of Britain looming large. The hour of Britain's crisis indeed seemed the hour of India's emancipation. But in July 1940 an iconoclast Subhas was arrested while campaigning against Holwell monument for rehabilitating the highly romanticized Sirajuddowla—a metaphorical digression in Gandhian style. Subhas's continued detention without trial and then without any prospect of release in the near future, must have made him bitter, anguished and frantic. It must also have afforded him leisurely opportunity to think furiously about himself—a stock-taking of what he could or could not do, an introspection into his own position in the national movement and India's position in a fast-moving world. The outcome was a glimpse of the possible future course of action. Subhas himself recollected later how he spent 'days, weeks and months in carefully considering the pros and cons' of his escape in January 1941.[3] It was not as inexplicable as it first appeared.

Subhas's obviously hypothetical line of action was based on certain premises. The situation of the Second World War, though extremely fierce, was relatively simple. The Axis powers, led by Germany, were vastly successful. Italy was energetically driving from Cyrenaica towards Egypt while Germany became the master of central Europe. France had fallen and Britain was alone fighting a battle for her existence. As it seemed then (even after Britain's success in the Battle of Britain), persistent aerial and undersea blows could finally dispose of Britain's resistance and nobody thought it was beyond Hitler's capability. (It was not known at that time that Hitler's generals treated the invasion of Britain as 'a bluff'[4] and that Hitler's thoughts, from October 1940 onwards, were singularly occupied with a surprise attack on Russia.) Russia was on the fence, worried yet relieved that she had managed to buy ephemeral security from an imperialist war by signing the Ribbentrop–Molotov Non-Aggression Pact of 23

August 1939. The United States was still philosophically watching the developments from an ivory tower. Japan, though all set, was yet perplexed as to what Hitler was really up to.

It was 'crystal clear' to Subhas that in Britain's decline alone lay the hope of India's freedom.[5] As no compromise was possible between British imperialism and Indian nationalism, '... one must perish for the other to live'.[6] The setback of the Allies in the war, especially of Britain, offered to nationalist India 'a golden opportunity... rare in a nation's lifetime' to free herself.[7] In the previous war of 1914–19 Indians, unlike Irishmen, merely contemplated taking advantage of Britain's troubles without being able to act on it. Subhas would not like another opportunity to be wasted. Nationalist India must, therefore, side actively with the Axis powers, for Britain's enemies were but India's friends.[8] In his eagerness, however, Subhas did not care to examine the strength of Hitler's determination to destroy Britain. But who could foresee in 1941 that Hitler was pressurizing Britain only for a convenient understanding? Subhas was equally unwilling to be carried away by ideological issues. He was known to have a soft corner for the Black Shirts in Italy and the Nazis in Germany though, in fact, he repudiated the imperialist aggression of the Fascists in 1938,[9] and of Japan in 1937.[10] Neither ideological finesse nor internationalist sophistication was Subhas's strong point. His devotion to nationalism was infinitely stronger than his belief in socialism. He did not bother as much to discover if Fascist internal and external policies stemmed from the same origin as to use the Fascist position in war in India's national interest. Did not Daladier and Chamberlain appease Hitler in Munich in September 1938 to divert aggression towards Communist Russia? Did not an internationalist Stalin do the same in August 1939 in anticipation of war and with the prior knowledge of persecution of the working-class movement in Germany? Then, did not Churchill, in the midst of war, cooperate with Stalin for self-preservation against Fascism? Nationalism and political naivety, though characteristics of the subject races, were not solely Subhas's monopolies.

The other major premise of Subhas's formulation was that Britain would not give up her empire without a challenge of strength and that the struggle for national liberation, armed of course, could not be won without external aid. 'I have studied very carefully this struggle for liberty that has gone on all over the world during the last 200 years but I have not as yet discovered one single instance where freedom was won without outside help of some sort.'[11] In the context of the onward march of Axis powers in the war 'it would indeed be foolish not to take the fullest advantage of such assistance which fate and history provided for Indians'.[12] This assertion of Subhas, with an undertone of the Indian revolutionary terrorists of 1914–16 and the Irish Volunteers of 1916, about the lessons of history, was substantially correct. But history also indicates that the initiative of utilizing external aid, which is but one of the elements of a successful freedom struggle, should always remain inside the country—on the very spot of struggle. In his own case, Subhas was exporting the initiative abroad. Besides, was external aid really essential for India to derive advantage from an imperialist war? A violent anti-British upsurge throughout the country at Britain's hour of distress would in itself have been crucial. Strangely, Subhas, who always longed for such an upsurge, decided to leave—in his anxiety to seek foreign help—the multitude in India to the care of a 'compromising' Gandhian leadership. Unfortunately for Subhas, he was pushed out of the Congress and deserted by the left. His Forward Bloc was far from catching the popular imagination and he himself was still away from swaying the masses. Besides, the British government was alert not to give him a free hand or to allow him any immediate freedom from arrest. Subhas must have concluded that his effectiveness in steering the internal situation had come to an end. In his plunge into Europe, Subhas staked his own future more than his country's. He felt it necessary, therefore, to limit himself to the task of seeking external help and synchronizing it with any future development inside the country rather than to wait and lose time. He left India '. . . in order to establish direct contact with the enemies of British imperialism and thereby link up India's fight for freedom with the struggle of the Tripartite Powers against our old enemy, Britain'.[13]

Subhas could not have remained indifferent towards the most ticklish of all the issues, namely, the apprehension of letting the Axis powers in while chasing the British out of India. There is nothing on record to show Subhas's explicit reactions. He was also not likely to express himself publicly while living under the shadow of the Axis powers. Yet, it is possible for one to find camouflaged statements in his speeches here and there, like: '. . . no one should make the mistake of concluding that external collaboration with the Tripartite Powers means acceptance of their domination or even of their ideology in our internal affairs.'[14] Again, 'In the political field I should be the last man to expect foreign powers to sympathize with us if it were not in their own interest to do so.'[15] These remarks at least hint that Subhas's attitude towards the Axis powers was one of political expediency. The outcome of such an expedient in the event of a Tripartite victory is, however, a matter of conjecture.

Subhas often spoke of numerous contradictions among the Allied powers and he probably had in mind similar conflicts of interest inside the Tripartite bloc. Hitler and Mussolini, even at the outset of their European adventure, did not always agree on all issues. The conflict for a sphere of influence over India, following a British defeat, was a phenomenon likely to arise in Hitler–Mussolini relations. Again, Japanese entry into the war—a foreseeable development in 1941[16]—could always result in a rivalry between oriental Japan and occidental Germany and Italy for hegemony over South Asia. This was a distinct possibility in the perspective of the known Japanese dream of an eastern empire covering the western coast of India. It is also relevant to recall Hitler's reaction at the initial Japanese successes in the war: 'It means the loss of a whole continent, and that is to be regretted, for it is the white race which is the loser.'[17] It is quite possible that Subhas depended on this possibility as far as his vague future was concerned. He was reported to have commented confidentially, while in Germany, that only two situations could emerge from the Second World War, a defeat for the Axis powers meaning a setback for India's liberation, or their victory with the prospect of Indian independence, tinged with apprehensions, of course, of another foreign domination. In case the second alternative materialized Subhas did not, and could not, take any assurance of the Axis powers at face value and felt his chances lay in taking advantage of an eventual contradiction between Japan and Germany.[18]

Apart from victory and defeat in a strenuous, all-pervading war, there was always a third alternative, namely, a revolutionary changeover. It had happened in the cases of Russia and, partially, Turkey in the First World War. It is not known whether Subhas pondered over this point. But chances of a third alternative coming to the surface in Germany were dormant in the situation. The Nazi regime was based more on persecution than on Mittel European myths. But opponents of Nazism in Germany were subdued, not eliminated. Social Democrats were sprinkled all over Germany, pro-Communist elements hidden here and there, and discontentment in the army, under Prussian blue blood, was rising with the pressure of war. This undercurrent of hostility often revealed itself through assassination attempts on Hitler and carefully laid-out plots. This discovery of the widening conflict inside Nazi Germany is obviously the result of a postwar postmortem. But significantly Subhas's main contact in Hitlerite Germany throughout was a disguised socialist, Adam von Trott Zu Solz, an opponent of Nazi Germany from its very inception and a martyr participant of the famous Stauffenberg plot of July 1944. Curiously enough, Subhas seemed to be aware not only of 'an ultranationalistic' nature of the Nazi government but also of the prospect of a future German government 'predominantly leftist in character.'[19]

Whatever might have been the various hypotheses of Subhas, they were certainly centred round the Soviet Union and the Russo–German Non-Aggression Pact. The understanding of August 1939 gave an impression to the rest of the world that Russia would remain outside the war. This was an important consideration for an Indian explorer in the wartime European situation. At the outbreak of war, Stalinist Russia enjoyed a unique position—she was by no means the ally of any of the warring combinations and the ultimate enemy of both. Though no more eager, as in the 1920s, to squander money on transporting revolutions to the east, Soviet Russia was still theoretically committed to her specious profession of liberating colonial countries. To Subhas, a militant nationalist in the thick of anti-imperialist struggle, Soviet Russia thus appeared to be the biggest dividing and dubious factor in the west, an ideal springboard for any indefinite European adventure. It was but natural that Subhas's preference was to go to Moscow first before he could think of proceeding towards Berlin or Rome. This is exactly what Uttam Chand, Subhas's friend in the Afghan wilderness, recorded. This was what Subhas unequivocally stated before the Nazi authorities soon after his arrival in Germany: '... *status quo* between Germany and Soviet Russia should be maintained' to wreck British influence in the colonial countries of the east.[20] The Russian embassy in Kabul, however, was reluctant to assist Subhas in obtaining a visa for Moscow. It was not unusual for an isolated suspicious power to be on guard against a mysterious visitor whose plans were not abundantly clear even to himself, and whose wavering faith was evenly distributed between Russia and Germany. But Russia did not reject Subhas altogether—the grant of a transit visa through Russia was a tacit indication. On 28 March 1941 Subhas flew into Berlin from

Moscow with a bold plan of action. It involved, as all bold plans did, risky calculations and miscalculations.

Before Subhas could settle in Germany, get over Nazi suspicions and begin his diplomatic overtures, the fatal mishap in the war took place. On 22 June 1941 Hitler chose to attack Russia—a mistaken strategic decision which he took by over-emphasizing the Anglo-French reverses and in preference to strengthening Italy's battle in North Africa, and carrying it to the Middle East. For Subhas the Hitlerite aggression on Russia proved to be a miscalculation of far-reaching consequences. He immediately remonstrated to the Germans by pointing out the adverse effect it would have on Indian opinion. Indians looked upon Russia as an anti-imperialist country and, therefore, an ally of India against Britain. Germany would be considered in India, for her attack on Russia, as yet another dangerous imperialist country.[21] Ernst Woermann, Nazi foreign secretary, was shocked to find Bose so strongly favouring the Soviet Union's case against Germany's.[22] But Subhas never did budge from his position and always held that Hitler's attack on Russia was 'fundamentally responsible' for Germany's final collapse.[23] In June 1941 his apprehension was stronger than his disappointment and the invasion of Russia menacingly hinted to him not merely the end of his hope of help from Stalin, but the beginning of an end to the war itself.

That Subhas continued persistently in trying to convince the stony Nazi government of the necessity of assisting the Indian cause, established a Free India Centre in Berlin for propagating Indian aspirations, obtained monetary aid as a national loan to be paid back, arranged for the setting up of Azad Hind Radio for nationalist propaganda, organized an Indian Legion with prisoners of war under German training and on condition of their fighting in India alone—and all this in one year's time—speak of Subhas's great energy and organizing ability. Still, India remained far too distant and the high hopes of the march of an Indian liberation army through the German-dominated (if not occupied) Russia or through the Balkans, Turkey, Iraq and Afghanistan, to India, looked unreal. This was because of Subhas's failure to evoke German response to his main objective, namely, a joint declaration in favour of Indian independence—a step towards committing the Axis powers to an Indian undertaking. The Axis powers sympathized with Subhas, trained his men, financed his organization, without holding out, however, any further promise. The reason was probably, as Count Ciano, Mussolini's foreign minister, mentioned: a general doubt about the real 'value of this upstart'.[24] Possibly they wanted Subhas merely for war propaganda as evidenced by Goebbel's satisfaction at the effect of Azad Hind Radio on 'the British nerves'.[25] There was, however, no doubt about one fact—that Hitler was not contemplating any invasion of India at any stage. In his characteristic manner, he always agreed to put up with the continued existence of the British empire, and thought it as useless to him as the Catholic church.[26] Besides, Hitler continued to be hopeful for an Anglo–German understanding till at least the middle of the war. He was fighting Britain with the sole object of extracting a British promise to give Germany a free hand in eastern and central Europe. Thus, it seemed to Nazi Germany that any public commitment to Subhas was a risky manoeuvre. When Hitler met Mussolini in the Palace of Klessheim, Salzberg, on 29 April 1942, and the issue of Indian independence was raised, he referred to the German declaration of Polish independence during the First World War which had hardened the Russian attitude and consequently frustrated the German expectation of a Russo–German understanding. Hitler apprehended similar British determination to fight the war if he declared Indian independence to satisfy Subhas.[27] Subhas, who found Hitler to be one with whom 'logical discussion' was scarcely possible,[28] had no alternative but to relinquish his confidence and search for opportunities elsewhere. The prospect of Japanese cooperation was reported to have been hinted by Hitler himself.

Though clouds had been gathering for some time, the Japanese storm over Southeast Asia broke on 7 December 1941 with an attack on Pearl Harbour. In its wake it brought an ominous development of the war—American participation—leading to rapturous Churchillian excitement on the Allied powers' prospects. Japan was aware of this significance and thus raced against time to capture Malaya and the Dutch East Indies—a rich source for war raw materials. She achieved an immediate harvest of victories between January and May 1942, in a spectacular drive on Guam, Hong Kong, Manila, Singapore and Rangoon, attaining her military objectives in 70 days in place of the estimated 100 days. Subhas, a man himself in a hurry, was deeply impressed. Meanwhile General Tojo, the Japanese premier, expressed some good wishes in March and in June 1942 with regard to the possibilities of Indian independence. (Tojo's official announcement about

Japanese support to Indian freedom, however, did not come till Subhas decided to leave Germany.) Subhas also knew about the stir among the sizeable and resourceful Indian community in the East and South-east Asian countries, which had established the Indian Independence League with Japanese encouragement. Following the commencement of the Pacific war, it was in Japan's interest to play upon the anti-British fervour of the substantial community living in the occupied zones. They also engineered (even if one concedes the patriotic efforts of Pritam Singh, Mohan Singh and others) the formation of the Indian National Army in September 1942 with Indian prisoners of war, attached it to the League and planted an old Indian revolutionary-turned-Japanese citizen, Rashbehari Bose, at the head of the combined organization. It was a successful move, though it did not work very smoothly due to constant friction between the patriotic Indians and the Japanese paternalists and among Indian leaders themselves.[29] But the existence of an Indian organization with an army, however weak and uncertain, must have given Subhas hope. By this time Subhas and his Indian Legion in Germany were well known and both the Japanese and the League were thinking about persuading Subhas to come to the East to take a lead. The League had been inviting Subhas since June 1942, and Rashbehari later supplemented the endeavour with great effect.

Subhas expressed a wish to shift to Asia as far back as May 1942, when Japanese forces reached the neighbourhood of India. 'But now the time has come when I should be in the East.'[30] The final decision, nevertheless, was delayed till August 1942 when developments in India and Russia occurred simultaneously. The beginning of the 'Quit India' movement in India was to Subhas a dream come true. It was, he felt, 'a non-violent guerrilla warfare' which could paralyse the British administration in India.[31] Thus, the opportune moment had arrived at last when Subhas's military efforts from outside could be coordinated with the agitation inside. The objective situation of upsurge had matured to receive a vanguard action: '. . . I will live to participate in the final struggle for liberty not from abroad, but at home. . .'.[32] Coincidentally, Germany's dissipation in the Russian interior also proved to be decisive. Heroic Russian resistance started in Stalingrad in August 1942 and by winter it had swallowed up the Hitlerite campaign. To Subhas it was no more the beginning of an end but an end in itself.[33] It was irrelevant, thereafter, to cling to Berlin, especially when General Oshima, Japanese ambassador in Germany, was making plans for

Subhas's journey towards Singapore. Following a perilous journey in a submarine from Kiel to Sumatra and a flight therefrom to Tokyo and Singapore, Subhas, at long last, passed through all stages of deliberation and landed at the site of final action.

From June 1943, when Subhas arrived in Southeast Asia, to May 1945, when Britain recovered Burma from Japanese control, incidents moved in rather a straight line—though not a bold straight line by any means. This was a busy period for Subhas. In July 1943 he took over presidentship of the Indian Independence League, assumed supreme command of the Indian National Army in August, and proclaimed a Provisional Government of Free India in October to 'launch and conduct' the last war against the British in India. Soon this was given a cloak of legitimacy and a token territory in the Andaman and Nicobar by Japan, enabling it to declare a formal war against the Anglo–Americans. Hurried recruitment in the INA and training of recruits in Tokyo military academies were undertaken. A total mobilization of the immigrant population was undertaken and a levy for funds was pressed. The battle cry was raised, emotions swelled and women were formed into a regiment. Simultaneously, vociferous propaganda, careful dealings with the Japanese and attempts at spreading espionage in India continued. Subhas the leader always outshone Subhas the ideologue. In his busy movements round Tokyo, Manila, Shanghai, Singapore, Rangoon and Bangkok, he was at his best. He was frantically short of time as the flame of the 'Quit India' movement was gradually dying. Hitler's Moscow campaign was turning out to be a Napoleonic failure. The Allied powers were wresting the initiative in North Africa and 'the superior wealth and superior productivity of the US'[34] were going to tell on Japanese strength. Subhas passionately longed for the presence of his liberation army on the frontiers of India, in the northeast if not in the northwest. Did not the presence of Garibaldi and his Red Shirts in Marsala make all the difference in Sicily and Naples?

Whatever might have been Japan's grand design, her Pacific war had a limited object which did not include an invasion of India. Japan's objective was to occupy Hong Kong, Indo-China, the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, Thailand and Burma. With the occupation of Burma the Japanese army halted, as they had little wish to disperse their forces in the vast Indian subcontinent. Strategic considerations, however, compelled Japanese militarism to look towards the Indo–Burma frontier. By July 1942 Japan began anticipating a counter-attack of the Allies through the Burma frontier on her new acquisitions. By the logic of tactics Japan had to resolve to occupy some areas of India's northeastern frontier, namely, Imphal and Kohima. The plan of the Imphal campaign was developed in the latter half of 1943, corresponding significantly with Subhas's hectic activities. Occupation of Kohima and Imphal with the aid of the INA would not only strengthen the Japanese defence of Burma but would also render Subhas's Provisional Government of Free India into the most disturbing factor for British India. The Japanese interest was all too obvious. But for Subhas, the immediate prospect of stationing the INA on Indian territories certainly outweighed the distant risks. It was, after all, fishing in troubled waters where convenience should be superior to conscience. Similar instances in Burma and Indonesia showed how the nationalists sought Japanese cooperation and rejected it to suit their needs. Subhas was adhering to the line, 'Today we are taking the help of Japan, tomorrow we shall not hesitate to get help from any other power.'[35]

But the plans did not materialize and the protracted Imphal campaign, directed towards the Arakan Hills and Imphal, between January and June 1944, ended in disaster. Though given a subsidiary role by the Japanese, the INA battalions fought well, suffered much and even reached parts of Indian territory. But the whole campaign was overwhelmingly a Japanese one and its fate was not affected by INA's successes or lapses. It could not also pursue, as Subhas visualized, a mighty breakthrough on the battlefront. The campaign was undertaken at a time when the Allied powers were ready to burst open the Indo–Burma frontier. In consequence, the Japanese were outnumbered and out-manoeuvred. Even a delayed retreat ended in hunger, disease and desertion. On 14 July 1944 the Japanese high command called off the shattered campaign. The Kohima campaign failed but the legend of the INA lived on. It filled the nation subsequently with its battle cries, marching songs, sacrifices and glories. The example of the mercenary Indian sepoys moved the men in the Royal Indian Navy and Air Force. The courtmartial of INA prisoners evoked such nationwide excitement and tension that the Congress in October 1945 had to decide in favour of their legal defence with the enthusiastic support of even Nehru, who had always disapproved of Subhas's choice of allies.[36] 'Netaji', a designation resembling the 'Fuehrer', became a unifying symbol in a diverse and divisible country. But all this came a little too late—Subhas's opportune moment or the final hour of his militant nationalist experiment in a truncated world had already gone. Subhas, the desperate patriot of a colonial country, was indeed a collaborationist, but not in the sense Marshal Petain, the stately figure in independent France and the hero of the First World War, was. Nothing fails like failure. But what would have been the case had the *status quo* between Hitler and Russia continued during the war, or had the Hitlerite regime in Germany been replaced by a sudden Social Democratic changeover? What would have happened if Subhas had reached India with his liberation army at the height of the 'Quit India' movement? What other methods were there for turning an imperialist war in India into a 'people's war' except supporting Britain when Hitler attacked Russia, and even when Stalingrad defied destruction? (India, unaffected directly by war, was not passing through simultaneous civil war and imperialist aggression as were China and Indo-China.) What is a 'people's war' after all? What would have been the case if the Kohima campaign was successful and a Provisional Government of Free India set up on the border? What would have been the subsequent form of struggle in India if Britain did not select to abdicate authority?

The outcome of the Kohima campaign did upset Subhas, but could not break him. He was searching for another ally with his characteristic zeal when he saw Germany's defeat and Japan's imminent downfall. Russia attracted his vision again. 'If there is one man in Europe today, who holds in his hands the destinies of the European nations for a few decades, that man is Marshal Stalin.'[37] He could discern contradictions between the Anglo–Americans and the Russians and the differences in their respective war goals. To Subhas these differences were 'irreconciliable'.[38] It was thus imperative for India to 'utilize' the conflict between the Soviet Union and the Anglo–Americans.[39] He was making calculations again about another revolt within the country, among the armed forces if possible, to coincide with his new venture. He was calling on his countrymen to disrupt British administration on the lines of the Chittagong armoury raid of 1930. Till his reported death in an air-crash on 18 August 1945, Subhas was looking for yet another fight. If India could not emerge as an independent state by the end of the Second World War, 'our plan should be for a post-war revolution, and if we fail in that too, there shall be World War Three to give us another opportunity to fight for our freedom'.[40]

A Colony, a World War and a Patriot

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Notes and References

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[3] Subhas's broadcast from Rangoon, 7 July 1944, 'Arun', *Testament of Subhas Bose*, Delhi, 1946, p. 73.

[4] B.H. Lidell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*, London, 1951, p. 222.

[5] Subhas's broadcast from Berlin, 13 March 1942, 'Arun', *Testament of Subhas Bose*, p. 3.

[6] Subhas's broadcast from Berlin, 7 December 1942, ibid., p. 35.

[7] Subhas's broadcast from Berlin, 6 April 1942, ibid., p. 15.

[8] Subhas's broadcast from Berlin, 7 April 1942, ibid., p. 36.

[9] N.G. Jog, *In Freedom's Quest*, New Delhi, 1969, p. 121.

[10] Ibid., p. 130.

[11] Subhas's broadcast from Berlin, 1 March 1943, 'Arun', *Testament of Subhas Bose*, p. 49.

[12] Subhas's broadcast from Berlin, 26 January 1943, ibid., p. 46.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Subhas's broadcast from Berlin, 1 March 1943, ibid., p. 50.

[15] Subhas's broadcast from Berlin, 31 August 1942, ibid., p. 22.

[16] Subhas, in April 1941, foresaw the cataclysmic happenings in the Far East following Japan's advent in the war. S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, Bombay, 1967, p. 430.

[17] Dr P.J.H. Voigt, *Relations between the Indian National Movement and Germany* (a pamphlet), issued and published by Press and Information Section, Consulate General, Federal Republic of Germany, Calcutta.

[18] An interview in Calcutta on 11 February 1971 with Shri Promode Sengupta, a Marxist, who joined Subhas in Germany and his Azad Hind Radio. A.C.N. Nambiar, Subhas's deputy in Germany, could possibly be more enlightening on this point.

[19] Subhas's broadcast from Singapore, 25 May 1945, 'Arun', *Testament of Subhas Bose*, p. 80.

[20] Suppl. Memo. to German Government by S.C. Bose, 3 May. See S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p. 433.

[21] Report of an interview with Subhas by Woermann, 17 July 1941. *The Indian Struggle*, pp. 438–39.

[22] Ibid., p. 439.

[23] Subhas's broadcast from Singapore, 25 May 1945, 'Arun', *Testament of Subhas Bose*, p. 9.

[24] N.G. Jog, *In Freedom's Quest*, p. 203.

[25] Ibid., p. 209.

[26] A. Bullock, *Hitler, A Study in Tyranny*, London, 1965, p. 589.

[27] P.J.H. Voigt, *Relations between the Indian National Movement and Germany*, p. 13.

[28] Girija Mookerji, *This Europe*, Calcutta, 1950, p. 134.

[29] K.K. Ghosh, in his book, *The Indian National Army* (Meerut, 1969), covered in a meticulous manner the formative period of the INA movement in East and Southeast Asia. His study, however, could in places lead to conclusions at variance with his own findings.

[30] Subhas to German Foreign Minister, 22 May 1942, Berlin. S.C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p. 460.

[31] Subhas's broadcast from Berlin, 31 August 1942, 'Arun', *Testament of Subhas Bose*, p. 25.

[33] Interview with Promode Sengupta in Calcutta, 11 February 1971.

[34] K.K. Ghosh, *The Indian National Army*, p. 183 (citing a press statement of Subhas on 12 December 1943).

[35] Subhas's broadcast from Singapore, 26 June 1945, 'Arun', *Testament of Subhas Bose*, p. 128.

[36] Nehru's enthusiasm becomes suspect if one believes what Mountbatten said. According to Mountbatten, Nehru, while visiting Singapore in March 1946, agreed readily to the suggestion that he should not lay a wreath on the memorial to INA soldiers, if asked by local Indians (p. 5). Then again, in April 1946 Nehru agreed and persuaded others to withdraw an Assembly motion, backed by all parties, calling for the immediate release of INA prisoners (p. 17). The Second Jawaharlal Nehru Lecture, 1968 by Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Reflections on the Transfer of Power and Jawaharlal Nehru*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968.

[37] Subhas's broadcast from Singapore, 25 May 1945, 'Arun', *Testament of Subhas Bose*, p. 81.

[38] Subhas's broadcast from Singapore, 24 June 1945, ibid., p. 120.

[39] Ibid., p. 123.

[40] Subhas's broadcast from Singapore, 27 June 1945, ibid., p. 135.

The Communists and the Outbreak of the Telengana Rising

May1944–February 1947

Amit Kumar Gupta

You've heard of Telengana, have you not?
The world has heard and wondered...
(From *Tales of Telengana* by Harindranath Chattopadhyay)

It is now by and large acknowledged that the partisan struggle in Telengana marked the climax of Communist opposition to the feudal–colonial rule in India. Beneath this general consensus, however, controversies are still raging—especially among the Indian Communists themselves—over the 'over-doing' and the 'under-doing' during the Telengana rising (1944–51), and the bearing of these upon subsequent 'adventurist', 'revisionist' and 'neo-revisionist' errors. In the heat of these polemics, the issues that activated the Telengana Communists and the circumstances that led them to take up arms—almost in contravention of the posture of their central leadership—have receded practically to the background. An attempt has been made in this essay to understand why the Telengana Communists had to behave the way they actually did, between May 1914 and February 1947.

As is well-known, the national policy of the Communists in India for about a decade, from 1936 to 1947, was built upon the *Fronte Populaire* dictates of the Comintern (1934) and the United Front postulates of Rajani Palme Dutt and Ben Bradley (1936). The cardinal principles of this policy were the furtherance of the struggle against imperialism by uniting all anti-imperialist forces under the banner of the Indian National Congress (and by remaining vigilant against its vacillation), and the intensification of the toiling people's battles

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against their exploiters by forming a broad unity among the leftists.[1] Within this policy framework the Communist Party of India (hereafter CPI) tried to work out its political line in varying situations and at different levels. During the phase of 'united opposition to imperialism' (1936–39), the Communists attempted to realize their objects of forming the national and the left fronts by functioning from 'below', meaning united action with the rank-and-file of the Congress and the left groups to exert pressure upon the leaders. In the next phase of opposing the 'imperialist war' (1940–41), and taking advantage of it to promote the cause of Indian independence, the party's emphasis was on acting from 'above', signifying attempts at agreement with the leaders of the Congress and the left groups over the heads of their rank-and-file. In the 'people's war' period (1942–45), when the anti-imperialist struggle was suspended for facilitating the prosecution of an anti-Fascist and pro-Soviet Union war, the party persevered for unity from 'below'. Following the end of the war, the issue of Indian independence came to the forefront in 1946–47, and the party called for a 'Congress–Muslim League–Communist Joint Front' against imperialism by hobnobbing from 'above'. In the entire range of *Fronte Populaire* politics in India the partisan or armed struggle hardly had any relevance, and logically, therefore, the Communists made no serious reference to it at any stage between 1936 and 1947.

It is necessary, however, to remember that *Fronte Populaire*, as a dictum of the international Communist movement, did not preclude armed struggle altogether, and that the CPI might have opted for it in 1941–42 had the war remained an 'imperialist war'. Despite some qualms about the precedence of anti-Fascism over anti-imperialism, the Communists reciprocated the prevailing nationalist mood, called for opposition to the British authority, suffered repressions, and awaited a showdown with the British imperialist government.[2] Among all the anti-imperialist forces in India in 1940–41, the Communists perhaps had drawn up the most aggressive appreciation of the situation. They apprehended a severe war-time agrarian crisis, 'more devastating than [that] of the time of 1932–34', expected heavy loss of British power through reverses in the battlefields, and imagined that the British Government would look for a settlement by making concessions to the national bourgeoisie. They were naturally opposed to any possible compromise and were ready to denounce all those 'who talk of supporting the Allies, who talk of cooperating with the government for defence, who talk of forming national ministries'. But more importantly, the Communists anticipated that the British reverses would embolden the peasantry to take 'revolutionary action'. That was why they decided to concentrate on the *kisan* front and 'prepare for the storm brewing' up there.[3] They backed the Adhiar movement in north Bengal, intensified the campaign for tenancy legislation and the anti-repression movement in Malabar, organized 'hunger marches' and resistance to evictions in Andhra, tried 'no-tax' and 'no-rent' agitations in Gujarat, and inspired the sugarcane growers' movement as well as the movement against dispossession of lands in the United Provinces and Bihar. Although critical of isolated violent acts of individual and group heroism, the party was not against taking armed 'vanguard action', provided it was pre-planned with popular support.[4] Matters could have come to a head but for the Hitlerite aggression on Soviet Union in June 1941, and the consequent enunciation of the 'people's war' line in December 1941, substituting anti-Fascism for anti-imperialism, and cooperation with the British for opposition to them.

Howsoever much the 'people's war' line alienated the Communists from nationalist populism, and wholly checked their own rising influence, the party's preoccupation with the war-time agrarian crisis nevertheless continued—though in a milder form. The plan of arousing the rural masses for acts of defiance was replaced by a kind of 'constructive programme'—'grow more food' and 'cultivate the fallow land' for augmenting the war resources. But the agitational approach was not wholly given up, and rural mobilization was often attempted between 1942 and 1945 on issues such as the formation of people's committees for dealing with the scarcities of food and other essential commodities, resistance against hoarding and 'blackmarketing', and the demand for price control and remission of revenue in flood-affected and famine-stricken areas. Interestingly enough, in view of their support to the British war effort, the Communists also decided to oppose all 'forcible war levies'—in cash or kind.[5] Irrespective of all alterations to the political line, the Communists persisted in their work on the *kisan* front, and remained active—in one form or the other—for about a decade.

At the end of the war, the militants among the Communists apparently called for an end of the 'people's war' line and a resumption of anti-imperialist popular struggles. Almost all sections of the people seemed, in the post-war years, to be dissatisfied with British rule, and this raised hopes of winning immediate independence. The strike wave in the industrial centres, the unrest in the agricultural sector and the urban demonstrations over the release of the Indian National Army prisoners led the militants among the Communists to think in terms of wresting the political initiative. In December 1945, therefore, they succeeded in impressing upon the party the need for a programme of 'rousing the people directly for asserting independence', and to make 'a final bid for power'.[6] The moderate party leadership, however, managed to twist the militant slogan of 'a final bid or assault for power' to mean the formation of a fresh 'joint front' of the Congress, the Muslim League and the Communists vis-à-vis the British authorities. They also forced upon the militants a plan for channelizing the unprecedented features of 'mass revolutionary upsurge' into a united action for independence under the auspices of the 'joint front'.[7] The moderate political strategy—a curious amalgam of revolutionary fervour and reformist tactics—ran on till the militants challenged the moderate position in the middle of 1947 and clashed with them over the issue of the true character of Indian independence.

During the war, Telengana was affected by some of the developments in the Indian Communist movement. The first was the strident anti-imperialism of the Communists during the 'imperialist war' phase (1939–41), synchronizing the rising nationalist aspirations and promising an impending trial of strength. The Communist stand proved to be as attractive to the socialistically oriented political workers as to those nationalists who felt disenchanted with the dispirited ploddings of the Congress leadership. In the wake of the State Peoples' Congress agitation against the Nizam's administration, a branch of the CPI came into existence in Hyderabad state in 1939. Along with a group of radical intellectuals (the Comrades' Association[8] in Hyderabad), a number of left participants in the Gandhian movements (from among the members of the Andhra Maha Sabha[9] in Telengana and the Maharashtra Parishad[10] in Marathawada) and stubborn young men of the staunch nationalist variety (the student protesters of the *Vande Mataram* agitation) came into the Nizam State Communist Party.[11] Apparently the patriotic content in the 'imperialist war' strategy of the CPI proved attractive to the Andhra Maha Sabhaites and the former student agitators—both of whom came from a nationalist background. Together, they contributed richly to the growth of the Communist organization in Telengana.

The second was the Communists' understanding of the wartime agrarian crisis in India and their determination in 1940 to work among the increasingly discontented *kisans*. For the first time, perhaps, the Communists seemed to give precedence to the task of mobilizing the peasantry over all other day-to-day political activities. The trend did not allow the members of the newly formed organization in Telengana to busy themselves wholly in the rhetoric of urban politics. Coming mostly from a rural background, they also found work among the peasants somewhat to their liking. The Telengana party's enthusiasm for organizing the peasantry eventually led to the conversion of the Andhra Maha Sabha (hereafter AMS) into a predominantly peasant organization—a sort of regional Kisan Sabha. Originally the Telengana Communists had planned to form a Kisan Sabha in 1940, but abandoned it when the Nizam's government threatened them with a ban. Thereafter they decided to work within the AMS (where some of their members had already been playing leading roles), and use it as an instrument for work in the rural areas.[12] On its part, the AMS had always taken note of some of the agrarian issues though mainly from the point of view of the landholding classes. It had expressed concern about the high rate of land and water taxes, the difficulty in obtaining agricultural loans, the question of indebtedness, and the need for good seeds and irrigation facilities. At times it had also dwelt upon the basic ill from which all classes of agriculturists suffered in Telengana, namely, the problem of *jagirdari* and landlord oppression.[13]

However, the subject was discussed more to give vent to the general feeling of frustration than with a determination to resist. The problem of *jagirdari* and landlord oppression and several other fundamental questions were brought in an agitational manner to the forefront of the Sabha's activities only from 1940 onwards, or during the period the Communists marched for ascendancy over the AMS. The demands for a reduction in land tax and a revision of the land tax system were made in the AMS conferences of 1940 and 1941. The sufferings of the people under the *jagirdars* and the urgency for abolishing the practice of forced labour were discussed in the conferences of 1942 and 1943. The problems of the tenants were voiced by the AMS for the first time in 1944 (eleventh conference at Bhuvangiri), and in 1945 (twelfth conference and the last at Khammam) the doors of the AMS were opened up to agricultural labourers and poor peasants of all sorts.[14]

Following the election of Ravi Narayan Reddy—a Communist—as the president of the AMS in 1941 (eighth conference at Chilkur), there began a contest between the youthful radicals and the veteran moderates for controlling the Sabha. Although the moderates wrested the leadership in 1942, they soon lost it again. The contest was finally decided in favour of the Communist-led radicals when Ravi Narayan Reddy became president for the second time in 1944, and the moderates left the organization in a huff. Meanwhile, the Communists and their supporters had transformed the AMS into a *kisan*-based mass organization by recruiting a large number of members from the rural areas, by reducing the membership fee from one rupee to four annas in 1941 and then to one anna in 1944,[15] and by commencing agitation on all pressing agrarian issues. In 1944–45 the AMS had a standing committee, district and *taluk* committees, and innumerable village committees with more than 1,00,000 members from the villages. At the twelfth conference in 1945 (Khammam), nearly 40,000 people were reported to have attended the open session.

However, the ground—or the cause—that helped the Communists considerably in mobilizing the peasants, under the banner of the AMS, emanated from the general call of their central leadership (December 1941) against the forcible war-time levy on grain producers, an essential part of the 'food policy' of the Government of India during the war. Faced with food shortages, the Nizam's government also introduced the policy in October 1943 by fixing a quota per acre and by purchasing levied grain through the state-controlled Hyderabad Commercial Corporation. The actual collection of the levy was left to the local officials and the village food committees at a price lower than the rate prevailing in the surrounding British–Indian territories. Apart from promoting the smuggling of grain, the levy encouraged large-scale falsification of crop returns, misrepresentation of the lands producing crops, and various irregularities in the weighing of procured grain. With the help of their position of power and in collusion with the village officials, the landlords invariably succeeded in lessening their burden of the levy and increasing it disproportionately for the peasantry. The levy, in fact, deprived substantial peasants of the profit of their surpluses and unsubstantial ones of food for subsistence. At a later stage the revenue and police minister of Hyderabad state conceded that the village officials compelled the poor peasants, who had barely enough for family consumption, to part with half their stocks of grain. He also confirmed that the village food committees were dominated by landlords and other influential persons of 'good caste', who evaded the levy with the connivance of the village officials. In many cases the peasants did not even receive the money the government sent as price for grain.[16] In accordance with their national policy, the Communists in Telengana lost no time in seizing the levy issue and campaigning against its abuses. Being free from the ban on their activities, which had been lifted throughout India and Hyderabad by the middle of 1942, they enthusiastically tried to build public opinion, and passed a resolution in the AMS conference of 1944, exhorting its members to oppose the injustices and ensure correct weighing of grains. Communist-led AMS activists also tried to regulate the indiscriminate collection of war funds in the villages, insisting that the amounts be decided in proportion to the capacity of the villagers. The campaign over the levy generated greater interest among the rural population in the AMS than earlier, brought fresh recruits, and led to the founding of new centres. Simultaneously with the growth of the Sabha, the ranks of the Communists also swelled in Telengana.

There is little on record to show that the Telengana Communists were influenced by another development of the Communist movement in India, namely, the expression at the leadership level (December 1945) of a militant reaction against the continued policy of moderation. It is also not clear if the post-war popular convulsions in different parts of the country moulded the outlook of the Telengana Communists. Apparently, the ideological standard of the Telengana members was not rated very high in Communist circles,[17] and left to themselves, they were not likely to receive much attention from either the moderate or the militant section of the leadership in Bombay. Their political mentor, the Andhra Provincial Committee at Vijayawada—who guided the politics of the entire Hyderabad branch—was, however, in a position to reflect the currents of political thinking at the headquarters. Since they formed an advanced unit of the Communist movement in India, the Andhra Communists were represented on the CPI Central Committee, and therefore took part in the making of party formulations. A few of their leading figures may have passed their militant ideas over to the receptive quarters in Telengana. The Telengana ranks were already impressed[18] by the determined manner in which their Andhra comrades were continuing—even in the days of the 'people's war'—the peasant struggle in the neighbourhood in Munagala.[19] The moderate central leadership, on their part, thought it necessary as early as 1944, in the wake of the Vijayawada session of the All India Kisan Sabha, to warn the Andhra party against 'sectarianism'.[20] Some of the Telengana Communists, in retrospect, laid claims to revolutionary militancy vis-à-vis the central policy of reformism,[21] but without clarifying how they managed to possess it. Whether an undercurrent of militancy developed independently in a certain group of the Telengana activists, or was vaguely engendered in them through the Andhra connection, the momentum that the revolt gathered throughout 1945 and the passage of the Central Committee's resolution about the same time were perhaps more than just coincidental.

Neither the 'reformist' stand (*Fronte Populaire*) nor the 'collaborationist' strategy (people's war) really hindered the performance of the Telengana Communists. Rather, bits and pieces of these policies helped them to grow in stature at a time (1942–45) when their comrades in other parts of the country were isolated for their 'antinationalism'. However, the increase in the strength of the Telengana Communists, especially in the absence of the nationalist and Congress Socialist elements from the political scene in the state,[22] hardly rendered them intrinsically different from the other Communists. Despite a questionable streak of militancy, the unquestionable devotion to agrarian politics and the prompt utilization of the levy issue, they displayed no sign of rebelliousness or of liking for arms. Clearly, the Communist involvement in the armed struggle in Telengana cannot be explained in terms of subjective factors, such as the political programmes and directions of the Communist movement in India. It may perhaps be understood better by referring to the objective conditions prevailing in Telengana and the manner in which the Communists responded to them.

II

Conditions in Telengana were the product of long-term accumulations, especially over the preceding three-quarters of a century. Telengana formed practically one half of Hyderabad,[23] where the lines of colonial political economy followed on the model of the rest of British India, but without any semblance of responsible, efficient government. Despite the growth of a market economy, some commercialization of agriculture and industrial beginnings, capitalism had not made any headway in Hyderabad. Apart from setting up certain coal mines and cotton mills, a few cement and tobacco factories, and some units for processing oil seeds and milling rice, Hyderabadi entrepreneurship was busy mostly with market speculation, moneylending and investment in land and buildings. Although they planned for industrialization, pumped in state capital to start new industries and help the sick ones, and ran a state bank, a state railways and a state airways, the modernist Hyderabadi ministers and bureaucrats could do little to link up agriculture with industry—or find ways and means to turn agricultural surpluses into capital formation for industries.[24] This was primarily because no one dared upset the feudal or semi-feudal *status quo* in the agricultural sector. The Nizam's government was overwhelmingly dependent on revenues from the land, customs levies on crop export and excise. The Nizam's autocratic rule rested almost entirely upon the political support of dominant landed magnates.

Landed magnates in Hyderabad were feudal elements like the *jagirdars* and similar other elements (such as *matkadars, samsthandars* etc.) in the *jagirdari* areas,[25] and semi-feudal elements like the *deshmukhs* and the *patel-patwaris* in the *diwani* areas.[26] Of the total land in the state, 30 per cent was *jagirdari*, 60 per cent *diwani* and 10 per cent *sarf-e-khas* or the Nizam's personal estates. The cultivation in the *sarf-e-khas* was done mainly through hired and bonded labourers. Although in theory the *jagirdars* and other intermediaries were not the legal proprietors of the *jagirdari* lands, they behaved in practice as owners of the estates. They treated the cultivators as tenants, collected rents and other cesses from them, maintained armed retainers and enjoyed certain judicial, police and even minting[27] powers. The tenantry consisted of occupancy tenants (*shikmidars*, who held land as long as they paid the rent) and tenants-at-will with a prospect (*asami-shikmis*, who paid rent and were entitled to *shikmidari* rights after twelve years), but mostly of tenants-at-will without any prospect (*kouludars*, who paid the annual rent in advance for a tenure of one year or two years). Tenancies were auctioned to *asami-shikmis* and *kouludars* in accordance with their ability to bid (known as the *gundu guttalu* system), and records were messed up to hoodwink the Nizam's government as to the exact amount collected from the tenants. All tenants were subjected to high tax[28] and irregular exactions, and tenants-at-will were exposed to periodic evictions. The conditions in *jagirdari* areas were generally disorganized, lands remained unsurveyed, rent receipts and *pattas* withheld, and many primary facilities (health, education and communication) denied.[29]

Administratively, the situation was better in the *diwani* lands under the direct control of the state, though the condition of the overwhelming majority of the cultivators was essentially the same. In these lands all the peasant proprietors—the so-called ones and the real ones—were *pattadars*, having obtained their *patta* directly from the state. Being owners of large holdings, some of the *pattadars* rented out land to various categories of occupancy tenants, such as *shikmidars, pot pattadars* (who took a part of the *pattadar's* land on condition of paying the proportionate revenue), and tenants-at-will like *asami-shikmis* and *kouludars*. Apart from these, there were the *ijara* tenants, or those who cleared and occupied forestlands in the hope that these would be allotted to them. Tax was collected from them without issuing any receipt, and the cultivation in these lands was not shown in the government records. Consequently, *ijara* tenants were thrown out with the help of revenue officials whenever the landlords wanted to grab these lands.[30] Among the *pattadars*, the *deshmukhs* and the *patel-patwaris* assumed the position of landed magnates in the *diwani* lands. Originally revenue farmers (*deshmukhs*) and tax collectors (*patel-patwaris*), they lost their jobs when the Nizam's government decided in the 1860s to collect the dues in the *diwani* areas directly from the cultivators. As compensation, the *deshmukhs* and the *patel-patwaris* were given land as well as a state pension. By using their influence and knowledge as revenue farmers, by manipulating survey records which they themselves had created and maintained, and by dictating settlement operations, the *deshmukhs* managed to take away as much good land as possible. Once they possessed large tracts of lands and started letting these out at an exorbitant rent,[31] they grew in power and position and became the arbiters of rural society. As arbiters they started imposing a number of irregular levies on the villagers and collected *nazrana* and *mamul* (a kind of bribe) on every possible plea. The yield from these exactions was considerable and it formed, according to popular belief, about one-third of the landlords' total annual income. Their land-grabbing also continued, side by side with their ever-expanding position of dominance, with the support and assistance of the state revenue and police officials. They forcibly seized land on grounds of non-payment of certain illegal levies, refusal to give free services, failure to repay loans and inability to pay fines imposed in connection with village disputes.[32] Their looting in land was so prolific that by the 1940s they monopolized 60 to 70 per cent of the land in certain districts and individually held at times 40,000 acres (Visunuri Deshmukh), 100,000 acres (the Kalluri brothers) or even 150,000 acres (Jana Reddy, Pratapa Reddy).

Beneath the variety of tenural arrangements, and between the *jagirdars* and the *baghelas* and *jeetagadus* (bonded labourers), or the *deshmukhs* and the Malas and Madigas (hereditarily attached *harijan* field labourers), there lived in Telengana different categories of rural population. From the Marxist–Leninist viewpoint,[33] these categories could broadly be identified as rich peasants (who produced surpluses by using the family and hired labour), middle peasants (who produced by family labour, and supplemented by short-term hired labour, just enough to meet the family needs), poor peasants (who had insufficient land to meet the needs of family consumption and had to work as sharecroppers and labourers to subsist), agricultural labourers (who had no land whatsoever) and artisans (who followed some trade to eke out a bare existence). Rich peasants in Telengana were clearly discernible among the Telengana *rayats* and Reddy *rayats*—independent family producers who used their surpluses for profit through lending[34] and selling in the market. Middle peasants were not so distinguishable in Telengana because they lived continuously on the fringe of poverty. They were exposed to indebtedness during hard times or times of expensive social occasions (marriages, illnesses, festivals and deaths). Threatened constantly with indebtedness and loss of land, poor peasants and artisans in Telengana shared in effect the lot of agricultural labourers. They usually engaged themselves as agricultural labourers at least for a part of the year. Wages were paid in kind or cash, or both, and money wages were particularly low in Telengana in comparison to other areas. Agricultural labourers constituted 33 per cent of the total village population in Telengana in 1937,[35] and about 40 per cent of cultivators of all kinds in Warangal and Nallagonda.[36]

If the domination of the *jagirdars, deshmukhs* and *patel-patwaris* was sustained by tenural weaknesses, rack rentals, irregular exactions, and periodic evictions and dispossessions, it actually flourished over rural Telengana with the help of the institutionalized practices of *vetti* (forced labour) and *vettichakiri* (forced services). Through the ages the practice of *vetti* grew out of a measure against the exodus of field labourers and artisans from their villages at times of famine and scarcity. It was thought that petty grants of land would tie these labourers and artisans (the potter, the washerman, the barber, the blacksmith, etc.) to their villages. Artisans were, therefore, given land from the rent-free *inam* lands and the village common lands (*gramanattam*), for which they had to pay one-fourth of the regular land tax. The field labourers and the *harijan* Malas and Madigas were granted land by the proprietors free of charge. In return, the artisans had to serve the villagers, and the field labourers, their respective proprietors. This labour (*vetti*) was to continue perpetually without any payment. In *jagirdari* areas the *jagirdar* customarily exacted all kinds of unpaid services from anybody domiciled in his *jagir*. In course of time both these practices in the *diwani* and the *jagirdari* areas were merged by the landed magnates into *vettichakiri*—a most elaborate arrangement for extorting unpaid labour and services from the entire rural population, including the rich peasants and the village shopkeepers.

In 1927 the Nizam's government extended it further by issuing orders that services to touring state officials in the villages were obligatory for the villagers.[37] The orders of the Nizam did mention payment for such compulsory services, but the long-standing beneficiaries of *vettichakiri* were opposed to creating a precedent for payment and the officials were only too eager to oblige them. So *vettichakiri* was claimed not only by the *jagirdars, deshmukhs* and *patel-patwaris,* but also by all the state officials. *Vettichakiri* included the performance of domestic jobs, acting as retainers, supplying of provisions and labouring in the fields. Houses were built, gardens laid, and sugar and oil mills constructed with the help of *vettichakiri.* The villagers had to be at the beck and call of their exploiters, quite often to the neglect of their own agricultural operations. *Vettichakiri* was invariably backed up by the ill-treatment of the peasants, their being abused and beaten, and their women molested.[38] *Harijans* were naturally the worst sufferers and, as a remedy for their despicable existence, they sometimes got themselves converted to Christianity or Islam. In the mid-1930s mass conversions to Christianity took place in Jagtyal *taluk* (Nallagonda). Similar conversions to Islam also occurred—to the delight of the revivalist Anjuman-e-Tablish-ul-Islam—in Janagaon *taluk* (Nallagonda). Viewing conversions as a danger to *vetti,* the *deshmukhs* and *patel-patwaris* immediately brought in the Arya Samajists to convert the labourers back to the Hindu fold and start the *Shuddhi* movement.[59]

Approximately between the First and Second World Wars, rural society in Telengana encountered certain important economic phenomena which considerably affected its prevailing circumstances.[40] The first of these was an increase in the cultivation of oil seeds (castor and groundnut) in Telengana. Encouraged by the British and aided by the Nizam's government, this increase was effected primarily to meet the demands of the industrial west and for bulk exports to Britain and the United States.[41] Oil seed production integrated the rural economy of Telengana with the world of capitalism and brought the international market for these products right into the villages of Telengana. All this helped Telengana's agro-economy, and the profitable price for oil seeds encouraged almost everybody to start their cultivation.[42] The *deshmukhs, patel-patwaris* and the rich peasants, who were in a position to invest, took to commercial cropping in a big way. Consequently, the demand for land, especially 'dry' land (where oil seed cultivation was possible without disturbing the irrigated 'wet' land) rose, and the landlords increased rents and looked for opportunities to evict tenants. The growth of commercial agriculture also exposed Telengana to the vicissitudes of the world economy, which became apparent during the Great Depression of 1929.

The Depression caused a slump in the prices of agricultural commodities generally; in Telengana the prices in November 1930 fell by 20 per cent when compared with the prices of 1928–29.[43] For ordinary cultivators the fall meant a depreciation of their assets in land and a near doubling of the monetary debts they had previously incurred. They had nevertheless to carry on agricultural operations by taking fresh advances, and so their indebtedness mounted. Seeing their depressed conditions, the merchant moneylenders refused to issue fresh loans. Loans to the cultivators, therefore, came primarily from the rich peasants and landlords, or those who managed to overcome the effects of the Depression with the help of their surpluses. As always, indebtedness led to the peasants' losing land due to failure to repay the debt or pay the rent. Evictions by landlords became frequent, alienation of lands to the lenders (mostly cultivating lenders) considerable, and the sale of holdings at ridiculously low prices numerous.[44]

From 1935 Telengana's rural economy looked up a little, and the prices of commercial crops—more particularly, groundnut—started picking up. The rising prices did not, however, bring relief to most categories of the peasantry. Encumbered by debts, they had not enough to sell in the market after meeting land revenue demands and family consumption needs. Before being able to recover, they were confronted with another serious crisis—that of inflation during the Second World War. The demands for war supply led to a sharp rise in prices as well as to shortages of essential commodities and food items. The government's attempt to control the prices of food items led to hoarding, and its compulsory levy on grains, to the taking away of the cultivators' food for subsistence. On his part, the hard-pressed cultivator could not hoard, he had to take his crop to the market as soon as it was harvested. To make matters worse, crops failed in 1941–42 and then again in 1943–44, and the import of Burmese rice[45] stopped with the war extending to Southeast Asia. Deprived of his own stock and exposed to the rising prices of daily necessities, the Telengana peasant had to go looking for fresh debts. Indebtedness soared as high as 122 per cent in proportion to the figures of 1931,[46] and a fresh wave of land transfers and ejection began.[47] Many cases of ejection were caused by the landlords' anxiety to prevent a section of their tenants-at-will (*asami-shikmis*) from acquiring occupational rights in their lands. A government-appointed Tenancy Committee had already recommended in 1940 that the *asami-shikmis* should get *shikmidari* rights after six years, with one year's notice of eviction. The Nizam's government, which accepted this recommendation, was also reported to be taking action for its implementation.[48] The *jagirdars* and the landlords, therefore, wanted to get rid of the *asami-shikmis* from their lands before the measure was actually implemented. But some of the ejections and land transfers took place because the landed magnates and the rich peasants needed more lands for making the best of a situation of scarcity. The acreage under cultivation of commercial crops increased during the war,[49] but 'the cultivated area of foodgrains did not decline'.[50]

The economic phenomena naturally affected the behavioural patterns of the classes of rural exploiters. The interest of the *deshmukhs* and *patel-patwaris* in commercial agriculture marked the beginning of a capitalistic trend in them—a tendency to profit as commercial producers. The manner in which they absorbed the government supply of improved seeds and the state facilities for irrigation,[51] and the way they hoarded their food stocks to play the market, were indicative of this bent. The *deshmukhs* were also known to have taken over most of the contracts for excise collection[52] and invested their income in setting up oil and rice mills. All this gave an impression that the *deshmukhs* were turning gradually into a class of market-oriented rural capitalists and ceasing to remain feudal exploiters.[53] Truly speaking, the position of the *deshmukhs* was changing to a certain extent in the changed economic climate. The position of the *jagirdars*, too, changed and they behaved almost similarly: hoarding foodgrains, taking to commercial cropping, and applying to the government for support in their entrepreneurial endeavours.[54] But was there any change, so far as the landed magnates were concerned, in the feudalistic methods of production or relations of production? Whether they were producing food crops or commercial crops, it was done invariably through bonded labour and forced labour. They were still living mainly on rent and illegal exaction, and not much on profit. Their domination over the rural society was based more on their feudal standing and on *vetti-chakiri* than on their position as commodity producers or on their market relations. Their network of moneylending was not very wide and their share of acquiring the indebted peasants' lands was rather limited.[55] That does not mean that there was any let-up as far as the land-grabbing spree of the *deshmukhs* was concerned. Their seizure of lands, particularly 'wet' lands (suitable for food crops), not only continued unabated, but actually increased during the deflationary and inflationary periods—years of opportunities galore. However, the character of their land seizures was different; it was carried out by exerting pressure, by the use of sheer force and by showing it later in the records as sale. Besides, what was important for them was the occupation of land and not the records. Ironically, under the colonial system, Telengana's linkages with world capitalism, and its subjection to the twists and turns of the international market, in effect, accentuated feudal oppressions rather than reducing them.

Not that commercial, semi-capitalist exploiters did not appear in rural Telengana, they were in fact emerging from the category of rich peasants. Following the Depression, rich peasants dominated the credit scene in the countryside, both in cash and in kind. A major part of the lands that changed hands on account of indebtedness actually came into their possession. They took the cultivation of commercial crops more seriously than others and made a greater success of it. Oil seed cultivation being practicable in the 'dry' lands, they tried to acquire as much of these as possible.[56] In running their family farms, they exploited labour, employing more and more free field-hands, producing surpluses for the market and living largely on the profit. A contradiction was fast developing between the rich and poor peasants over indebtedness and land alienation, and between the rich peasants and agricultural labourers over wages and terms of employment. There had also been a longstanding contradiction between the rich peasants and the landed magnates (the *jagirdars, deshmukhs* and *patel-patwaris*) over *vettichakiri*, illegal exactions and the feudal social domination. The manner in which the *deshmukhs* and others stood in the way of swallowing poor peasants' lands, monopolized the facilities offered by the state, and enjoyed the support of the state officials and police—was most frustrating to the rich peasants. Matters came to a head in 1944 when the rich peasants' stock of grain was threatened under the levy orders and the *deshmukhs'* stocks were spared. From the viewpoint of Marxist–Leninist class contradictions, rural Telengana was being divided first into a camp of feudal and semi-feudal magnates against that of the rest of the cultivating population, including the rich peasants; and then into a camp of the rich peasants against that of the poor peasants and agricultural labourers. Much depended on the handling of the alignment of forces, and on the highlighting of one of the two conflicts, or both.

III

Apparently the Communists in Telengana were laying more emphasis on combining forces against the feudal and semi-feudal magnates than on the contradiction between the rich and poor peasants. This was consistent with their declared national policy of forging a united front against the imperial–feudal alliance,[57] 'the village parasites and British toadies'[58] and 'landlord oppression'.[59] The national policy of the Communists also stood for cooperation among all the anti-landlord classes of the peasantry, and for not opposing the 'small *zamindars* and the rich peasants'[60] even after identifying 'the new capitalist of the village'.[61] The Telengana Communists also called for an anti-landlord understanding among all classes of cultivators, and asked the so-called 'small landholders' to sympathize with the cause of the poor peasants and agricultural labourers. After all, they argued, the entire peasantry was dependent on the services of field labourers at the time of agricultural operations. Besides, there was no guarantee—under the prevailing exploitative system—that some of them would not be forced to join the ranks of the agricultural labourers.[62] Communists, however, remained conscious of the fact that the main-stay of their influence was the rural poor, the poor peasants and the agricultural labourers. They were, therefore, persistently vocal in favour of the tenants' rights and against their evictions.[63] They deman-ded increase in the wages of the bonded and agricultural labourers and improvements in their working conditions. It was decided, for example, that the wages in kind for the *baghelas* should be raised from 40 to 90 *seers* of jowar a month and that they should get thirty holidays in a year. It was further demanded that the day's work for a field-hand should be limited to eight hours.[64] From time to time, they continued to raise the slogan of giving land to the landless. That the Communists succeeded in building up an anti-landlord united front in Telengana, was clear from the speed with which their agitation against *vetti, vettichakiri* and illegal exactions developed.

The discontent over *vetti* and *vettichakiri* had been brewing long before the Communists appeared on the political scene in Telengana. There were cases of isolated agitation on these issues in different localities for brief periods, but the *jagirdars* and the *deshmukhs* had always managed to break the opposition. The AMS took up the question for the first time at its second conference in Devarakonda (1931), and this inspired the shopkeepers in certain areas to stop unpaid supply of provisions to landed magnates. This act of defiance, however, did not last long, and the AMS continued to discuss the issue without any further consequence. It was in 1940 that the AMS under Communist leadership launched an anti-forced labour and services campaign. A 'week' against *vettichakiri* was observed and AMS activists, including its president, Ravi Narayan Reddy, went on extensive tours in the countryside to rouse public opinion. In 1941–42 a series of demonstrations took place against the *deshmukhs* of Cherukupalli and Chandupalli (Nallagonda). In 1943 the campaign picked up in Suryapet (Nallagonda) and Khammam (Warangal) and extended from *taluk* to *taluk*. Two successful struggles were waged in 1944, one in Janagaon (Nallagonda) against Deshmukh Visunur Rama Chandra Reddy and another in Manukotaluka (Warangal) against Deshmukh Cherlapalem Gopala Rao. Another massive struggle followed in Warangal *taluk* where *vettichakiri* ceased in about forty villages.[65] By 1945, the movement against *vetti* and *vettichakiri*, under the guidance of the AMS, engulfed most parts of Nallagonda, Warangal and a small part of Karimnagar districts. The movement also put an end to the collection of illegal levies at many places, and among the suffering notables were the Kalluri Deshmukh in Madhira (Warangal), the Pingali Deshmukh in Malkalagudem (Warangal), the Visunuri Deshmukh and Koduru brothers in Janagaon (Nallagonda), and Dupalli Venkata Rama Reddy in Bhuvangiri (Nallagonda).

The AMS was in great demand in rural Telengana, and the peasants came to its leaders with invitations to open branches (*sanghams*) in their villages.[66] Having championed some of the popular causes, the Communists could not shrink from taking up others, especially when the people themselves were so keen. The movement against feudal oppressions (*vetti, vettichakiri* and irregular extortions), therefore, turned naturally towards resistance against feudal expropriations (evictions and dispossessions). The resistance against evictions grew precisely in those areas where the anti-forced labour movement had raised its head. It sprang up in Janagaon (Nallagonda) when the inhabitants of Mundraya village, in the middle of 1944, opposed the attempts of the Koduru (brothers) Deshmukhs to forcibly occupy some lands. They were joined in their fight by people from the neighbouring villages under the banner of the AMS. The struggle, however, failed eventually and the Deshmukhs had their way with the help of the police. Later the leading agitators were arrested on trumped-up criminal charges.[67] Nevertheless, the illustration of Mundraya was emulated by peasants in the rest of Janagaon, Bhuvangiri and Suryapet. Pusukuri Deshmukh Raghava Rao's endeavours to drive away the Lambadis (a tribal community) from their lands in Dharmapuram, Janagaon (Nallagonda), were frustrated collectively by the peasants. In Edavelli village, Suryapet (Nallagonda), Jana Reddy Pratapa Reddy's efforts to eject the tenants were successfully neutralized. In similar fashion the peasantry counteracted the landlords' attacks on their lands and crops in Batavolu, Huzurnagar (Nallagonda), Malla Reddygudem, Huzurnagar (Nallagonda), Mallcheruru, Huzurnagar (Nallagonda), Thimmarapuram (Warangal), Desaipet (Warangal), Papukullu, Illendu (Warangal), and many other places.[68] The agitation against fresh ejections raked up tragic memories of the past and led those dispossessed in the last twenty years or so to hope for a return of their lost holdings. The clamour of the vast landless peasantry for the possession of lands was already known to the Telengana Communists. In their book on the Janagaon peasant movement, entitled *Janagama Prajala Veerochito*

Poratalu, they had noted that the peasant was 'land-thirsty'.[69] At the height of the anti-eviction agitation, therefore, they anticipated the emergence of the issue of land redistribution to a certain extent.

Both kinds of resistance (against feudal oppressions and against feudal expropriations) were generally meant to be peaceful, and the Communists and the AMS members had not shown much violent intention. Each act of resistance led to arrests and criminal proceedings against them. They fought all these arduous legal battles and often emerged unscathed. They usually tried to seek redress by referring disputes over land to the local government officials. They resented the pro-landlord corrupt officialdom as much as they appreciated the fairplay of some good officers.[70] The Communist leader and president of the AMS, Ravi Narayan Reddy, took up the issues of the levy on grain, forced labour and evictions, with the Nizam's government at Hyderabad, and personally discussed matters with the revenue and police minister at least twice, in November 1944 and January 1946.[71]

The case of Ailamma's lands in Palakurthi village, Janagaon (Nallagonda)—which received some public attention at the end of 1945—was characteristic of the cautious Communist approach. Ailamma, a village washerwoman, wanted to get about six acres of her land cultivated by others. The Visunuri Deshmukh allowed it after taking a bribe from her. At the time of harvesting he demanded a further amount, which Ailamma refused. She then contacted the local AMS, whose volunteers came forward to help in the harvesting. The Deshmukh promptly complained to the police, claiming Ailamma's holdings to be his own and alleging that the AMS volunteers were forcibly taking away his crops. The police arrested and tortured five Sabha members. The Communists and their followers created some commotion over these issues and forced the district authorities to institute an enquiry into the case. The enquiry officers (an assistant deputy superintendent of police and a circle inspector) were so influenced by the Deshmukh that their report in December 1945 went against Ailamma, stating that the lands and crops belonged to the Deshmukh. Meanwhile the arrested AMS members raised a hue and cry over the tortures they had suffered. An enquiry into the allegations of torture by the superintendent of the district police was also influenced by the Deshmukh, and the findings in January 1946 dismissed the charges brought by the arrested persons. The Communists and the AMS, thereafter, took the case to a court of law and won, in February 1946, a resounding legal victory. The arrested AMS members were released and Ailamma's rights over her lands restored.[72]

But Ailamma could not have exercised her rights had the peasants not defended the crops against the Deshmukh's men by the use of force. It had not always been possible for resisters against ejectment and land-grabbing to avoid the use of force. While facing the hirelings of the landlords, the peasants had resorted to the use of force much earlier than the case of Ailamma. In defence of their *kouludari* rights in Janagaon (Nallagonda), the Lambadis had used force as early as January 1945.[73] Force was used in Edepalli, Suryapet (Nallagonda) when Jana Reddy Pratapa Reddy's men came to take possession of lands and were beaten back. The villagers of Batavolu, Huzurnagar (Nalgonda) repulsed the landlord's men by the use of force. Throughout 1945 similar incidents occurred in Alipuram Jagirdari (Warangal), Brahmanakotta (Warangal), Nasikull (Nallagonda), Malkalagudem (Nallagonda) and several other places. The incidence of violence increased during the harvesting season, when the peasants had to defend their crops from being looted by the landlords' men. It was at the beginning of 1946, when the police and revenue officials came to take away the levy grain forcibly, that the villages of Akunoor and Machi Reddy Palli (where the AMS organization had not developed) put up a strong resistance with whatever arms they could lay their hands on. Later, after the resistance was overcome, the police tortured the villagers, raped the women and destroyed properties.[74]

Irrespective of the disposition of the Communists, therefore, armed conflicts were already taking place in Nallgonda and Warangal fairly regularly. The arms used were invariably very petty—*lathis*, slings (used for hurling stones at birds spoiling the crops), sickles and other agricultural implements. Women made use of brooms, stones, utensils and chilli powder. Once the battle had begun, entirely because of the popular enthusiasm generated through their political campaigns, the Communists were left with hardly any alternative: either they proved themselves true to their cause and their following, or they retraced their steps with ominous results. Though no-one wanted the destruction of the Communist movement built upon sacrifices in Telengana, many hesitated in escalating the fight for fear of inviting repression. It was the Nallagonda District Committee of the Telengana Communists which took the initiative in acknowledging the state of war prevailing in the countryside. By taking a cue from their Andhra comrades,[75] Communists in Nallagonda and other places had in the meantime set up, in the middle of 1945, a volunteer corps of the AMS, composed primarily of 'agricultural labourers, poor and middle peasants'.[76] Towards the end of 1945, the Nallagonda District Committee decided to arm the volunteer corps with *lathis* and to raise the slogan 'Resist the *goondas* of the landlords with sticks in your hands.'[77] Then, at the beginning of 1946, after enquiring into the incidents of Akunoor and Machi Reddy Palli, and seeing the defiant mood of the people, the Committee further decided to resist by using force not only against the landlords 'but the police as well'.[78] Both these decisions, in effect, committed the Communists in Nallagonda district to the cause of armed struggle,[79] and the *chitti* (petitioning) *sanghams* turned into *gutappa* (*lathi*-wielding) *sanghams.* Thus by the middle of 1946 some Communists in Telengana became willing to play the game they had started, and on the lines their peasant supporters preferred.

Armed and unarmed popular struggles were so mixed up throughout 1945 and in the first half of 1946 that it would be difficult to point to a certain date or an incident as the starting-point of the Telengana armed rising. It was not clear—even from the viewpoint of the Communists—when exactly their cadres took to arms, and whether their District Committee's decisions were made to give their activists a lead, or merely to ratify the steps they had already taken. However, a point of no return (to unarmed struggle) was reached, certainly in Nallagonda district, in July 1946. Enraged by his failure in the case of Ailamma's lands, the Visunuri Deshmukh of Janagaon planned a murderous attack on the AMS leaders in Kaduvendi village. On 4 July his men attacked the homes of some AMS members and, on being driven away, took shelter in the Deshmukh's fortress-like house. The villagers, armed with *lathis* and slings and raising slogans, followed them there. The Deshmukh's men opened fire on the crowd, killing Doddi Komarayya on the spot and injuring a few others. The crowd, infuriated by this attack, surrounded the place, captured the culprits and prepared to set the house on fire. A large contingent of the local police arrived at this point and rescued the Deshmukh and his family by dispersing the gathering. Before the cremation, Komarayya's dead body was taken out in procession and people from distant places came to join it.[80] After Komarayya's martyrdom everything changed in Nallagonda, 'changed utterly'.[81]

Red-flag demonstrations and noisy meetings were organized on a large scale, village committees and defence squads were formed, and the collection of levy grain was completely stopped. In a village adjacent to Kaduvendi the peasants seized, for the first time, 200 acres from the landlord and restored these through the village committee to the peasant owners.[82] The village committees started acting as courts and functioning as administering bodies. Landlords generally fled the villages, and those who remained were socially boycotted. Most of their henchmen were caught, tried by the village committees and suitably punished. Within a few weeks the rebellion had spread to several hundred villages in Nallagonda (in Janagaon, Suryapet, Bhuvangiri and Huzurnagar) and certain parts of Warangal and Karimnagar districts.[83]

By August 1946 the Nizam's state administration had completely collapsed in the affected areas, and a parallel government, run on the lines of the *Patri Sarkar*,[84] was established.[85] State officials stopped going to the rebel areas and the police encountered violent mobs whenever they tried to enter a village. The months of September and October were, in fact, marked by numerous hostile demonstrations against the police *zulum*.[86] On a number of occasions, till November 1946, police parties went to arrest AMS members in the villages and were confronted with armed gatherings of 200 to 500 persons. Attacks on police stations were often feared, although these did not actually take place. It was noted that the villagers used a system of signalling to forewarn their leaders against raiding police parties.[87] The Communists and AMS members were in full command of the situation, under the overall guidance of the District Committee of Nallagonda. Their programme of action included (i) free justice to all by the village committees, (ii) special courts to try oppressive landlords (iii) return of all irregular exactions, in grain and in cash, by the landlords and (iv) finally, as well as most importantly, return of the 'illegally'[88] secured lands of the landlords.[89] But the Communist leadership in other districts were still wavering and had not been able to organize the rebellion the way it did in Nallagonda.

Seeing the inefficacy of the local police, the Nizam's government sent heavy police reinforcements from Hyderabad to Nallagonda in October 1946. When this failed to produce much effect, the state infantry and cavalry were employed in November that year. In the same month the Communist Party and the AMS were declared unlawful in Hyderabad state. The military operation followed a policy of encirclement, cordoning off a village and sending in the police to make arrests.[90] The rebels put up a resistance against the army and the police almost everywhere, especially in Dharmapuram (Janagaon), Balemula (Suryapet), Patasuryapet (Suryapet), Devaruppali (Janagaon) and Malla Reddygudem (Huzurnagar).[91] While fighting the police and the military, the rebels, for the first time, used muzzle-loaders, in addition to *lathis*, sickles, slings and agricultural implements.[92] In thirty-five days, from the middle of November, the police and the military carried out thirty-one raids, resulting in ten deaths, 300 wounded and 1500 arrested, including old men and boys.[93] According to Communist sources, twenty persons, both men and women, were killed while resisting state forces in about 120 to 150 villages.[94] By January 1947, the rebels were losing in the face of superior arms and numbers, and were facing ruthless repression. The turning of the tide was heralded by the return of the landlords and state officials to the villages. By 1947 the rising was apparently over in Telengana. In actuality, however, it was not, for armed struggle was resumed by the Communist-led Telengana peasantry five months after its suspension in August 1947—far more extensively and, of course, under somewhat changed circumstances.

The rising in Nallagonda, Warangal and parts of Karimnagar districts between May 1944 and February 1947, was initiated wholly by the Communists in Telengana. Their understanding of the objective conditions prevailing in Telengana and their reading of the alignment of forces in the countryside helped them considerably. In their appreciation of the situation, as well as in taking steps in accordance with it, they were not influenced by any imported enthusiasm for revolutionism. The Telengana Communists tried to function, more or less, within the *Fronte Populaire* framework, and intended to follow largely the United Front line of their national body. The United Front policy in general, and some of its subtle shifts and nuances in particular—immediately before and during the war—certainly contributed to the growth of the Communist movement in Telengana. The work among the peasantry, the opposition to the feudal and semi-feudal elements, the movement against *vetti* and *vettichakiri*, and the agitation over the levy on grains—were all undertaken by the Communists in Telengana on United Front lines. To argue that the 'reformist' national policy of the CPI, and its influences, stood in the way of rebellious Telengana[95] is not, therefore, wholly justifiable.

Much, however, depended on how seriously the activists in a region worked out a specific political line, and with what experiences. The experiences of the Telengana Communists showed that a skilful application of the United Front policy was capable of arousing the agrarian classes against their common exploiters, and leading them even to widespread rising. Once a situation escalated to a rising (which it did in certain parts of Telengana throughout 1945), a change of policy became necessary. A policy followed during disturbed peace is often not the best policy to employ during uninterrupted war. The difficulty that the Telengana Communists faced was in foreseeing the coming of a state of war and in deciding beforehand whether or not they ought to precipitate it. They seemed to have taken the precipitating step by mobilizing resistance against evictions, and consequently stirring up the expectations of the dispossessed and the landless for land. It was the issue of evictions that often led to the use and counter-use of force in the rural areas, and that could lead easily to the demand for seizure of land from the landlords. On these points, the central Communist leadership and its policy of United Front had no guidelines to offer,[96] except, of course, to set goals through slogans like 'abolish landlordism', or 'land to the tiller'. Theoretically, therefore, in the absence of any clarity as to what they should do with the land-hunger of the poor peasantry, the Communists in Telengana need not have whetted it by resisting the cases of 'illegal' evictions.

Practically, however, it was not possible for the Telengana Communists—even if they wished (which they did not, anyway)—to discriminate among the various kinds of feudal and semi-feudal oppressions, or to put a halt to the opposition to one kind and continue to fight the others. Although the agitation over *vetti* and *vettichakiri* began first, the movement against the levy on grains and evictions ran almost concurrently. The resorting to arms as a popular initiative and the demand for the seizure of the landlords' lands appeared at the height of the movement. Having little compunction in view of their understanding of the situation, the Telengana Communists, nevertheless, had not been particularly enthusiastic about either of these two developments. There was irresolution among them on both the counts, and only the Nallagonda District Committee decided to follow up what it had started. The facts that the Communist-led armed struggle continued mainly in Nallagonda district, without forming guerrilla squads or using fire-arms,[97] and that the lands seized from the landlords amounted only to 3000 acres, restored mostly to former owners and not distributed among the landless, are indicative of the Telengana Communists 'groping hesitantly'.[98] It would be very enlightening to know how they fared in their pioneering tasks at the resumption of the struggle in August 1947.

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Notes and References

[1] 'The Anti-Imperialist Peoples Front', R.P. Dutt and B. Bradley, *Imprecor*, 29 February 1936, and *To All Anti-Imperialist Fighters: Gathering Storm* (a pamphlet issued by the CPI), December 1936, available at Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[2] In 1940 the CPI in fact advocated in their document, *Proletarian Path*, militant struggle under the leadership of the working class, for overthrowing the British government.

[3] 'The Impending Crisis and Our Tasks', CPI Politburo Circular No. 59, 25 January 1940, *Party Documents*, available at Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[4] CPI Politburo's comments on the happenings in Kayyur, Kerala, Party Letter No. 43, 15 July 1941, *Party Documents*, available at Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[5] 'The All People's War against Fascism and our Policy and Tasks', Resolution of the CPI Politburo, 13 December 1941, *Party Documents*, available at Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[6] 'The New Situation and Our Tasks', Political Resolution of CPI Central Committee, 16 December 1945, *Party Documents*, available at Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[7] 'For the Final Assault', Political Resolution of CPI Central Committee, August 1946, *Party Documents*, available at Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[8] In the late 1930s a group of socialist intellectuals, including the Urdu poet Makhdoom Mohiuddin, formed the 'Comrades Association' in Hyderabad city.

[9] Starting in 1922 as an association for upholding the cause of Telugu language and culture in Hyderabad state, Andhra Jana Sangham turned into Andhra Maha Sabha in 1930. It grew thereafter into a powerful semi-political organization, representing moderate nationalist and Gandhian viewpoints, and acting as a cementing force behind the various sections of the Telugu-speaking people in Hyderabad.

[10] The Maharashtra Parishad (Andhra Maha Sabha's equivalent in Marathawada) was formed in 1936 and functioned more or less as a nationalist organization.

[11] The student agitation started in October 1938 over the prohibitory order

on the singing of the patriotic anthem '*Vande Mataram*' in Osmania University hostels. The agitators also refused to wear the Muslim dress (as per the custom of the university) and demanded facilities for teaching Sanskrit and their mother-tongues (Telugu, Marathi and Kannada). The agitation continued for about two months and a large number of students were rusticated from the university, as well as from other colleges and schools.

[12] Barry Pavier, *The Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, Delhi, 1981, p. 82. It should, however, be noted that the AMS had by this time a distinguished record of working for social regeneration, cultural progress and administrative and political reforms. By associating themselves with it, the Communists also hoped to share in its reputation and goodwill.

[13] '*Andhra Maha Sabha: Rayatu Samasyalu*', in Rajeswar Rao, Arutla Rama Chandra Reddy and Krishna Y.V. Rao, *Bhuswamya Vidhanam Roddukai Rayatula Veerochita Tirugubatu* (Heroic Peasant Rebellion for the Abolition of Feudal System), part I, chapter 4, Vijayawada, 1973, pp. 25–36.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ravi Narayan Reddy, *Heroic Telengana*, New Delhi, 1973, pp. 19, 21.

[16] Report to HEH the Nizam's Government on the Communist Agitation in Hyderabad State, W.W. Griegson, Revenue and Police Member, 5.12.46. Proceedings of the Ministry of States, Government of India, File No. 15 P(S), 1947, NAI.

[17] Ian Bedford, 'The Telengana Insurrection', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 1967 (microfilm at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library), p. 211.

[18] Ravi Narayan Reddy, *Heroic Telengana*, p. 37.

[19] Munagala in Krishna district was adjacent to the Nizam's territories in Nallagonda.

[20] Party letter (CPI), *Party Documents*, Vol. IV, No. 7, 31 May 1944, available at Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[21] D.V. Rao, 'Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution', *Proletarian Path* (monthly), Calcutta, November 1973, p. 8.

[22] The state Congress—the platform of the nationalists and the Congress Socialists—was banned in Hyderabad state between 1939 and 1946.

[23] In area, population and the number of people speaking a language (Telugu) Telengana constituted roughly one half of the Nizam's territories.

[24] Pavier has discussed this in some detail in his work, *The Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, part 2, chapter 1. The discussion has also generated among the reviewers of his book, a controversy over the actual significance of these capitalistic rudiments in Hyderabad.

[25] These were the areas where the *jagirdars* collected land revenue on behalf of the government, or acted as intermediaries.

[26] These areas were directly under the government land revenue system.

[27] The *jagirdars* of Gudwal and Wanapurthi, for example, had authority to mint coins.

[28] The Nizam's government admitted that the assessments charged by the *jagirdars* were 'far higher' than those charged in the neighbouring *diwani*

villages. Report by W.V. Griegson, Revenue and Police Member, 5.12.46, Proceedings of the Ministry of States, Government of India, File No. 15 P(S), 1947, NAI.

[29] Suravaram Pratapa Reddy, *Jagirulaloni Sthitigatulu* (Conditions in *Jagirs*), Hyderabad, 1941, pp. 1–26, available at Saraswatha Niketarnam, Vetapalam, Prakasam district, Andhra Pradesh.

[30] Communist Party booklet in Telugu, *Conditions of Telengana and Deshmukhs' Exploitation in Nalgonda and Warangal*, no publication details, 1945, available at Saraswatha Niketanam, Vetapalam, Prakasam district, Andhra Pradesh.

[31] The Nizam's government confirmed that the *deshmukhs* were 'rack-renting those to whom they sub-let their own occupancy holdings': Report by W.V. Griegson. Hyderabad state CID also spoke of 'undoubted rack-renting' by *deshmukhs* and *patels*: Note by Hyderabad state CID, 14.2.47, Proceedings of the Ministry of States, Government of India, File No. 15 P(S), 1947, NAI.

[32] K. Balagopal, 'Telengana Movement Revisited', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XVII, No. 18, 30 April 1983, pp. 709–12.

[33] Mao Tse-tung's ideas were not really in vogue in India till 1947–48.

[34] Rich peasants in Telengana stepped into the moneylending business in the 1930s, which was previously monopolized by Komti *sahukars*. Rich peasants, however, always dominated grain-loaning, charging in the 1930s 50 per cent interest on foodgrains and 100 per cent interest on seed grains.

[35] Inukonda Thirumali, 'Aspects of Agrarian Relations in Telengana, 1928–1948', unpublished M. Phil. thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1979, p. 92.

[36] Barry Pavier, *The Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, p. 82.

[37] In 1922–23 the state government undertook for the first time an elaborate assessment of land and the fixation of tax on that basis. This led to extensive movements of the revenue and police officials in rural areas, and consequently necessitated the carrying of their luggage and arranging for their food, shelter and other facilities.

[38] D.V. Rao, *Hyderabadu Samsthanamlo Vettichakiri* (Forced Labour and Services in Hyderabad State), Bezwada, 1946, pp. 1–28, available at Saraswatha Niketanam, Vetapalam, Prakasam district, Andhra Pradesh.

[39] Ibid. Much of the strength of the Arya Samaj movement in Hyderabad state in the late 1930s came from the *deshmukh* and *patel–patwari* support to its cause.

[40] These developments have been noted by Pavier and Thirumali with sufficient care, but not without their respective slants.

[41] Barry Pavier, *The Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, p. 19.

[42] This was done by adjusting, as far as possible, with the cultivation of food crops. In the 1940s groundnut occupied the third highest average in the whole of Hyderabad, jowar being the first and cotton (produced mainly in Marathawada) the second. Ibid., p. 20.

[43] Thirumali, 'Aspects of Agrarian Relations in Telengana, 1928–48', p. 55.

[44] Ravi Narayan Reddy has recorded in his book, *Heroic Telengana*, p. 5, how

a poor peasant sold his entire holding (two acres of 'wet' land) to him for a paltry sum of Rs. 25.

[45] Hyderabad used to import 68,000 tons of rice from Burma every year.

[46] S. Kesava Iyengar, *Rural Economic Enquiries in the Hyderabad*, Hyderabad, 1951, p. 436.

[47] At this point landless tenants constituted 46.6 per of the total number of tenants. Ibid., p. 55.

[48] In 1945 the Hyderabad government introduced the Asami Shikmis Bill for consideration. However, it was passed only in 1947.

[49] *The Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, p. 35.

[50] Thirumali, 'Aspects of Agrarian Relations in Telengana, 1928–48', condusion.

[51] Barry Pavier, *The Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, p. 25.

[52] In Hyderabad the state government used to auction the right to collect excise duty. The *deshmukhs*, who owned much forestland and palm trees, found the buying of this right very lucrative. It was doubly beneficial to them, for they charged the toddy-tappers for the palm juice, as well as for the excise duty. The considerable monetary gain in fact encouraged them further to dispossess peasants of their lands growing palm trees. There was, incidentally, a phenomenal rise in the excise returns of the state, from Rs 24 crore in 1942–43 to Rs 56 crore in 1947–48, exceeding even income from land revenue or the railways.

[53] Thirumali in his 'Aspects of Agrarian Relations in Telengana, 1928–48', believes this to be the case.

[54] Twenty-five *jagirdars*, for example, applied in 1934 along with others to the government for financial support in running a sugar manufacturing company.

[55] According to Thirumali ('Aspects of Agrarian Relations in Telengana, 1928–48', p. 81), about 85.5 per cent of the lands actually transferred passed into the hands of 'cultivating' persons and 15.45 per cent into the hands of the 'non-cultivating' persons. The *deshmukhs* and *patel–patwaris* were known to belong to the latter category.

[56] Thirumali, 'Aspects of Agrarian Relations in Telengana, 1928–48', p. 63.

[57] 'The Communist Party in the Fight Against Imperialism', *Communist*, Vol. 1, No. 15, March 1937.

[58] 'On the New Political Situation', Resolution of the Central Committee, CPI, 16 December 1945, *Party Documents*, available at Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[59] G.D. Adhikari, 'Slogans and Strategy of Anti-Landlord Struggle', *Communist*, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 1947.

[60] 'Election Manifesto' of the CPI, *People's Age*, 13 January 1946.

[61] 'On the New Political Situation', Resolution of the Central Committee, CPI, 16 December 1945, *Party Documents*, available at Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[62] D.V. Rao, *Hyderabadu Samsthanamlo Vettichakiri*, pp. 1–28.

[63] *People's Age*, 22 December 1946.

[64] Ibid., 10 November 1946.

[65] D.V. Rao, *Hyderabadu Samsthanamlo Vettichakiri*, pp. 1–28.

[66] Arutla Rama Chandra Reddy, *Telengana Porata Smruthlu* (Memoirs of the Telengana Struggle), Vijayawada, 1981, pp. 31–35.

[67] Arutla Rama Chandra Reddy and G. Gopala Reddy were arrested along with twenty others on charges of attempted murder. The sensational trial (Palakurthi Conspiracy Case) of the accused continued for about a year, and in the middle of 1945 they were released.

[68] P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, Calcutta, 1972, pp. 28–34, and P. Venkataramanaya, *Warangallu Zilla Rayatu Poratalu* (Peasant Struggle in Warangal District), Bezwada, 1946, pp. 1–16.

[69] D.V. Rao, 'Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution', *Proletarian Path* (monthly), Calcutta, November 1973, p. 11.

[70] There were instances in Warangal district where conscientious officials earned the approbation of local communists. The Nallagonda communists, in fact, were disappointed at the transfer of Abdul Alam—an impartial *munsiff*—from Suryapet.

[71] *Condition of Telengana and Deshmukhs' Exploitation in Nallagonda and Warangal*, communist pamphlet, publication details not available, 1945, pp. 1–52, available at Saraswatha Niketanam, Vetapalam, Prakasam district, Andhra Pradesh.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Note on the situation in Nalgonda District, Hyderabad State CID, 1 February 1947, Proceedings of the Ministry of States, Government of India, File No, 15 P(S), 1947, NAI.

[74] D.V. Rao, 'Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution', *Proletarian Path*, p. 12.

[75] Between 1943 and 1945 the Andhra communists developed a volunteer corps to defend themselves against the attacks of the *goondas*, incited by their detractors.

[76] D.V. Rao, 'Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution', *Proletarian Path*, p. 12.

[77] Arutla Rama Chandra Reddy, *Telengana Porata Smruthlu*, pp. 60–61.

[78] D.V. Rao, 'Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution, p. 12.

[79] Communists in other districts, i.e. Warangal and Karimnagar, continued to ponder over the issue for some time. D.V. Rao has claimed that while the Nallagonda District Committee, representing 'the revolutionary trend' took the initiative, the communists in other districts preferred to follow 'the liberal reformist' line ('Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution', *Proletarian Path*, pp. 8–11). The fact that the rising—so far as the participation of the communists was concerned—occurred mainly in Nallagonda district, gives credence to Rao's contention. The British residents in Hyderabad (A.C. Lothian and C.G. Herbert), the revenue and police member of the Nizam's government (W.V. Griegson) and the Hyderabad state CID noted this fact and described the rising as 'Nalgonda Kisan disturbances, engineered by the Communists' (Proceedings of the Ministry of States, Government of India, File No. 15 P(S), 1947, NAI). P. Sundarayya's narrative of

events also conveys an impression that the rising was predominantly a Nallagonda affair (*Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, pp. 35–52).

[80] P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, pp. 36–37.

[81] This was how W.B. Yeats expressed the Irish mood following the martyrdom of rebels in April 1916, in his poem *The Easter Rising*.

[82] D.V. Rao, 'Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution', *Proletarian Path*, p. 13.

[83] P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, p. 39.

[84] In the wake of the 'Quit India' movement a rebellious parallel government to the British Raj was established in Satara, Maharashtra, under the leadership of Nana Sahib Patil.

[85] Note on Nalgonda District, Hyderabad State CID, Proceedings of the Ministry of States, Government of India, File No. 15 P(S), 1947, NAI.

[86] The police member of the Nizam's government had to accept later that the local police always acted in Telengana in a *zabardast* manner and regarded themselves 'too big for their boots'. Report by W.V. Griegson, 5 December 1946, ibid.

[87] Fortnightly Reports of Hyderabad Residency (from the Resident to the Secretary, the Crown Representative) for the months of September, October, November and December 1946, ibid.

[88] This meant lands occupied by the landlords through the manipulation of 'legal' procedures.

[89] D.V. Rao, 'Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution,' *Proletarian Path*, p. 13.

[90] Note on Nalgonda District, Hyderabad State CID, Proceedings of the Ministry of States, Government of India, File No. 15 P(S), 1947, NAI.

[91] P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, pp. 41–52.

[92] Note on Nalgonda District, Hyderabad State CID, Proceedings of the Ministry of States, Government of India, File No. P(S), 1957, NAI.

[93] From the draft statement on the proposed adjournment motion by Shri Vijayanand, Indian Legislative Assembly, February 1947, Proceedings of the Ministry of States, Government of India, File No. 15 P(S), 1947, NAI.

[94] D.V. Rao, 'Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution', *Proletarian Path*, p. 13.

[95] A host of leftist ideologues and scholars, including Barry Pavier, have taken this position.

[96] The communist-dominated All India Kisan Sabha sometimes fought cases of large-scale ejectments (notably from the *bakasht* lands in Bihar in the late 1930s and from the *sir* lands in eastern UP in the mid-1940s), fortunately without the discomfiture of being overwhelmed by the peasants' demands for land seizures.

[97] The communists restrained volunteers from using firearms for fear of transforming 'the struggle into an entirely new stage'. Towards the end of 1946, however, the volunteers used muzzle-loaders. P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, p. 40.

[98] Ibid., p. 54.

Forest-fire in the Sundarbans

The Communists and the Kakdwip Rising, 1946–50

Amit Kumar Gupta

Ahalya Ma, tomar santan janmo nilo na . . .
(Mother Ahalya, your child is left unborn . . .)[1]

The Indian left attained considerable success in organizing the peasant masses and stirring their aspirations, but they also encountered great difficulties in guiding them towards achievements and in coping with the rise and ebb of their militancy. Periodical shifts in the left ideologies, and the consequent programmatic adjustments, added to the magnitude of the problem. The radical political activists' interactions with the suffering rural classes were, therefore, often simultaneously expansive and circumscribed, orchestrated and discordant, ultra-revolutionary and extra-reformist. Yet, despite the twists and turns, the leftist-led agitations in the countryside revealed, on occasion, the peasantry's eagerness to take some initiative and the activists' determination to hold on to those they had aroused. Most of these traits of the leftist-*kisan* syndrome in a certain way were epitomized in the peasant rising of Kakdwip (1945–50) in the Sundarbans—a significant local outbreak that has not yet been adequately discussed.

Prologue

Covering an area of 249 square miles, with a population of nearly one lakh spread over approximately 70 villages,[2] Kakdwip is situated in the southernmost part of 24 Parganas district and forms an integral part of the Sundarbans[3]—the vast tract of forest and swamp along the Bay of Bengal, from the estuary of the Hooghly to that of the Meghna. This deltaic stretch, roughly extending over 170 miles, made up the southern parts of several districts of undivided Bengal[4] and about 4000 square miles of it (including the reserved forest area) fell within 24 Parganas. Between the Hooghly and the Meghna flowed a number of rivers (such as the Matla, the Raimangal, the Saptamukhi, the Bidyadhari and the Muriganga or Baratala in 24 Parganas), which were connected to each other by an intricate series of branches and channels. The whole tract was, in effect, a tangled network of rivers, streams and water-courses, dotted with islets of various shapes. Its flat and marshy land was covered with dense forests and inhabited by tigers and crocodiles, among other wild animals, along with a large variety of poisonous snakes. The entire region was also exposed to recurring cyclones and floods, which inundated and devastated large areas.

To begin with, only a few predatory Mags from Arakan (who gradually settled down in Bakerganj), and some people belonging to low castes, tribes and the Faraizi sect of Muslims (who depended mostly on forest produce) lived in the Sundarbans. Woodcutters, fishermen and people in search of honey, wax, thatching material (*gol pata*) and shell (used for making lime), also frequented the region between autumn and spring. New settlers, however, trickled in later and a sparse population grew when the British government began to encourage the clearing of forests and reclamation of land. Apart from a faint paternalistic desire to make use of the cultivable waste, the British interest in the Sundarbans was largely evoked, in the early 1850s, by strategic considerations. It was through the Hooghly (flowing on the western edge of Kakdwip and Sagar) that British trade and men-of-war moved between Calcutta and the Bay of Bengal. The safety of the route, as well as the security of Calcutta and Fort William, would have been more effectively ensured if the delta jungles—likely places for the enemy to take cover—were cleared to some extent. The British also unsuccessfully attempted, directly (in order to lighten the pressure on Calcutta) and indirectly (to close the hinterland and preserve, as far as possible, the metropolis as the seat of imperial authority), to develop a new port in the Sundarbans. Canning—at the junction of the Matla and the Bidyadhari—was chosen as the site for the new port.[5] British enthusiasm for clearing certain areas of the Sundarbans coincided with their experimentation at Canning, and it was in 1853—the year Port Canning was planned—that the government initiated a lease-holding system of temporary settlement in the cleared land.

Since the Sundarbans were excluded from the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the government decided to lease out blocks of forestland, described as 'lots', or *lats* in Bengali, to private individuals for a reasonable period of time. Although the original Lease Grant Rules of 1853 fixed the period of lease at 99 years, it was reduced to forty years at the time of revision in 1879. Under the revised rules of 1879, *lats* up to 200 acres or more were given to lease-holders on the condition that one-fourth of the plot would be exempted from taxation forever and the rest would be held free of assessment for ten years. On expiry of the ten-year period, it was decided that nominal rates would be imposed on the land.[6] Further, the lease-holder, known as the *lotdar* or *latdar*, was required under threat of lease forfeiture to make one-eighth of the entire *lat* fit for cultivation within the first five years, and thereafter in similar stages.

However, the task of reclaiming the *lats* for cultivation was both difficult and time-consuming. Usually, after clearing a piece of forestland, a *bandh* or dike was erected to keep out the salt water. Then, the plot was left fallow for about two years.[7] Only after drying and salt-cleaning was the plot rendered fit for the cultivation of good rice. Faced with this arduous process of reclamation which involved considerable investment in terms of men and money, the *latdars* started renting out portions of their *lats* as rightful tenancies (called *chaks* or *jotes*) to interested investors (known as *chakdars* or *jotedars*). The landlord and rentier classes soon brought into the Sundarbans coolies or labourers from inland 24 Parganas and other neighbouring districts, as well as from the tribal belts of Orissa, Hazaribagh, Manbhum, Birbhum and Bankura, for jungle-clearing and earthwork. Following the initial phase of reclamation (that is, deforestation and the construction of *bandhs*), expert hands were required to start agricultural operations. Landless cultivators and tribals were, therefore, hired on the promise that they would be given tenancy rights over the land they made cultivable. This lure of land attracted the landless and the dispossessed to work on the difficult terrain and bear with the harsh conditions of life in the Sundarbans. Shanties and shacks slowly grew into hamlets, and marshy patches developed into high-yielding paddy fields. Barns (*golas*) sprouted, markets (*hats*) sprang up, and waterfronts (*ganjs*) came into existence. Years passed, but the toiling settlers were not given assured tenancy rights over the land they had developed and cultivated. The mirage did not disappear and, like the *kafila* camels, they continued to bear the burden of others' riches.

Scenario

In keeping with the conditions of the Sundarbans, the *latdars, chakdars* and *jotedars* from the beginning resorted to the arrangement of sharecropping (*bhag chas*) as the main method of agricultural production. A survey conducted as recently as 1979 in Budhakhali and Haripur in Kakdwip, showed that 89 per cent and 65 per cent of the families, respectively, were sharecroppers in these two villages.[8] The fact that sharecropping was popular in most parts of Bengal also made its extension appear natural as well as in order.

The sharecropping contracts, under which the cultivators apparently divided the produce equally were, in fact, inequitably divided in favour of the lease-holders and rentiers. Being outside the purview of tenancy legislation, these contracts, renewed orally every year, represented the rentiers' growing earnings without labour and also almost without investment. As per the custom in sharecropping in Bengal, the landlords did not supply seeds, agricultural implements and cattle; the sharecroppers had to arrange for these and then labour to earn their one-half share.

In the Sundarbans, the *latdars, chakdars* and *jotedars* initially provided all the requisite inputs (seeds, implements and field animals) to attract cultivators to break in the land. Thereafter, those cultivators who were able to develop their investment (or had managed to buy implements and animals) were allowed one-half share of the produce. Others, who could not invest anything more than their labour, had to share the crop under the *krishani* method, that is, they had to give the rentiers and lease-holders a two-thirds share for supplying all the inputs—including seeds—as well as the land. Besides *krishani*, whenever the rentiers supplied seeds to the cultivators, these were deducted at the time of sharing, with 50 to 100 per cent interest. The rentiers' share of the crop or the produce rent was also invariably higher than the prevailing cash rent. Even during the Depression years, when prices were falling, the sharecroppers in Bengal paid, on average, twice as much as the lowest category of *rayats* paying cash rent. Later, in the war years, the produce rent became six or seven times higher than the cash rent, as prices rose.[9] It has been shown on the basis of the prices existing in 1934–38 (the years of agricultural recovery after the Depression) that if the value of the seeds and straw (Rs 3–14), one-half share to the landlord (Rs 13–6) and the wages at the current rate for agricultural labour (of the sharecropper himself and his family members for such field operations as ploughing, sowing, harvesting and threshing, totalling Rs 13–8) were deducted from the value of the produce per acre (17 mounds of rice and straw worth Rs 30–10), the sharecropper would be left with a small loss (2 annas).[10] This small loss, or his constant struggle to live at the subsistence level in an 'ideal' situation (a purely theoretical one minus all fraudulent practices, forcible exactions and marketing hazards), grew alarmingly when he was seen in his 'real' situation of dependence and difficulty vis-à-vis the landlord.

The sharecropper's dependence stemmed primarily from the absence of any kind of right over the land he cultivated after improving it. Every year he had to renew his contract with the same landlord, if not with a new one, and often he was shifted from the piece of land he had made arable to a new plot—which he had also to improve till he was evicted again. The sharecropper's insecurity and instability resulted in his being exploited by the landlords—the lease-holders and rentiers. He had to submit to their unlawful demands of *nazrana* (presentation) and *salami* (charges for the contract) at the time of renewing the settlement every year. In course of time, the number of illegal levies the landlords imposed on him increased rapidly. These included *naibana* or *hisabana* (charge for account-keeping by the landlord's agent), *kayali* (wage for those weighing crops), *khamar chilwani* (charge for preparing the landlord's yard), *prachirghera* (charge for making walls around the yard), *parbani* (charge for village festivals), *golakamti* (charge for the loss of paddy-weight due to drying in the landlord's barn), and *darwani* (charge for guarding the crops). There were even levies such as *kaktadani* (charge for scaring crows away) and *biyashradh* (charge for marriages and deaths in the landlord's family).[11]

Another remarkable practice prevalent in the Sundarbans was *derabari* (enforced borrowing originally devised to encourage tillers without implements and animals), under which the sharecropper had to take a grain loan advance on heavy interest. Refusal to take this loan usually led to eviction by the landlord. At the time of dividing the crop (which was strictly kept in the landlord's yard), all these illegal levies were deducted, reducing the sharecropper's share considerably. To these should also be added the difficulties that the sharecropper faced in repaying some of his debts (mostly in kind) from his heavily reduced share and in marketing what eventually remained with him after partially meeting his family's consumption needs.

Sharecropping and indebtedness were almost synonymous in the Sundarbans. After giving the landlord his share and meeting all his unlawful demands, the sharecropper usually turned to the grain market. Lacking holding power, he had no alternative but to sell his small surplus to the *aratdar* (the grain dealer) soon after harvest, when the prices were low. (The *jotedar* usually waited for several months to take full advantage of the price fluctuation.) Often, he was given *dadan* (an advance) by the grain dealer to reserve the sale of his part of the crops at the lowest possible price. The little cash that he derived from the sale of crops was soon spent in obtaining certain basic necessities (oil, salt, cloth and kerosene) and in dealing with crisis expenditure (marriage, death and illness) or in attempting to repay previously incurred cash debts. The stock of grain for family consumption was so inadequate (especially if it was necessary after harvesting to return with interest the grain borrowed the year before) that it barely lasted a few months. So, the sharecropper had to go to the landlord again for grain loans—and to the *mahajan* for cash loans—within about three or four months of harvesting.

The interest for loans, both in cash and in kind, was invariably exorbitant. It was the grain loan (the most common) that hit the sharecropper the hardest. The creditor charged him a 50 per cent rate of interest on the cash value of the current rate of higher price. He had to return the cash equivalent of this loan (and not the quantity of the loan) soon after harvest—at the time of division. Thus, he was compelled to return almost three times the grain he actually borrowed,[12] by paying in four to five months the interest for twelve months. Understandably, the loans were hardly ever paid back in full, and they continued to accumulate. This condition of perpetually remaining in debt reinforced the sharecropper's state of dependence, and the landlord took full advantage by forcing higher terms of settlement, extracting *begar* (or unpaid labour)[13] at all times from all members of the sharecropper's family, and even assaulting the women members sexually.[14] The situation deteriorated to such an extent that the fortunate few who did not require any loan in a particular year had to pay *machatut*, or a sort of compensation to the landlord.[15] Even if many of them had not formally become *maldars* or bonded labourers for life because of their failure to repay debts, the majority of the sharecroppers in the Sundarbans were semi-serfs for all practical purposes.

Apart from the landlords themselves, their managers, agents and 'courtiers'—the *naibs, gomastas* and *bakshis*—especially in the case of absentee landlords,[16] were also direct oppressors of the peasants. They often took the initiative in evicting the *kisans* annually and overnight turning *bhag* (sharecropping) land into *khas* (landlord's own) land. Sometimes they caused breaches in the *bandhs* (to let saline water inundate the plot and destroy the crops) in order to enforce the *kisan's* ejection. They commissioned the services of *lathials* (*lathi*-wielding retenues) frequently to break a defiant cultivator, burn his hut and even murder him, if necessary. Since the landlords and their *naibs* had close contacts with the local police and government officials, there was generally no retribution for murdering *kisans*. The landlords' *cutcherries* (offices) were symbols of oppression—places for harassing, humiliating, abusing and punishing peasants. Predators in the Sundarbans included not only tigers, crocodiles and snakes, but also landlords, *naibs* and *lathials*.

Dramatis Personae

The exploitative system under which cultivators suffered in the Sundarbans was feudal in the main. The *latdar* or the primary lease-holder, like the absentee *zamindar*, lived almost entirely on rent. The *lats* varied from 10,000 acres to several lakh acres of land. In some areas of the Sundarbans, the Port Canning (*Zamindari*) Company held major portions of land. Another British *latdar*, Sir Daniel Hamilton, occupied two lakh acres—which the amount held by a number of Indian *latdars* as well. The *latdar* recovered rent in cash from the part of the *lat* rented out to *chạkdars* and *jotedars*. The rest—which he kept as his own or *khas*—he got cultivated, both by sharecropping for rent in kind and by field labourers for family consumption and profit. Practically the whole of his income came from rent—mostly in cash but also in kind. Similarly, the *chakdars* and *jotedars* were feudal exploiters who gave their land (from several hundred *bighas* to several thousand *bighas* per holding) to sharecroppers and extracted rent only in kind. They also kept some as their *khas* land to be cultivated by agricultural labourers. The only factor not in their favour was that they also had to pay rent to the *latdars*. But their payment was in cash or a fixed small amount, unlike their income from sharecroppers in crops —the price of which was ever increasing. Being inhabitants of the village and closely linked to the local grain market, they were more efficient in expropriation and more commercial in their attitude. In a way, in the Sundarbans, as well as in many other parts of Bengal, it was more profitable and less onerous to be a *jotedar* than a *zamindar*. The *jotedars* were also the *mahajans* of the rural people, lending money and grain to cultivators at very high rates of interest. Simultaneously, they were procurers of grain for the market and, invariably, hoarders of rice at times of scarcity. Both the *latdars* and the *jotedars* controlled the local markets (*hats*), usually held on to their land, and vigorously collected tolls (*tola*) from the cultivators for the sale of their produce. As landed magnates, they enjoyed the support of the local administration and the police, and the favours of lawyers and court officials.

However, all the *jotedars* were not landed magnates. There were some who had rented small *jotes* (blocks of land of about 30 to 60 *bighas*) with *jotedari* tenurial rights, and who tilled the land themselves with the help of agricultural labourers, or gave a part to sharecroppers. The small *jotedars* (or rich peasants) also acted as usurers of money and paddy, and tried to make some profit out of cultivation as independent family producers. Numerically small, they were socially and economically overawed by the *latdars* and other *jotedars*. The rich peasants had contradictions with the *latdars* (to whom they had to pay rent) and with the *jotedars* and *chakdars* (whose domination they feared). They also had contradictions with the agricultural labourers (whom they exploited) and with the poor peasants (to whom they lent). But neither of these two sets of contradictions was sharp enough, nor were the rich peasants, as a class, ambitious enough, to cause social revolt.

Like the rich peasant who existed among the *jotedars*, there were some middle or relatively better-off peasants even among the sharecroppers. They managed to make two ends meet somehow and were left with either a small surplus or a small deficit. Such sharecroppers of bigger plots also came to own some *bighas* of land from the *latdars*. But their degree of solvency—in comparison with the majority of the landless sharecroppers—was so thin, and their ability to withstand the effect of bad years so fragile, that they hardly constituted a clearly distinguishable category. Barring a feeble interest in land that rendered them cautious, they shared, on the whole, the average sharecropper's deprivations, sufferings and aspirations, and lived under the same contradictions as did the poor peasants vis-à-vis the landlords. There was practically no difference between the conditions of the ordinary landless sharecropper and that of the landless agricultural labourer. Both had the same desire for land, both earned comparable amounts for their labour, both failed to support themselves for several months of the year and, in their situation of indebtedness, both received similar treatment at the hands of their exploiters. What is more, both transgressed upon each other's occupational domains for supplementary income—the sharecropper working as an agricultural labourer and the *khet majoor* (field-hand) taking a piece of land on *bhag* (share). There was one significant difference between the two: the sharecropper generally possessed agricultural implements and animals which the agricultural labourer did not. Besides, the sharecropper's interest in an increase in the share, and that of the agricultural labourer in wage, were not directly connected—one would not automatically lead to the other. Again, rural society in the Sundarbans had its own socio-cultural complications. Among the peasants there were marked disparities between the Hindus and the Muslims, between the marginally Hindu tribals (such as the Pods, who demanded to be known as Poundrya Kshatriyas) and the animist tribals (such as the Santhals), as well as between the scheduled castes (such as the Mahisyas) and the untouchables (such as the *muchis* or *chamars*). All of them were loyal to the disciplines of their respective communities, and each community suspected the other of jeopardizing or hampering its own legitimate position.

In spite of all the contradictions and differences, however, the sharecroppers as a whole (including the slightly better-off peasants) and the agricultural labourers had broadly similar grievances against the landlords, and a uniform pattern of motivation against evictions and in favour of some kind of tenurial rights. Even the rich peasants were jealous of the dominant position of the landlords, which they felt was stifling their growth. The major contradiction that afflicted agrarian society in the Sundarbans was, therefore, between the poor peasants and their feudal oppressors, between the sharecropping and the field-labouring masses, on the one hand, and the *latdars* and the *jotedars*, on the other. Although the poor peasants seemed to be reconciled for decades to their helpless position and avoided acts which would intensify the contradiction, they had, on occasion, been involved in desperate individual acts of resistance and killing. The sizeable number of criminal cases of murder and clashes throughout the 1920s and 1930s in the Diamond Harbour sub-division (24 Parganas district) is indicative of this trend.[17]

A change was noticeable in the mid-1930s when political parties started taking an interest in the condition of the Sundarbans peasants. The Congress tradition in Bengal being pro-landlord in general, and its local organization being dependent on *latdar–jotedar* support in particular, it was left to the leftists—mainly the Communists—to take up the cause of the poor peasants of this region. The Communist Party of India and all its provincial committees began functioning from 1936 within the framework of the *Fronte Populaire* dictates of the Comintern (1934) and in pursuance of the 'United Front' policy of the Dutt–Bradley variety (1936). They followed a two-fold objective: one, that of prosecuting the struggle against imperialism (British rule) by uniting all the anti-imperialist forces under the banner of the Indian National Congress (and by guarding against its vacillations); and two, that of vigorously undertaking the toiling people's battles against their exploiters (the big bourgeoisie, the princes, the landlords and the moneylenders) by forming a broad unity of leftists.[18] The imperialists and the oppressors of the toiling masses were so interdependent and mixed up that popular struggles against them, in the eyes of the Communists, were, in fact, two aspects of the same struggle. It was to realize the latter, that is, to organize the toiling masses in so far as the agricultural sector was concerned, that members of the CPI joined the other left groups and individuals to form the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) in April 1936, and set up the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) in March 1937.[19]

True to their 'United Front' approach, the Communists initially functioned in the BPKS in collaboration with the members of the provincial Congress Socialist Party; it was even decided originally that the BPKS secretariat would be formed on the basis of a 50:50 representation of Communists and Congress Socialists.[20] In course of time, however, the organization was dominated overwhelmingly by the Communists, and the Congress Socialists were reduced to a small minority. Being in the thick of agrarian agitation from the start, the Communist-led BPKS became active in the Sundarbans from September 1937 by taking up cases of cultivators evicted by the Port Canning (*Zamindari*) Company. At this point, the Company was resuming *bhag* land on the ground of alleged non-payment of rent by cultivators, and turning these into *khas* land. Many *bargadars* (sharecroppers) in the Sandeshkhali, Canning and Haroa *thanas* were driven away not only from the land they tilled, but also from the homes in which they lived. On 27 October 1937, the BPKS brought 1000 victimized peasants from the affected areas to Calcutta, to present their grievances to the government. A meeting was also held on the same day at Shraddhananda Park, where Swami Sahajanand Saraswati and Subhas Chandra Bose addressed the peasants.[21]

In November 1937, the BPKS planned a *satyagraha* against the evictions in some of the villages of Sandeshkhali[22] and in Kalikatala in Canning. However, two BPKS volunteers sent from Calcutta[23] were arrested for inciting the peasants against their landlords. They were later tried by the sub-divisional officer, Alipore, and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. In the face of stiff official opposition, the peasant agitation in Sandeshkhali and Canning could not make much headway. But this was not the case in Haroa, where the evicted peasants of Uchildah and Minakhan rallied against the landlords when some of their resumed lands were auctioned. In April 1938, the BPKS again brought the hapless peasants from the Sundarbans to Calcutta, to brief members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly on their problems and miseries.[24]

However intense in feeling, the BPKS-led agitation in the Sundarbans was generally restrained till the beginning of the Second World War. It also did not involve any direct confrontation either with the landlords and their men or with the government officials and the police. But a splinter group of leftists under Soumyendranath Tagore, which broke away from the BPKS in March 1938, advocated a more militant and violent form of peasant agitation in the Hasnabad, Bijpur and Sagar *thanas*, and became active in the Sandeshkhali, Canning and Haroa *thanas* as well. The activities of this group,[25] between September 1938 and May 1939, often resulted in cases of peasants refusing to pay rent, forcibly removing paddy from the landlords' *khas* land and assaulting their agents. The most serious of these occurred in February 1939, when the *naib* of Sir Daniel Hamilton's estate was severely beaten up by Soumyendranath's followers, and two guns were snatched from the *cutcherry*.[26] Disdainful of the 'compromising' approach of the Congress Socialists and critical of the pseudo-revolutionism of the 'Congress Communists',[27] Tagore and his adherents challenged, in a certain way, the position of the BPKS in the Sundarbans. The BPKS was, in fact, forced to assume a posture of militancy in the region, revitalize its propaganda machinery and concentrate on the battles already waged. Coincidentally, all this happened at a time when the Communist Party of India (CPI) itself was beginning to think in more aggressive terms.

The outbreak of the Second World War, according to the CPI, offered India an opportunity 'to make revolutionary use' of the war for achieving her own freedom and for completing 'the national democratic revolution'.[28] Even within the limits of the *Fronte Populaire* and the 'United Front', the Communists suddenly had visions of overthrowing British imperialism by harnessing 'the forces of national revolution' under proletarian (or Communist) leadership, and through a phase of 'armed insurrection'.[29] This new CPI line was reflected in its foreseeing on the agrarian front, a severe war-time crisis —'more devastating than of the time of 1932–34'—anticipating British reverses in the war which would embolden the peasantry to take 'revolutionary actions', and warning its own followers to be ready for 'the storm brewing up' in the agricultural sector.[30] Party members were asked to make extensive use of *kisan* marches, plan no-tax and no-rent campaigns wherever possible, and take 'militant actions' against landlords and the police for 'sweeping away British imperialism, landlordism, rack-renting, etc.'.[31]

In the Sundarbans, this shift in Communist policy found its clearest expression in the agitation of the evicted peasants in Uchildah. The rapid growth in the political consciousness of the *bargadars* and the extent of success of the upper-caste, middle-class Communist agitators from 'outside' surprised the local government officials. So far, they were under the impression that the *bargadars* had 'few champions, as even agitators [the Communist 'outsiders'] probably got their own land cultivated elsewhere on this *barga* or sharecropping system'.[32] To meet the challenge, the district authorities imposed Section 144, Criminal Procedure Code, banning meetings of the Communist Kisan Sabha activists in Uchildah and neighbouring villages. Despite this, resistance in Uchildah grew to 'riotous' proportions in August 1939, resulting in the death of a *darwan* of the Port Canning (*Zamindari*) Company.[33] In course of time, the clashes with landlords' men turned into conflicts with the police. The most serious one occurred in October 1940 when an armed police party, which went to arrest an 'outsider' Communist *kisan* leader,[34] was surrounded by an agitated peasant mob of three hundred. In the violent clashes and police firing that followed, several persons on both sides were seriously injured, and the peasants succeeded in freeing their leader as well as in capturing police guns and revolvers.[35]

The struggle of the Uchildah peasants, however, was hurriedly abandoned before it could attain some stature. The abandonment was caused as much by a drastic change in the Communist policy as by the mounting pressure of police repression. The arrest of the agitators on various counts and the hounding out of Communist 'outsiders' from Uchildah in November–December 1941 synchronized—following Hitlerite aggression on the Soviet Union from June 1941—with the enunciation, on 13 December 1941, of the Communist policy of a 'People's War'. It replaced the opposition to the 'imperialist' and 'unjust' war with 'all support to an anti-Fascist' and 'just' war, and the slogan of 'immediate overthrow of the British government' with an attitude of 'cooperation with the anti-Fascist and, therefore, pro-Soviet Union British war efforts'. In the agrarian sector, in particular, the 'People's War' policy suspended the Communist enthusiasm for organizing peasants' revolutionary struggles in favour of a campaign to explain to the peasants the significance of the war, to create sympathy for the Soviet Union among them, and 'to rally the people to support the war'.[36] The propaganda in aid of the British war effort, the slogans of 'grow more food' and 'cultivate the fallow land' for 'augmenting the country's resources',[37] and the British response of lifting the government ban on the CPI, helped the Communists to return by the second half of 1942 to their rural fields of activity. Cooperation in the war effort, however, was at times combined with the articulation of pressing issues like scarcity of food and essential commodities, the problem of grain hoarding, the urgency for price control and the necessity for remission of revenue. In the Sundarbans, the reappearance of the Communist 'outsiders' was further facilitated at this point by the occurrence of a devastating flood, followed by the Bengal famine.

The 'Midnapore cyclone' took place in the middle of October 1942, devastating the coastal areas of Medinipur district and parts of the Sundarbans. Kakdwip and surrounding areas were flooded on 17 October 1942. The cyclone took 1390 lives, killed 23,743 animals and swept away 25,201 houses.[38] The flood also destroyed the entire standing *aman* (autumn) crop of 1942–43 in the region, leaving its local population starving. Even before the affected could cope with this havoc over the following months, the Bengal famine struck in June 1943. The famine brought, as it did throughout Bengal, mortality and destitution among the peasants in the Sundarbans, and many of those who managed to survive had to sell their land, domestic animals and agricultural implements. At the very outset of these calamities, in

October 1942, came fresh batches of Communist 'outsiders', mainly as members of the People's Relief Committee (PRC)—a CPI-sponsored voluntary organization. The Communist relief workers continued to function in the Sundarbans right up to 1944 and succeeded in gaining the confidence of the suffering people. The political outcome of their relief work was an extension of activity in new localities, conspicuously in the villages of Kakdwip. Towards the end of 1943, the PRC members started mobilizing the peasants in Kakdwip, inspired the local recruits to hold a *kisan* conference in Budhakhali in 1944, and succeeded in forming local *sabhas* (branches of the BPKS) soon after.[39] By 1946 the Kisan Sabha organization under the Communist leadership appeared to have taken root in a number of villages in Kakdwip.

Another factor—namely, an exodus at this juncture of the landless peasants from parts of Medinipur district to Kakdwip—also helped the cause of the Communists and the growth of *sabhas* there. After being battered continuously in the struggle for existence, the evicted Medinipur peasants (mostly from Ghatal, Contai and Tamluk), generally of Mahisya origin, came to the Sundarbans in search of a new lease of life. The places they came from had already been scenes of *kisan* and nationalist political agitation for some time. They were, therefore, reasonably politically conscious, and they had also the experience of passing through the tumultuous 'Quit India' movement of 1942. The exodus, in fact, began when government repression in 1942 forced the peasants to flee from their agitation-affected villages. This was accelerated by the cyclone of October 1942, and reached its peak during the famine of 1943. Instead of going to the urban centres to beg for food, a large number of famine-affected peasants considered it more honourable to come to the Sundarbans to eke out a living. The migrant peasants from Medinipur were so numerous that in certain villages of Kakdwip they actually formed 60 to 70 per cent of the population.[40] In the post-war years, these articulate, expectant and toughened Medinipur peasants introduced to rural society in Kakdwip a spirit of adventure—a foretaste of resistance.

The Acts of the Drama

The sharing of crops by half was common to all the sharecropping areas in India, and sharecroppers everywhere felt deprived at parting with 50 per cent of the crops that they had raised. In their opinion, and quite justifiably so, they deserved more than 50 per cent of the produce of their labour. Interestingly, though a sizeable part (24.9 per cent, according to the Ishaque Commission of 1944–45[41]) of the total cultivated land in Bengal was under sharecropping, and the left movement there was relatively more advanced, the first sharecroppers' agitation over the sharing of crops was organized by the leftists in Gujarat and not in Bengal. As early as 1939, the sharecroppers of the rice-producing areas of Surat district (around Mandavi *taluk*) refused to give a one-half share to the landlords. The agitation, organized by the Gujarat Kisan Sabha (and led by Indulal Yajnik, D.M. Pangarkar and Thakorebhai K. Patel), continued for about three years with varying degrees of success.[42] Nothing on these lines was attempted by the BPKS, despite its knowledge that the sharecroppers in Bengal were unhappy with their share, as well as with the storing of all grains in the landlords' stacks.

During the *adhiar* (sharecropper) movement (1939–40) in Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri, the BPKS did project the sharecroppers' desire, among other issues, to store paddy in their *khamars* (threshing floors) instead of at the *jotedars*'. In its historic memorandum to the Land Revenue Commission (Floud Commission) of 1938, the BPKS also attacked the system of landlordism and demanded the abolition of rent in all forms. But it failed to formulate any specific demand for the sharecroppers and said nothing about the mode of sharing crops. In fact, it was the Commission which, on its own during the course of enquiry, took pity on the sharecroppers and recommended a two-thirds share in their favour. Encouraged by the Commission's recommendation, the BPKS also recognized in the same year, in its conference at Panija (Jessore), that the sharecroppers should get a two-thirds (*tebhaga*) share.[43]

During the following five years, however, the subject was hardly discussed in Communist circles. Even in the summer of 1946 the BPKS, in its conference at Maubhog (Khulna), merely demanded a two-thirds share for the sharecroppers, but took no steps to back it up by contemplating an agitation.[44] Nevertheless, barely four months later, in September 1946, the Council of the BPKS decided—with scant preparation, and in an atmosphere riddled with communal frenzy[45]—to launch a struggle for *tebhaga* in the approaching harvesting season. The suddenness with which the BPKS discovered the prospect of an impending agitation and the abrupt manner in which it sprang into immediate action are indeed baffling, to say the least.

It would hardly be adequate to believe that the Communists in Bengal jumped all of a sudden into action over *tebhaga* just to extricate themselves from an uncomfortable and inconvenient situation, and to prove their strength to the Communist Party in the Soviet Union as well as to the Congress and the Indian public.[46] The CPI, no doubt, had been passing through a difficult time at this point, mainly on account of its unpopularity over the anti-'Quit India' movement and pro-British stand during the war. Also, the fundamental premise of its 'United Front' policy—namely, carrying on the struggle against imperialism under the aegis of the Congress—was in jeopardy because of the nationalist suspicion of the party's patriotic credentials. The Congress–Communist rupture was, in fact, complete in December 1945 when the Communist members were forced to leave the Congress organization. Even the attitude of the CPSU in 1945–46 was, by implication, one of 'almost total disregard of the CPI'.[47] Therefore, in 1946 the CPI needed to perform in a manner that would gain the confidence of the people, the Congress and the CPSU. This extraneous consideration might have also helped in creating in the party a militant mentality, but could not intrinsically be responsible for the BPKS's decision to begin an agitation for *tebhaga*. Rather, the decision was reached under compulsions of internal and local circumstances. Internally, the CPI was struggling to adopt a new post-war policy to suit the immediate aspirations of the Indian people. The militants among the Communists apparently pressed for the dropping of the 'People's War' line and the resumption of anti-imperialist popular struggles. Against a backdrop of agitation at industrial centres, unrest in the agricultural sector and urban demonstrations over the release of Indian National Army prisoners, they were in favour of wresting the political initiative.

In December 1945, the militants succeeded in impressing upon the party the need for a programme of 'rousing the people directly for asserting independence' and to make a 'final bid for power'.[48] The moderate party leadership, however, managed in August 1946 to twist the militant slogan of 'final bid or assault for power' to mean the formation of a fresh 'joint front' of the Congress, the Muslim League and the CPI, vis-à-vis the British authorities.[49] But this August resolution of 1946 was not wholly a moderate document, and the militants had not altogether failed to secure in it some of their basic points. They persuaded the party, for instance, to acknowledge 'the unprecedented features of mass revolutionary upsurge' (following the agitation on the INA issue, the struggle of ratings of the Royal Indian Navy, the mutiny of Indians in the Royal Air Force, and the strike among the police ranks), and to take militant measures so that it 'boldly leads all popular struggles, develops the initiative and the fighting capacity of the masses'. They also managed to commit the party to support and organize the mass actions of the peasants who, in a situation of food shortage, high prices of daily necessities and landlord oppression, were being forced to take 'more and more militant actions'.[50] This militant–moderate contest over policy-making at the leadership level, between September 1945 (the end of the Second World War) and August 1946 (the passing of the party's August resolution), was clearly echoed and re-echoed in party quarters in Bengal—one of the most organized centres of the Communist movement in India. Therefore, after the adoption of the CPI resolution of August 1946, the BPKS, on its part, could not avoid assuming a militant posture, if confronted with a local situation of militancy.

Locally, a situation of militancy had already developed by the beginning of 1946 in the famine-ravaged countryside of Bengal. Apart from killing 3.5 million people, the famine shattered many more physically and economically. About 2,59,300 families (mostly in the marginal peasant category) were forced to sell all their land. While another 5,71,500 families partially sold their land, 5,10,600 families were compelled to mortgage their land to moneylenders and rich peasants. Besides, 3,06,000 families lost 11,47,000 plough-cattle as a result of the famine.[51] Obviously the most affected were the poor peasants and the sharecroppers, many of whom had to join the ranks of the rural proletariat after losing their domestic animals and agricultural implements. Although the famine was over, the food crisis continued in varying degrees, and the foodgrain production of 1944–45 was far from satisfactory. So the food committees in the villages, which the government had set up during the famine for helping the distribution process, had to be continued. The *jotedars* generally dominated these committees, but many were taken over by the Kisan Sabha activists, and turned into instruments of their campaigns against grain hoarders and blackmarketeers. There were also skirmishes between the cultivators and the *jotedars* over foodgrains and, often, the *jotedars' golas* (barns) and the traders' godowns were surrounded, with the demand for distribution of hoarded grain on a loan basis or at the control rate.

Many of these 'raids' were supervised by the BPKS members themselves. They even participated in the seizure and distribution of the *jotedars*' grains in the face of a police offensive.[52]

All this naturally posed a serious challenge to the *jotedars*' authority and undermined their social position. Thus, a movement had actually begun in the countryside in the name of anti-hoarding and the people's relief operations of the CPI.[53] Only, it was not recognized as an agrarian movement by the party's provincial or central leadership. In 1945–46 the crop situation was again bad, and sharecroppers, in particular, voiced their unease and their desire for a higher share in the produce. Some of the Communist peasant leaders were aware of the mood of the peasantry but 'could not correctly assess the situation'.[54] Some even thought in retrospect that the call for *tebhaga* should have been given a year earlier—during the harvesting season of 1945–46.[55] It seemed that the sharecroppers were almost certain in 1946–47 to demand *tebhaga* on their own, irrespective of the responses of the leadership in the BPKS or in the party. In September 1946, when the harvesting season was approaching, the BPKS and the Bengal party had no choice but to formalize the steps the peasants were going to take, and declare the commencement of the movement. They could not have wavered any further in view of the CPI Central Committee's directive to utilize any agrarian circumstance 'which may develop into big local battle'.[56] The launching of the Tebhaga movement was thus neither sudden nor adventurist; it was simply delayed through procrastination and, therefore, unprepared to an extent.

The situation in the Sundarbans and Kakdwip being more or less similar to the one prevailing in the rest of the province, the Tebhaga movement began there almost simultaneously with the other areas, that is, in November 1946.[57] The movement thereafter spread rapidly to Munsiff's Lat, Fatikpur, Bamanagar, Bisalakshmipur, Dwariknagar, Sibarampore, Radhanagar, Budhakhali, Durganagar, Chandanpiri, Layalganj, Haripur, Rajnagar, Debinibas and Lakshmipur. The peasants of Frazerganj, Mathuranagar and Sagar soon joined the fray. In all these places Kisan Sabhas (*samitis*) were set up, *tebhaga* committees formed and public meetings and processions (preceded by songs on *tebhaga* and *kisans'* sufferings) organized. The slogans were also typical of the movement everywhere: '*zamindari khatam karo*' (abolish *zamindari*), '*tebhaga chai*' (we want a two-thirds share) and '*nija khamare dhan tolo*' (stack paddy in our own yards). Two other slogans also dominated the proceedings in Kakdwip, namely, '*bhag jamir rashid chai*' (we want receipts for the sharecropping land) and '*samasto zulum bandho karo*' (stop all oppression).

Although the last two slogans had no direct bearing on the *tebhaga* demand, both were especially attractive to the Kakdip masses. The first one represented the sharecropper's anxiety for the recognition of his linkage with the land he tilled or of a semblance of his tenurial rights. The second, and more important one, expressed his age-long desire to free himself and his family from oppression and humiliation at the hands of the landlord and his agents. It was the fight against *zulum*, more than the demand for *tebhaga*, that dominated the initial phase of the movement in Kakdwip. The peasants' refusal to perform *begar* of any sort, together with their defiance of the landlords' unbridled authority, gave an emancipatory content to the movement. This liberating nature of the agitation and the general awakening, particularly the stopping of *begar* and the exemplary acts of retaliation such as forcing the landlords' men to apologize publicly for specific acts of oppression or beating an oppressive *jotedar* (Atul Sasmal) with shoes,[58] inspired a large number of agricultural labourers in Kakdwip to join the agitation. The case in other parts of Bengal was almost identical, agricultural labourers joined the movement *en masse* by the side of sharecroppers. They often assumed a leading role, though the *tebhaga* demand (formulated wholly in the interest of the sharecroppers) did not include any of their immediate needs. Apart from the natural solidarity that grew between the two poverty-stricken categories—the sharecroppers and the agricultural labourers—a considerable number of sharecroppers had lost their agricultural implements and cattle during the famine, and were compelled to join the ranks of the agricultural labourers. Emotionally, by resenting their relegation, they still remained sharecroppers in mentality. They even vaguely hoped to regain their former position by joining the movement and dreamt (as all the landless do) of securing for themselves, through the struggle, a minimum portion of land. Unlike in other parts of Bengal, it was this forlorn desire of the agricultural labourers (and not their despair) that raised, in the next stage, the tumult in Kakdwip to a new revolutionary height.

Despite their preoccupation at the beginning with the anti-*zulum* campaign, the Kakdwip peasants did make some progress in obtaining *tebhaga*. In a sizeable number of cases there, the *bargadars* carried their entire produce to their own *khamars* and offered a one-third share to the landlords which, of course, they refused to accept.[59] Some government officials and non-officials, including a Congress member of the Legislative Assembly (Charu Chandra Bhandari), tried to bring about a compromise between the sharecroppers and the *jotedars*, but without much success. Seeing the involvement of the *bargadars* as a whole in this 'spontaneous and general movement', some petty *jotedars* had to yield to the demand of *tebhaga* and accept the one-third share offered to them.[60] But the BPKS slogan of '*nija khamare dhan tolo*' (stack paddy in our own yard) was only partially implemented in Kakdwip and, in many cases (even while demanding *tebhaga*), the *bargadars* allowed the harvested paddy to be carried to the *jotedars*' yards and stacked there. Some cases did occur when peasants assembled in the harvested fields and resisted the landlords' efforts at taking away the crop. But these were isolated cases; they were few and far between till February 1947.

The movement in Kakdwip took a dramatic turn at the beginning of 1947 when the BPKS raised new militant slogans—'*jotedarer kholan bhango*' (break the granaries of the *jotedars*) and '*jan debo tobu dhan debo na*' (we will give our lives, but not the paddy). There was considerable debate among the Communists and within the BPKS over the '*kholan bhango*' call—whether such 'adventurism' would invite government repression and cripple the movement, or whether such an 'anticipatory' step would raise it to a new 'revolutionary stage' by reflecting the mood of the peasant masses.[61] As events later proved, the '*kholan bhango*' slogan, which meant concerted attacks on the *jotedars*' property, both exposed the movement to repression by the police and elevated it to a phase of greater militancy. The Communists in Bengal, at this point, were taken in by the sympathetic attitude of the League ministry under Suhrawardy towards the *bargadars*' plight and their demand for *tebhaga*. They, therefore, had not foreseen (which they might have, in view of the effect that their slogan could produce on the law-and-order situation) any shift in the 'progressive' League ministry's policy to the detriment of their agitation. Their movement so far was facilitated by the favourable reactions of Suhrawardy and, in fact, received an impetus when his ministry decided to concede the *tebhaga* demand in the Bengal Bargadars Temporary Bill and actually introduced it in the legislature in January 1947. Greatly encouraged, the Communists exhorted the peasantry to implement the '*kholan bhango*' slogan.

That the call reciprocated the rising temper of the poor peasants was adequately borne out by the developments in Kakdwip from February 1947, coinciding with the harvesting of the winter crop. *Panchayat khamars* were hurriedly set up in many of the villages. One Kisan Sabha member, one *lathi*-carrying volunteer and a one-rupee subscription per family were quickly raised—sometimes within twenty-four hours—in a village. Armed with *lathis* and other conventional weapons, crowds of sharecroppers started surrounding the *jotedars' kholans*, breaking them by force and taking crops to the *panchayat khamars* for distribution. In the face of this new offensive, the *jotedars* had to give in and flee their villages to nearby subdivisional towns and district headquarters for safety. In the absence of landlords and their agents, the Kisan Sabhas (or *samitis*) became practically all-in-all in the villages. It was at this point perhaps (roughly around the middle of February 1947) that the *samitis* in certain villages attempted to transform the movement for grain seizure into one for limited land seizure. Some land of the fleeing *jotedars*, especially that from which the actual tillers had recently been evicted, was taken over by the *samitis* and distributed among those evicted. It is not very clear how exactly the land seizures and their distribution were effected, mainly because of the vagueness of available accounts on the issue. But that some land was seized and distributed in Kakdwip is factually correct.[62] It is also correct that these were used to satisfy the agricultural labour participants of the movement, and that some of these pieces of land were taken over by the *khetmajoors*.[63] This point, in respect of Kakdwip, is very significant, for nowhere else in Bengal were land seizures ever attempted during the Tebhaga movement. This not only added a new radical dimension to the Kakdwip peasants' struggle, but also supplied the sharecroppers and the agricultural labourers with a common cause and common course of action. Consequently, their alliance became the strongest in Kakdwip, rendering the peasant battle there more persistent and uncompromising than similar battles waged in other parts of the province.

The peak of the Tebhaga movement in Kakdwip was attained, however, only for a short time, and an onslaught against it began in a matter of weeks. The fierce attack was a part of the province-wise counter-offensive launched by the landlords against the *tebhaga* agitators. A hue and cry was raised against the 'looting' of paddy and the 'riotous conduct' of the peasants. Hindu and Muslim *jotedars* jointly represented their 'suffering' to the provincial government, demanded stern action against the 'looters' and the Communists, and the end of indiscipline and anarchy. Congress and League members of the Legislative Assembly unitedly forced Suhrawardy's ministry to shelve the Bargadars Temporary Bill and carried it with them to pledge for the preservation of law and order in the countryside. By the end of February 1947, the government finally committed itself to the task of wiping out the rebellion, started large-scale arrests of the agitators and resorted to the use of unrestrained force.

By the end of February 1947, the authorities in Kakdwip were fully prepared to deal firmly with the 'ominous' situation in the whole area—a situation of 'disorder and violence'.[64] Police forces had already been deployed in the area, and the widest use was being made of preventive laws such as Sections 144 and 107 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Many cases of rioting and looting against the agitators had also been instituted.[65] By the middle of March 1947, repressive forces were operating in Kakdwip in full swing and the *jotedars* were returning to their villages under police protection. The police arrested about a thousand persons (including hundreds of women), assaulted the peasants and broke their huts. The police opened fire on the agitators five times, killing nine and injuring many.[66] The agitation in Kakdwip naturally receded in the face of such drastic action but not without some determined resistance. It was a battle for the defence of the *panchayat khamars* and for the retention of the paddy taken away from the *jotedars' kholans.* Men, as usual, put up resistance with their traditional weapons—*lathis, daos* (choppers), *sarkis* (spears) and bows and arrows. Women fought with *jhantas* (brooms), *bontis* (fish-cutting knives) and chilli powder. Whenever a police contingent arrived in a village, an alarm was sounded with the help of conchshells, horns and gongs. People would come out of their huts at this warning, encircle or *gherao* the police party and engage themselves in an unequal battle—leading to injury, bloodshed, arrests and, eventually, to the loss of the grain so doggedly sought to be defended. In raising the alarm, *gheraoing* the police and *jotedars'* parties and in the scuffle that invariably ensued, the peasant women always played a decisive role: a role commensurate with the humiliation and intimidation they especially suffered. The outcome of the clashes did not always go against the peasants and, on occasion, they succeeded in repelling their attackers and in compelling the police to release the arrested. In Budhakhali (Kakdwip), they forced a group of policemen to beat a hasty retreat. In Layalganj (Kakdwip), the police party had to lay down arms and surrender to the peasants.[67] When six persons were killed in police firing in Barmajor (Sandeskhali), a traditionally armed mob over-ran the local police camp and chased away the policemen.[68]

Despite their stubborn resistance, the Kakdwip rebels found it difficult to cope with the severity of police operations. By the middle of April 1947, they appeared to have lost the encounter without, however, losing all hope or the will to resume the fight. At this point, the situation in the rest of Bengal—from the point of view of the *tebhaga* agitators—was certainly worse. Peasant resistance in all other places had either completely broken down or reached a moribund state. Those who still resisted in certain isolated pockets, particularly in north Bengal, were being brutally suppressed. Coincidentally, at this juncture, communal violence erupted again in Bengal.[69] This led the provincial Communist leaders to apprehend that any agitation in such a frenzied atmosphere was bound to take a communal turn. They were, therefore, in favour of suspending all agitation and concentrating their energies on stopping the riots.[70] Hardly anybody seriously believed that the riots could be stopped, but no one had the courage or the imagination to revive the struggle in a different form. Consequently, the riots did not stop in April 1947—rather, they continued unabated till August 1947—but the Communists conveniently let the flames of a dying movement extinguish.

In assuming their political posture in the Tebhaga movement the Communists had invariably over-emphasized, and even exaggerated, their apparent accomplishments and setbacks. As a result, their standpoint had swung from one extreme to another—from doleful hesitancy in demanding *tebhaga* to reckless urgency in attacking the *jotedars' kholans*, and then to puritanic penitence in abstaining from all agitation. Against the background of an impending transfer of power in India, the Communists appear to have left agrarian issues, including the fate of their faithful followers (the *bargadars*) in the care of the 'progressives' in the Congress and the League. This explains why the Communist spokesman in the Legislative Assembly 'welcomed'[71] the Muslim League ministry's State Acquisition and Tenancy Bill—a measure which aimed at strengthening the *jotedars'* position in the name of securing the rights of the *rayats* and the under-*rayats*, and which contained not even a single provision to protect the interests of the *bargadars*. This also explains why the Communists believed, following the actual transfer of power and their moderate central leaders' support to Nehru's government, that the Tebhaga movement had put *zamindari* abolition 'on the agenda' of the Congress ministry in Bengal.[72] They did not seem to mind the *jotedars*—the target of the *tebhaga* agitation—getting away scot-free.

The League and the Congress, though known for their dependence on *zamindar* and *jotedar* support in the countryside, were suddenly presumed by the Communists to be saviours of the peasantry. The party in Bengal also ruefully discovered that the Bengali middle class—a class made up predominantly of petty rentiers 'who dominate our country's main political organizations'—remained 'on the whole hostile' to the sharecroppers' agitation. It regretted the alienation of the middle class from the Tebhaga movement which, in the opinion of the leaders, might not have taken place but for the adventurism of the agitators. 'We should have advised the *adhiars* to exempt petty *jotedars* from the operation of the *tebhaga*, and concentrate on the richest and the biggest.'[73] Left adventurism was, therefore, roundly condemned by the disguised adventurists themselves, and the '*kholan bhango*' slogan was criticized within party circles in October 1947.[74] The general secretary of the CPI's Bengal Provincial Committee appealed to the sharecroppers 'not to launch direct action this year [that is, the harvesting season of 1947] as they did last year'.[75] Although meetings demanding *tebhaga* were held in 24 Parganas, Medinipur, Jalpaiguri, Malda and West Dinajpur, the Communists were no longer keen to renew the agitation and burn their fingers. The Tebhaga movement was thought to have somehow miscarried, and there was no point in fussing and fretting over it.

The Tebhaga movement failed, but the Kakdwip peasants did not feel that they had entirely lost. Grown in confidence from a headlong confrontation, they had, in the second half of 1947, their own reasons for limited satisfaction. The days of the *jotedars' zulum* (atrocities) were over and, similarly, the practice of *begar* had passed away. The *jotedars* also found it difficult throughout 1947 to enforce the collection of illegal levies or to evict sharecroppers from allotted lands. Even the government was obliged to think in terms of giving some recognition to the *bargadars* and it started special settlement work in the Sundarbans to register *bargadars*' names in the twenty-third column of the settlement records.[76] Although the defence of the *panchayat kholans* had often to be given up, the *bargadars* still managed, in certain cases, to retain the crops of 1946–47, without giving any share whatsoever to the landlords. The repayment of paddy loans in 1947 was neither demanded nor acceded to. The *jotedars* also failed to recover the cash they had loaned to the cultivators. Above all, the poor peasants of Kakdwip succeeded in attaining a solidarity they had never even dreamt of in the past. They were also fortunate to be the least affected by communal riots or by the partition of the province.[77] Their defeat at the hands of the police had steeled rather than broken them. They prized whatever they gained, and expected more—not only *tebhaga*, but also *choubhaga* (three-fourths share)—not only grain, but also land. It is the material expectation, the attainable reality (and not the ideal, or the romance of defiance) that leads the peasantry to rise again and again.

Throughout the comparatively peaceful sowing season of 1947, a restlessness and disquiet continued to build up again in Kakdwip. The mood of the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers was best reflected in their reactions to the compromising attitude of the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha. They were critical of the leaders for creating an illusion that the *bargadars*' demands could be secured through compromises. They also did not like their leaders meeting *jotedars* and government officials to effect such compromises. They resented the party and Kisan Sabha stalwarts' decision to abstain from agitation, and were surprised that the movement was not renewed or its scope enlarged and its operation escalated. 'The party asks us to step on the tail of the cobra,' the peasants were reported to have said, 'but does not allow us to go for killing it.'[78]

A crucial point was reached during the harvest of 1947 when the Communists and the Kisan Sabha leaders, in pursuance of their official line, advocated the stacking of grains at the *jotedars' kholans* again and then negotiating for *tebhaga*. Against the background of the provincial party's obvious stress on caution, this was deemed essential for avoiding further tension and trouble. In spite of their dislike of the party line, sharecroppers in most parts of Bengal reluctantly accepted it. The only exception was Kakdwip, where the *bargadars* and their allies rejected the party line outright and decided in favour of carrying paddy to their common yards for the purpose of division. Even the persuasion of high-ranking leaders of the party and the Kisan Sabha[79] had no effect on the disposition of the Kakdwip peasants, who clearly wanted to resume the struggle. They had, in fact, already made up their minds, without caring or waiting for the party or the Sabha leaders. In November 1947 itself, their desire for another showdown with their oppressors was expressed in an open rally in the Kakdwip Dak Bungalow *maidan.*[80] Seeing the unwavering resolve of the Kakdwip peasantry, the party leadership had no alternative but to modify its policy and agree to the peasants' acting differently in different areas 'as the situation warranted'.[81] The whole affair revealed not merely the bankruptcy of the Communist line of thinking (the like of which, in any case, was not really unheard of in the party's long past), it also demonstrated the peasants' unparalleled insistence on independence of action. Never perhaps in the history of the *kisan* movement in India were the leaders led in such a fashion by their followers.

The demand for *tebhaga* was raised again in Kakdwip in January 1947 and animated rallies in support of the demand were held in the first half of the following month, notably in Haripur–Layalganj on 8 February 1948, and in Budhakhali on 9 February 1948.[82] Throughout the period (from January to March) the peasants attempted, often quite successfully, to stack the winter crops in their own yards. Skirmishes with the *jotedars* and their men began once again, and the armed policemen hurriedly returned to the villages to maintain 'law and order'. The *kisans* of Budhakhali, in particular, had to confront the police almost continually.[83] *Tebhaga* was obtained in many cases and, in some, the *bargadars* refused to concede any share to the *jotedars.* By the summer of 1948, the Kakdwip peasantry was in the thick of a renewed agrarian struggle. The *latdars* and *jotedars* also did not lose time in taking the offensive and dealing heavy blows. Flanked by policemen, they regrouped their *lathials,* called in mercenaries and organized volunteer corps or *seva dals* with the blessings of the local Congress leaders. Exercising their influence in the corridors of political and administrative power, they managed to stop all special settlement work of registering the *bargadars'* names. At the beginning of the sowing season of 1948, the landlords issued thousands of eviction notices against the sharecroppers and obtained innumerable court orders prohibiting *kisans* from tilling the land.[84] Elaborate police camps were set up in the *cutcherries* and the village school buildings. Firing took place in Dongajhora when the peasants clashed with the police while trying to prevent the *jotedars* from 'blackmarketing' paddy.[85] The police, the local administration and the courts, as usual, acted in favour of the landlords and their agents. Nothing apparently had changed, as far as the depressed peasants were concerned, with the coming of independence and the working of a Congress ministry in Bengal. This feeling of the rural poor in Kakdwip, howsoever partial, on the basis of its own limited experience, was reciprocated by overgrown militants among the Indian Communists.

The militants in the Central Committee of the CPI, who challenged the moderates from December 1945 and cornered them decisively in December 1947, managed finally to take over the leadership of the party at its Second Congress held in Calcutta between 26 February and 6 March 1948. The party that was crawling on 'reformist' lines suddenly stood up to wobble towards a 'revolutionary' goal. Militant Communist leaders dubbed the transfer of power under the Mountbatten Plan 'a betrayal' of the Indian people's struggle by the Congress and the League, and described the installation of a nationalist government of independent India as a British manoeuvre to give 'a share of power to capitalists and landlords' for perpetuating imperialist domination in another form. The bourgeoisie in India, they asserted, had 'turned its face away from the masses and gone over to collaboration' with feudalism and imperialism. That is why its government, led by Nehru, was bound to adopt anti-people and anti-democratic policies. Hence the march of the democratic movement, in their opinion, would have to proceed 'directly in opposition to the bourgeois government and its policies and the bourgeois leadership of the Congress'.[86]

Having compromised itself with imperialism and feudalism, in their opinion, the Nehru government was obliged to stand 'against revolutionary changes in agrarian relations'. The militant leaders, therefore, wanted to put before the party the task of rousing and leading the toiling peasants in their struggle against eviction, rent, serfdom and other similar evils, and to develop all these into a fight for 'land to the tiller'. They anticipated the agrarian movements would set in motion colossal forces which, in alliance with the workers, would form a part of the greater movement for establishing a people's democratic state, and for 'simultaneously passing to socialist reconstruction without any intermediary stage of capitalism'.[87] Evidently, the militant leaders of the CPI were giving a call to overthrow the existing state of affairs and inciting the peasants, under the leadership of the working class, to intensify their class struggle and threaten the new government. It is not surprising that the authorities reacted strongly and promptly, unleashing forces of repression on the Communists. The CPI was declared illegal on 26 March 1948, the office of the BPKS sealed, and early morning raids and arrests carried out efficiently. The party, bubbling with a revolutionary zeal disproportionate to its organizational readiness, was wholly 'caught unawares'. Many of its district-level leaders in Bengal, for example, were detained, and its provincial organization took a long time (April to September) to settle down to serious underground political business.[88]

The new revolutionary fervour reverberated distinctly in the party's *kisan* front in Bengal. The same provincial committee of the Communists (elected in October 1947), which had endorsed the party's abstention from further *kisan* struggles for *tebhaga*, started in the second half of 1948 to denounce the reformist tendencies that had recently distorted their party activities, accusing the party leaders and members of 'inaction', of 'relying too much on the rich and the middle peasants', and of failure 'to take revolutionary advantage' of the *tebhaga* movement. What is more, the provincial committee in the latter half of 1948 began to retrace its former criticism (in October 1947) of the '*kholan bhango*' cry. It began saying that the slogan, being correct in the perspective of rising peasant militancy, should have been followed up by equally radical steps (like calls for land seizure, for refusal to pay rent and for general strikes by agricultural labourers). To make amends, the provincial Communist leadership continued in 1948 to urge party members and sympathizers to take up more vigorously and courageously the cause of agrarian revolution.[89]

With the wholehearted resumption of Communist activities in the Sundarbans, the fire in Kakdwip blazed in full force, perhaps too brightly and blindingly to last for long. Disturbances broke out in the sowing season itself when those evicted and debarred (by court orders) wanted to till the land they had previously cultivated. The new slogan, '*chas karo jami dakhale rekhe*' (till the land by keeping it in your possession), became instantly popular with the *bargadars*, and forcible occupation and tilling of land began. There were many minor clashes over the occupation of fields by the sharecroppers. But the *jotedars* who, after all, wanted the land to be cultivated in some way, did not oppose the *bargadars*' move very seriously. They reserved their energies for a fight to take away the produce at harvest time. About 7000 acres were forcibly occupied and tilled by sharecroppers in Kakdwip in the sowing season of 1948.[90]

Kakdwip's example was followed by the peasants of Mathurapur, Sagar and several other places. As anticipated by both the sides, pitched battles were fought in Kakdwip once harvesting commenced. The pattern was the same in all the villages: the *jotedar* would come to the field with his men, *lathials* and police to take away the crop. The *bhagchasis* (sharecroppers) would prevent the landlords from appropriating the crop and defend the produce as much as possible. But victory in the field did not always decide the issue conclusively. The fight continued even after the victorious party managed to take away the paddy and stack it in the yards. If the victory was the *jotedar's*, the sharecroppers would try and raid his yard. If it was the other way round, which seems to have generally happened, the *jotedar's* men would attack the *bargadars'* huts with the support of the police, and ransack their hamlets. One such battle was fought in Chandanpiri village on 6 November 1948.

It was decided at a meeting of the *kisans* of Chandanpiri on 4 November, that the sharecroppers would go to the fields to harvest the crop on the morning of 6 November. At the appointed hour on this day, men (with *lathis* and agricultural implements) and women (with *jhantas* and *bontis*) collected in the fields and began to harvest the crop. Soon the *naib* of the landlord appeared with a dozen *lathials* and some policemen to stop them. In the scuffle that followed, the *kisans* beat up the *lathials* and the policemen and took away their weapons, including a few rifles. The policemen and the *lathials* were allowed to leave the place, but the *naib* was kept hostage to ensure good conduct from the police. A couple of hours later, a police reinforcement marched out of the landlord's *cutcherry*, clashed with the men and women, and opened fire, killing eight (four men and four women) on the spot. The dead women included Ahalya,[91] the mother of an adolescent son and a leading figure in the village, who was more than eight months' pregnant. After the incident, the police party carried away six of the dead bodies. However, they could not take away the bodies of Ahalya and another woman, Batasi. The *naib*, [92] who was kept hostage by the *kisans*, was tried and executed soon after. The following morning, the body of Ahalya was taken around the village in a procession before it was placed on the funeral pyre.[93] From Chandanpiri, the story of Ahalya's death travelled to all the villages of the Sundarbans. She became a legend overnight,[94] and a symbol of both the heroic peasant resistance and of the brutality of police repression.[95]

Harvesting and resistance continued simultaneously in Chandanpiri, and the lead of its sharecroppers was soon followed in Budhakhali, Haripur and Layalganj. On 15 December 1948 a serious clash took place between the *kisans* and the police over the possession of paddy. A *latdar* of Layalganj[96] managed to take away paddy from the fields with the help of the police and Seva Dal members. On 31 December 1948, when he tried to load the crop on to boats for transportation to a safer place, he was confronted by a large crowd of armed peasants. The paddy was recovered from the *latdar* following a bitter fight and the loss of several lives.[97]

By the beginning of 1949, the battle for the possession of crops raged furiously in all parts of Kakdwip. The *jotedar*–police–Seva Dal combine attacked the sharecroppers, looted and burnt their huts, and arrested and tortured them. Peasant men and women retaliated by attacking the landlords' mercenaries, challenging police pickets and looting police rifles. Sometimes the villagers captured *jotedars* and their officials, tried them in open meetings for their misdeeds, and inflicted punishments on them, including execution. Despite the increase in the number of police camps in the area and the stationing of troops in Namkhana, the Kakdwip peasantry appeared to have gained the upper hand by April 1949, and brought crops from thousands of acres to their own yards. Naturally, during this upsurge cultivation was thoroughly neglected, and the winter crop could not be raised. Normal trade and communication with urban centres was also seriously disturbed. An acute food shortage developed in Kakdwip by the summer of 1949. It was against this background of a growing food crisis that a spurt of peasant attacks on *jotedars' golas* (granaries) and *cutcherries* began in May 1949. The *kisans* of Layalganj showed the way by occupying the *cutcherries* and the granaries of four prominent *jotedars* of the locality,[98] and by seizing their grain, livestock and agricultural implements.[99] All these operations in Layalganj were conducted by an Action Committee formed by the Communists, which declared on 1 May 1949 its intention to take over all land surrounding the village, and distribute it afresh among the landless labourers and the sharecroppers.[100] To begin with, the grain and other properties seized from the landlords were given away to the needy. Later, the Committee seized about 5000 *bighas* of land and allotted these to the landless to give effect to the slogan 'land to the tiller'.[101] In the first week of August 1949 the Committee renamed Layalganj as Lalganj (the 'red' locality) and declared it a 'liberated zone' to be administered directly by it. It announced the establishment of an armed village volunteer corps or 'liberation army', and took upon itself the responsibility of a revolutionary tribunal for the settlement of all village disputes. It also warned the enemies of the *majoor-chasi raj*—the *jotedars, mahajans* and rich peasants—of dire consequences.[102]

From the 'liberated' centre of Lalganj, the Communist-led rebels extended the upsurge to Radhanagar and Rajnagar. About 150 to 200 volunteers were sent to these villages to assist the sharecroppers in fighting the *jotedars* and the police, as well as to lend a hand in harvesting the crops. Serious clashes took place in these villages on 18 and 24 August 1949. Although the police party resorted to firing on 4 September in Radhanagar, killing one and injuring many, they were unable to quell the disturbances.[103] The developments in Radhanagar were followed by similar incidents in Haripur and Maharajganj. In both these places the armed peasantry beat up and chased away the *jotedars' lathials* and Seva Dal volunteers, occupied the *cutcherries*, broke into the *jotedars'* granaries and distributed paddy, agricultural implements and other articles.[104] Such examples were soon emulated in other areas of the Sundarbans—Bishnupur, Dhapdhapi, Jaynagar, Sandeshkhali and Canning. The trend in all these places was more or less the same, namely, forcible harvesting and stacking of crops, attacks on the *jotedars' golas* and *cutcherries*, distribution of the seized grain and other moveable properties, and destruction of loan documents and handnotes (*hatchithas*) kept by the *jotedars*. Approximately 1000 acres of land were seized in Kakdwip (mainly in Lalganj, Haripur, Budhakhali, Radhanagar and Rajnagar) and distributed among the landless. About thirty-three establishments of *jotedars* (including *cutcherries, golas* and houses) were destroyed and burnt, four *jotedars* were killed and seven seriously injured.[105] The remaining *jotedars* either fled or lived under strict police protection. A considerable number of *jotedars' lathials* and Seva Dal members and some policemen were also killed or injured. Apart from using conventional weapons (such as *lathis*, spears, bows and arrows), the peasants also used firearms—mostly rifles taken from the police. Bombs or locally produced grenades were sometimes used. Also, there was evidence of the use of a few revolvers and sten guns.[106]

With the spread of the rising in Chandranagar and Sibarampur in December 1949, the Communist-led peasant rebels seem to have been favourably placed in Kakdwip. They, however, had to pay a heavy price for their initial success. Although the exact number of casualties is not known, about a hundred persons were believed to have died, hundreds injured and several hundreds arrested.[107] Many more persons were detained and tortured from time to time in the *jotedars' cutcherries* and police camps to extract information about the incidents. Villages were raided, huts of the *kisans* devastated and their belongings taken away or destroyed. The peasants endured all these in the first flush of victory and hailed the martyrdom of their family members by saying: '*rane jiban dichhe, sagge jaichhe*' (died in battle, and so have gone to heaven).[108] However, such suffering and losses could not be sustained by a small population in a limited area for very long. The loss of lives might have been substantially reduced if the peasants had been introduced to the rudiments of armed resistance. The Communists, who had been leading at this time a full-fledged armed peasants' campaign in Telengana and using guerrilla tactics with great effect, failed to make any use of their experiences in Kakdwip. This happened even after their commitment to the 'Telengana way'[109] and their assertion of Kakdwip being a 'miniature Telengana' or a '*shishu*' Telengana. Learning about the progress of the Telengana struggle from their leaders, the Kakdwip peasants wanted to learn from the military experiences of their counterparts in Telengana.[110] The Communists, however, could not arrange for their training in partisan struggle and, consequently, their defence of the crop or attack on the *cutcherries* was like the surge of an angry crowd—often the easiest target of their enemy's bullets.

It was not, however, the military aspect that exposed the greatest chink in the Kakdwip rebels' armour. The real problem that should have caused concern in the rebel camp in December 1949 lay in the realm of political objective and strategy. The Kakdwip rising certainly inspired the peasants of some of the neighbouring areas in the Sundarbans, but it did not spread far enough. Peasant consciousness and peasant militancy had been uneven in 1946–47 also, but the Tebhaga movement at that time had affected nineteen districts and rallied six million *kisans*. The demand for *choubhaga* (a three-fourths share) and the slogan 'land to the tiller', which had enthused the Kakdwip sharecroppers and agricultural labourers, did not evoke a wide response in other areas. Unless a number of Kakdwips were created in 24 Parganas and adjacent districts, it was not clear how Kakdwip could carve out, in isolation, a reasonably good future. The partisan struggle of the peasants had often been found to be a long-drawn-out affair, demanding political and organizational resilience; it was not won or lost in brief encounters.

The Communists do not appear to have fully examined the significance of what they were doing or ought to have done. They behaved as if they were in the midst of an insurrectionary phase in the civil war. They were impatient to proclaim a 'parallel government', declare 'liberated zones', announce the formation of a 'liberation army' and loosely talk in terms of 'bidding for state power', much before these could be turned into even some semblance of reality. These unreal claims did not help them in any way in Kakdwip, except perhaps to surprise the authorities and strengthen their determination to crush the rising. The Communist anxiety to expedite the proceedings inevitably led to the monopolizing of all initiative by the local party and its members. Consequently, the Action Committee became more a kind of party committee rather than an elected peasant or popular body. These committees reflected not so much the practical ideas of a rebellious peasantry as they did the idiosyncracies of their benefactors—the Communists. The organizational base in Kakdwip, therefore, started shrinking, leaving too many responsibilities on the shoulders of too few party members. The arrest or detention of a single party member sometimes caused grave organizational dislocations. Also, the peasants, who should have been encouraged to become the arbiters of their own destiny, were reduced under this centralizing influence to the level of an enthusiastic soldiery. But even so, in December 1949, they were not the same compact lot they had been three to four months earlier.

From the beginning (that is, February 1948), the new militant Communist leaders claimed to have spotted the simultaneous growth in the number of 'capitalist elements' and agricultural labourers in the countryside. They, therefore, dubbed the rich peasants as capitalist exploiters in agriculture (without examining the difference between substantial independent family producers and capitalistic farmer-profiteers) and placed them in the enemy camp along with the landlords.[111] In their opinion, the middle peasant, too, was 'not a firm ally' of the revolutionary agrarian masses but only a vacillating friend.[112] These formulations only left two categories (namely, the poor peasants and the agricultural labourers) to constitute the revolutionary agrarian masses. Of the two, the new Communist leaders expressed a doctrinaire preference for the rural proletariat, which would spearhead the agrarian revolution by 'leading the poor peasants—another firm ally'.[113]

Giving effect to these rigid directives in Kakdwip, the Communists pushed the rich peasants to the side of the *jotedars* by their explicit hostility, and alienated and immobilized the middle peasants by their insinuation. In the context of the Sundarbans, of course, rich peasants did not count as a strong political force and the middle peasants were politically even worse off. What, however, had the potential to damage the Kakdwip rising was the rift in the understanding between the sharecroppers and the agricultural labourers that the Communists permitted to develop. The 'sectarian' way in which the spoils of victory—the seized grain, domestic animals, other articles and, more importantly, land—were divided and distributed, created heartburn among the landless themselves.[114] As a result, the anti-landlord camp in each village in Kakdwip was divided between the rich and the middle peasants on one side, and the rest on the other.[115] At times, even the components of the rest were under pressure of a divisive nature. When the Kakdwip rising threatened to assume serious proportions (which it certainly did in December 1949) and the Government of West Bengal decided to suppress it in a determined manner and with a heavy hand, all the shortcomings of the movement were glaringly revealed.

At the beginning of 1950, the Government of West Bengal meticulously prepared itself for the suppression of the Kakdwip rising. The deputy inspector general of police, Intelligence Branch, H.N. Sarkar, was first sent to make a detailed survey of the area and submit a report on counter-insurgency. On receiving his report, a high-level committee, presided over by the chief minister, Dr B.C. Roy himself, drew up an elaborate plan of action.[116] The overall charge of the operation was given to a military officer, Major Chatterjee, whose services were lent to the Government of West Bengal as additional district magistrate of 24 Parganas.[117] Strong police contingents were rushed to Kakdwip as reinforcements. Simultaneously, troops were sent to encircle an area of 40 square miles with a population of 15,000. Curfew was clamped on sensitive spots and combing operations began in the affected villages on the lines on which Major Nanjappa had proceeded in Telengana. A large number of suspects were rounded up and the people had to carry 'passes' issued by the authorities. By the end of January 1950, the situation in Kakdwip was reported in government circles to have vastly improved. In the succeeding months the *jotedars*, who had fled from their villages, gradually started returning. Under police protection, the local Congress became active in the area and set up a volunteer organization to work for 'peace'. The rich and the middle peasants welcomed this development and lent their support. Meanwhile, a subtle jealousy and mute suspicion had already adversely affected the mutual relations of the *bargadars* and the *khetmajoors*. Their previous enthusiasm for continuous fight also receded in the face of superior and ruthless government forces. The Action Committees, packed mainly with Communist Party activists, lost control generally and felt isolated. The arrest of key members of these committees also paralysed the local organizations. Barring isolated incidents of resistance, essentially adventurist and individualist in nature, the Kakdwip rising subsided by the middle of 1950. The last-minute efforts of the Communists to impart guerrilla training to the Kakdwip peasants[118] could not produce any results. It was already too late, and the police and army were in full command of the situation. By August 1950 all resistance in Kakdwip petered out, though some fugitive Communist leaders were still at large, trying desperately to regroup their followers. It was a forlorn, futile exercise on their part, but the peasants lovingly protected them and remembered them for a long time.

Catharsis

The Kakdwip uprising of 1949–50 was an integral part as well as an extension of the Tebhaga movement. It might have exhibited the full potential of the agitation, had it continued in its wide sweep.[119] The ill-informed assertion that the Tebhaga movement 'never assumed serious proportions', that the agitators did not 'even attempt to seize lands or to set up parallel administration', and that the introduction of the Bargadars Temporary Bill had 'taken the wind out' of the movement[120], cannot be accepted in the light of what actually happened in Kakdwip. It is hard for anyone studying the Tebhaga movement to miss the developments in Kakdwip—the only place where the agitation continued relentlessly, and without any break. Besides, the armed struggle in Kakdwip did signify a steady advance from one phase to the next, from the demand for *tebhaga* to the seizure of grain, and then to the seizure of land. In this process of elevating the struggle, its participants—in their own flamboyant, romantic manner—tried to establish their authority and run their own affairs and even proclaimed, howsoever prematurely, their own government. Often, an agitation is not born out of revolutionary proclivities; rather, it acquires them while gathering momentum. This appears to have happened in the case of the Kakdwip uprising, which developed a revolutionary content and attained a revolutionary stature.

If the Kakdwip peasants could achieve a revolutionary stature during the uprising, this was perhaps not beyond the capabilities of the peasants of other parts of Bengal—some of whom were certainly politically more conscious, more resourceful and better organized. In a certain way, and in spite of the circumstances varying from place to place, the revolutionary action of the expropriated peasantry in one locality is indicative of the trend among similarly placed peasants in all contiguous localities.[121] The material conditions that drove the Kakdwip peasants to join the Tebhaga movement were more or less similar to those of sharecroppers in other parts. Unlike other localities, of course, the rich and the middle peasants there were numerically small as categories and, therefore, relatively ineffectual as a pressure group. The *bhagchasi–khetmajoor* alliance that characterized the movement in Kakdwip was also unmistakably evident in other parts of Bengal. However, this alliance was further reinforced in Kakdwip by the seizure of a small amount of land and its distribution as early as February 1947. Such a daring act, in fact, had not been attempted by agitators in other places. This only shows that the Kakdwip rebels were a shade more militant and enterprising than their counterparts elsewhere, possibly on account of their being subjected to harsher treatment in the Sundarbans. But in one respect the Kakdwip peasants were definitely ahead of others: they exuded raw self-confidence and self-righteousness, and believed as fervently in their clairvoyance as in the justification of their own acts. Consequently, they were able to decide their future course of action entirely on their own during the winter of 1947, when they renewed their fight for *tebhaga*.

It is incorrect to think that the illiterate, superstitious and weak peasant masses followed their deliverers blindly. Rather, the peasantry in India often exercised some amount of initiative and autonomy in its agitational behaviour and committed its leaders to a militant programme of its own design—as in Nallagonda in Telengana throughout 1945; in Bihar, on the issue of *bakasht* land, in 1938 and 1946; and in Bengal, over the *tebhaga* demand, in the harvesting season of 1945–46. However, it was only the Kakdwip peasants who defied the dictum of their mentors—the Communists of the province—and decided to resume their battle in contravention of the policy of the Communist Party leadership.

The cataclysmic high drama might not have been enacted at all in Kakdwip but for the resoluteness and wavering, the heroics and despondencies of the Communists. Ever since 1937, the Communists had begun gathering combustibles in the Sundarbans, and searching for flints to produce a spark. Belonging generally to the urbane, educated middle class and often coming from high-caste families, the Communist 'outsiders' intrigued and impressed the Sundarbans peasants with their defiance of caste restrictions, indifference to the hardship of village life and uncompromising hatred of rural exploiters.[122] It was only when the 'outsiders' succeeded in becoming somewhat strange 'insiders', however, that the peasants started listening to them, and felt inspired by their message. In Kakdwip, this process of accepting the outsiders was facilitated by the relief work organized by the Communists to help the victims of flood and famine. Once the peasants accepted the Communists and developed confidence in their ability to lead a struggle against the feudal oppressors, there was no going back and no hesitation whatsoever. The Communist espousal of the *tebhaga* demand of the sharecroppers, as well as the campaign against *jotedari* atrocities and exactions, definitely won over the Kakdwip peasants. Communist–*kisan* relations were at their best in 1946–47, even under the pressure of governmental repression, but were shaken by the controversy over the party's moderate line in October 1947.

It was the '*kholan bhango*' slogan of January 1947 that proved to be crucial for the Communists in the Tebhaga movement. Attacking the *jotedars*' yards and forcibly taking away the grains was not only far more aggressive than defending the crops in the fields or carrying the paddy to the *kisans*' huts, but also qualitatively quite different. In one respect, it was a call for an open attack on private property by flouting the prevailing concept of 'law' and the system of 'order', an incitement to 'loot' and 'arson' by governmental standards. From another point of view, it was a clarion call challenging the exploitative, feudalistic agro-economic structure, and going all out to fulfil the task of the agrarian revolution. Once the task of prosecuting an agrarian revolution is undertaken, it cannot be given up or postponed without creating all-round confusion and leading to serious reverses. In moving towards their goal, therefore, the revolutionaries had to adopt more radical action: follow up grain seizure by land seizure, put an end to the landlord–moneylender combine, and set up village soviets. This was not only a protracted politico–military affair, but also contingent upon the large-scale mobilization of all sections of the anti-feudal peasant masses. As the '*kholan bhango*' slogan was debated among the Communists in December 1946–January 1947, it may be presumed that their leaders had an idea of some of the implications, even if they did not perceive all of them. If that was the case in January 1947, and the peasants were generally as enthusiastic as they appeared to be in ransacking the landlords' yards and granaries, the Communists should have had confidence in themselves and should have given a call for the immediate destruction of landlordism. Otherwise, if they were uncertain of their own strength and doubtful of their organizational competence, they need not have raised the '*kholan bhango*' slogan at all, and could have started instead a constitutional agitation in support of the *tebhaga* demand. As it turned out, they had neither the strength nor the will to go in for either. They sometimes toyed with the idea of starting a broad movement for the abolition of *zamindari*[123] and, at other times, tried to start a peaceful agitation against the repression of the *bargadars*. They eventually ended up suspending the Tebhaga movement on the ground that the new Congress government 'must be given an opportunity for fulfilling its promises through legal channels'.[124] The Communist anxiety, in April 1947, to give precedence to the stoppage of communal riots over the continuance of the Tebhaga movement, was hardly convincing. In fact, in April 1947 they had very little hope of stopping the communal riots in Bengal. Hypothetically, however, the Communists could have dealt with the rising communal frenzy in Bengal better, and arrested the outbreak of communal violence, had they not delayed the launching of the Tebhaga movement and commenced it in the harvesting season of 1945–46. In the second quarter of 1947 they had no chance at all of reversing the historical processes in Bengal.

When the Communists in Bengal finally decided to come out of their 'reformist' shell, following the Second Party Congress of the CPI, and take up the revolutionary path, the Tebhaga movement had died down everywhere, except in Kakdwip. Naturally the Communists paid total attention to the Kakdwip peasants, whose militancy struck them as being ideal for initiating a fresh revolutionary upsurge. The new experiment that began in 1948 in Kakdwip was impressive but politically unrealistic. The Communists over-emphasized the preliminaries of capitalist development in Indian agriculture, and felt that the main contradiction within agrarian society was not merely that between feudal exploiters and peasant masses, but also that between the rich peasants and the agricultural labourers. Middle peasants were discarded as camp followers of rich peasants, and so practically pushed to the enemy camp. In order to achieve revolutionary changes in the agrarian system, the new popular front of the Communists was to consist only of poor peasants, led by the rural proletariat. They also imagined in 1948 that their task was not merely to promote agrarian revolution, but to link it with the overall revolutionary situation which was being developed under the leadership of the working class. They clearly envisaged themselves as being in the midst of a civil war and, therefore, clamoured for the capture of state power.

The Communists were so satisfied with their belligerent theoretical innovation (especially of achieving socialism by circumventing the intermediary stage of people's democracy) that they wilfully ignored the complexities and handicaps of a colonial situation. Instead of isolating the main enemy on the agrarian front—the feudal exploiter—the Communists made more and more enemies among the rich and middle peasants and, consequently, diminished the number of their own allies. As if that was not enough, they dogmatically decided in favour of affirming a semi-proletarian leadership of the peasantry, thereby confusing the ranks of the poor peasants. It was within such a make-believe ideological framework that the Communists and the peasants fought once again for grain, for land, and for setting up 'liberated' zones. The years 1948 and 1949 in Kakdwip were replete with violent confrontation, heroic resistance and great suffering. But the struggle, run on doctrinaire, adventurist lines, and bewitched by the romanticized cult of individual terror, gradually contracted and was eventually crushed. Militancy and revolutionary slogans were not sufficient to cover up speculative fabrications and organizational deficiencies. The agrarian revolution—the dream of the Communists in Bengal—remained unfulfilled, and lay in the womb of time:

Ahalya Ma, tomar santan janmo nilo na . . .
(Mother Ahalya, your child is left unborn . . .)

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Notes and References

[1] From a contemporary song composed by the late Benoy Roy in memory of the peasant woman Ahalya who died during police firing, in an advanced stage of pregnancy, while leading the initial police resistance in Kakdwip in November 1948.

[2] *Census of India, 1941*, Vol. IV, Simla, 1942, p. 60.

[3] The name, which literally and ironically means the 'beautiful forest', originated from the dominant variety of trees in the jungle, known as *sundari*.

[4] 24 Parganas, Khulna and Bakerganj.

[5] Between 1853 and 1870 the government energetically pursued the Port Canning project. It acquired a lot of land in Canning, created a municipality there in 1853, formed a Port Canning Company in 1865, established a railway link with Calcutta and even initiated the building of jetties and the laying of tramway lines. But the scheme failed on account of the lack of various other infrastructural and natural marketing facilities. Ships hardly visited the place and the company went into liquidation in the early 1870s. Although Canning could not eventually be turned into a port, it flourished as a small trading centre, and its railway connection with Calcutta continued profitably.

[6] The rates remained nominal throughout and were, according to Communist sources, as low in certain parts of Kakdwip as 6 *pice* ($1^{1}/_{2}$ annas) per *bigha* ($3^{1}/_{3}$ *bighas* = 1 acre) even in 1948. See the Bengali pamphlet, *Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj*, 24 Parganas District Committee, Communist Party of India, 7 November 1949. Available in Material on Kakdwip, Central Archives, Communist Party of India, Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[7] *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. XXIII, Oxford, 1908, pp. 144–45.

[8] Krishnakant Sarkar, 'Kakdwip, Tebhaga Movement', in A.R. Desai (ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India*, Bombay, 1979, p. 471.

[9] Adrienne Cooper, 'Sharecroppers and Landlords in Bengal, 1930–50: The Dependency Web and Its Implications', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, (special issue on sharecropping and sharecroppers edited by T.J. Byres), Vol. X, Nos 2 and 3, January–April 1983.

[10] This computation, attempted by a government officer, has been cited in Adrienne Cooper, 'Sharecroppers and Landlords in Bengal', pp. 233–34.

[11] From the surveys made of these illegal exactions, the following details are available as to their extent:
Nazrana—1 to 4 *seers* of paddy per *bigha*.
Salami—1 to 1½ *maunds* of paddy per *bigha*.
Naibana—3 to 4 *seers* of paddy per *bigha*.
Khayali—3 to 5 *seers* of paddy per *bigha*.
Khamar Chilwani—2 to 4 *seers* of paddy per *bigha*.
Prachirghera—2 to 5 *seers* of paddy per *bigha*.
Golakamti—2 to 3 *seers* of paddy per *bigha*.
Kaktadani —2 to 4 *seers* of paddy per *bigha*.
Biya-Shradh—2 to 3 *seers* of paddy per *bigha*.
See the findings of Krishnakant Sarkar, 'Kakdwip Tebhaga Movement', in A.R. Desai (ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India*, pp. 472–73. Also see Amit K. Gupta's mimeographed paper, 'Agrarian Protest in Kakdwip of 24 Parganas', presented at the Third Damodaran Memorial Symposium on Peasantry and Struggle for New India, 12–13 April 1980, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

[12] *Janajuddha* (Bengali weekly), 8 and 15 December 1943. Also see Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*, Delhi, 1972, pp. 14–15.

[13] *Begar* in the Sundarbans, to some extent, resembled the more extensive practice of *vettichakiri* in Telangana. In accordance with this, the peasant had to perform all kinds of domestic and agricultural duties without payment for the landlord.

[14] Sexual intimidation of poor peasant women by the landlord and his relations was rampant. Like extracting *begar*, violating peasant women was also considered the landlord's right. It has been reported that sharecroppers with attractive wives would be refused land for cultivation till they sent their women to gratify the landlords. This, in fact, explained the large number of murders of young wives by their husbands in the Sundarbans (*Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj*, p. 27). The issue so seriously affected the peasant mind that the outbreak of the revolt in Budhakhali village in Kakdwip was believed by responsible government officials (like the then subdivisional officer of Diamond Harbour) to have been occasioned by one case of a *jotedar* molesting a peasant girl.

[15] A report by 'Nikunja' (Ashoke Bose), on the 'Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Feudal Struggle of the People in Sundarbans and the Role of the Communist Party', Kakdwip, 24 Parganas, 15 June 1951. Available in Material on Kakdwip, Central Archives, Communist Party of India, Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[16] A. Graham, commissioner, Presidency Division, had warned Sir Daniel Hamilton—one of the biggest *latdars*—that his manager was 'not the paragon he [Hamilton] thinks him to be'. Home Poll. Conf. File No. 333 of 1939, West Bengal State Archives, Writers' Building, Calcutta.

[17] *Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj*, p. 27. See also *Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1935–36*, Calcutta, 1937, p. 20, for the 'most noticeable'

increase in offences in the area under the special and local laws.

[18] Dutt and Bradley, 'The Anti-Imperialist People's Front', *Imprecor*, 29 February 1936, and 'To All Anti-Imperialist Fighters: Gathering Storm' (a pamphlet by the CPI), December 1936.

[19] The first conference of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha or Samiti was held at Patrasayar in Bankura district on 27–28 March 1937.

[20] Note of Special Branch (Police) on Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha, Calcutta, 3 July 1939, File No. 333/39, Confidential, Home Pol. Dept, Government of Bengal, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Nani Sengupta was sent from Calcutta to organize this.

[23] They were Pulin Bhattacharya and Nurul Huda.

[24] On this occasion, a meeting was held on 7 April 1938 on the steps of the Town Hall, Calcutta, where Samsul Huda and Naliniprova Ghosh spoke eloquently to the peasants. Note of Special Branch (Police) on Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha, Calcutta, 3 July 1939, File No. 333/39, Confidential, Home Pol. Dept, Government of Bengal, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta.

[25] Soumyendranath Tagore, who was closely associated with the communist movement from the mid-1920s, organized his followers in 1935 into a group known as the Ganabani group (named after its mouthpiece, *Ganabani*). In March 1938 the group adopted the name the Communist League of India, and in the late 1940s it became a part of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India.

[26] Note of Intelligence Branch (Police) on Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha, 30 June 1939, File No. 333/39, Confidential, Home Pol. Dept, Government of Bengal, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta. Also, Fortnightly Report, Bengal, 2nd half of February 1939, File No. 18/2/39, Home Pol. Dept, Government of India, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

[27] This expression was used by Tagore's Communist League of India in its 'Political Line adopted at the 2nd Party Congress', *Red Front*, No. 2, March 1940. File No. 1940/50B, P.C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

[28] 'Proletarian Path', Central Committee, Communist Party of India, 1940. File No. 1940/48, P.C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

[29] Ibid.

[30] 'The Impending Crisis and Our Tasks', CPI Politburo Circular No. 59, 25 January 1940. Available in Central Archives, Communist Party of India, Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[31] 'Proletarian Path'.

[32] 'A Brief Summary of Political Events during the Year 1939', Government of Bengal, Home Pol. Dept, File No. 148/41–Poll (I), Government of India, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

[33] Fortnightly Report, Bengal, 2nd half of August 1939, File No. 18/8.39, Home Pol. Dept, Government of India, National Archives, New Delhi.

[34] Sudhangshu Dutta.

[35] 'Brief Summary of Political Events in Bengal', Government of Bengal, File No. 49/1/43 Poll (I), Home Pol. Dept, Government of India, National Archives of India, New Delhi. Also, Fortnightly Report, Bengal, 2nd half of October 1940, File No. 18/10/40, Home Pol. Dept, Government of India, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

[36] The 'people's war' policy of the CPI was not only a product of the world-wide communist anxiety for safeguarding the Soviet Union (and '25 Years of Socialism') from German attack, but also a result of its discovery in the British and Allied support for invaded Russia, a clear 'split' in the imperialist camp. This 'split' over Russia, according to the CPI, had resulted in the creation of a 'world front against fascism' with one slogan (anti-fascism) and one enemy (fascist domination), and the conversion of the 'imperialist war' into an 'all people's war'. To refuse to support this war at the end of 1941, or to disrupt the efforts of those (like Britain) who were prosecuting the war was, therefore, to 'sabotage' the world front against fascism. From 'All People's War against Fascism and Our Policy and Tasks', Resolution of Politburo, 13 December 1941, Party Letter No. 56, 15 December 1941, Central Archives, Communist Party of India, Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[37] Ibid.

[38] *Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings*, 1944, Vol. LXVIII, No. 1.

[39] Krishnakant Sarkar, 'Kakdwip Tebhaga Movement', in A.R. Desai (ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India.*

[40] Ibid., p. 476.

[41] H.S.M. Ishaque, *Agricultural Statistics by Plot to Plot Enumeration in Bengal, 1944–45*, Part I, Calcutta, 1946.

[42] The Home Special Department files of the Government of Bombay for the years 1939–41, preserved in the Maharashtra State Archives, Bombay, contain a detailed account of this agitation.

[43] Bhowani Sen, a leading communist expert on agrarian issues and the secretary of the Bengal Provincial Committee of the CPI, 1943–48, had conceded that the *tebhaga* demand 'owed more to the recommendations of the Land Revenue Commission of 1938 than to the ingenuity of the Sabha'; see *Tebhaga Sangram Rajat Jayanti Samarak Grantha* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1973, p. 10.

[44] Sunil Sen, one of the leaders of the Tebhaga movement in Dinajpur in 1946–47, recalled attending the conference without, of course, any inkling as to the immediate commencement of the movement. *Peasant Movement in India*, chapter IV, Calcutta, 1982, p. 140, fn. 11.

[45] Communal riots had already started in Calcutta in August 1946, affecting practically the whole of Bengal.

[46] Jnanabrata Bhattacharya, 'An Examination of Leadership Entry in Bengal Peasant Revolts, 1937–47', *Journal of Asian Studies*,, Vol. XXXVII, No. 4, August 1978, p. 619.

[47] G.D. Overstreet and M. Windmiller, *Communism in India*, Bombay, 1960, p. 288.

[48] 'The New Situation and Our Tasks', Political Resolution of the CPI Central Committee, 16 December 1945, Central Archives, Communist Party of India, Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[49] 'For the Final Assault', Political Resolution of the CPI Central Committee, August 1946, Central Archives, Communist Party of India, Ajoy Bhavan, New Delhi.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Memorandum from Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha to the Government of Bengal, on Rehabilitation, October 1945.

[52] Abani Lahiri, 'Last Battle of Bengal Peasants under British Rule', in Nisith Ranjan Ray *et al.* (eds), *Challenge: A Saga of India's Struggle for Freedom*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 376.

[53] Hamza Alavi, 'Peasants and Revolution', reproduced in A.R. Desai (ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India*, pp. 702–03.

[54] An observation made by Abdulla Rasul, general secretary, All India Kisan Sabha, 1940–41 and 1947–52, in a personal discussion with the author (19 October 1983) in Calcutta.

[55] Abani Lahiri, 'Last Battle of Bengal Peasants under British Rule', in Nisith Ranjan Ray *et al.* (eds), *Challenge*, p. 386.

[56] 'For the Final Assault', Political Resolution of the CPI Central Committee, August 1946.

[57] The agitation was formally launched on 18 November 1946 at a *kisan* rally in the Dak Bungalow *maidan* of Kakdwip.

[58] Beating with shoes was the most cruel way of inflicting humiliation—a method very generously practised by the landed magnates on defaulting sharecroppers. In retaliation, the sharecroppers merely followed the landlords' example. *Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj*, p. 29.

[59] SDO, Diamond Harbour, 24 Parganas, to secretary, Board of Revenue and deputy secretary to Government of Bengal, Conf. Memo. No. C 266/2R–3/47, 9 March 1947, Land and Land Revenue Dept, Land Revenue Branch, File No. 6M—38/47, Government of Bengal, 1947, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Abani Lahiri, 'Last Battle of Bengal Peasants under British Rule', in Nisith Ranjan Ray *et al.* (eds), *Challenge*, p. 386.

[62] A report on the 'Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Feudal Struggle of the People in the Sundarbans and the Role of the Communist Party'. Also see *Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj*.

[63] *Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj*, p. 30.

[64] SDO, Diamond Harbour, 24 Parganas, to secretary, Board of Revenue and deputy secretary to the Government of Bengal, Conf. Memo. No. C266/2R–3/47, 9 March 1947.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Kangsari Haldar, '*Kakdwip Tebhaga Andolan*', in *Tebhaga Sangram Rajat Jayanti Smarak Grantha*, pp. 64–67.

[67] 'Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Feudal Struggle of the People in Sundarbans and the Role of the Communist Party'.

[68] Ibid.

[69] On 27 March 1947 communal riots broke out afresh in Calcutta and other affected parts of the province.

[70] Neither the provincial party nor the BPKS had an official pronouncement on this point. The Tebhaga movement, in fact, was never formally withdrawn by the Communists. However, party leaders feared, at this point, that agitations might aggravate a freshly disturbed communal problem (Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movement in India*, p. 118). Almost all the participants in the Tebhaga movement and those knowledgeable in party affairs, whom this author had the opportunity to consult, confirmed that the party leadership in April 1947 wanted 'to stop the movement [the *tebhaga*] for stopping the riots' (*andolan na kara, riot bandh kara*).

[71] Jyoti Basu approved of the general principles of the State Acquisition and Tenancy Bill when it was introduced in the legislature by the League ministry on 21 April 1947.

[72] Bhowani Sen, 'The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal', *Communist* (monthly), Vol. I, No. 3, September 1947, pp. 121–31.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Sunil Sen *Peasant Movement in India*, p. 142, fn. 56.

[75] Ibid.

[76] 'Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Feudal Struggle of the People in the Sundarbans and the Role of the Communist Party'.

[77] There is no evidence of any serious communal disturbance in Kakdwip between 1946 and 1950. Its small Muslim population of 7 per cent (*Census of India, 1941*, pp. 80–81) apparently had no difficulty in living harmoniously with others.

[78] 'Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Feudal Struggle of the People in the Sundarbans and the Role of the Communist Party'.

[79] It is said that Krishna Benode Ray, president of the BPKS, and Abani Lahiri, joint secretary, visited Kakdwip and the surrounding areas to convince the peasants there of the justification of the party's and the Samiti's new policy, namely, the stacking of paddy in the *jotedar's khamars*. The peasants, however, refused to accept this policy and sent the leaders back. Mahasweta Devi and Maitreya Ghatak, '*Prayata Asoke Bose Smarane*' (In Memory of Asoke Bose, who passed away) in Boudhayan Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *Sanskriti o Samaj* (a Bengali quarterly), first, second and third issues, Calcutta, December 1983, pp. 156–57. In a personal discussion with the author (15 July 1985), Abani Lahiri recalled visiting Kakdwip and other places in the winter of 1947, 'not for selling any new party line', but to try to read the peasant mind and to assess the situation in the area. While meeting peasants and discussing matters with them, he was struck by their militant temper and battle-readiness, and reported his findings accordingly to the party and the Kisan Sabha headquarters.

[80] List of open meetings where violence was preached. The High Court Judgement on Kangsari Haldar *vs.* the State.

[81] See the versions of Bhowani Sen, Abdur Razzak Khan and Kangsari Haldar in Krishnakant Sarkar, 'Kakdwip Tebhaga Movement', in A.R. Desai (ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India*, pp. 478 and 485 fn. 37.

[82] List of open meetings where violence was preached. The High Court Judgement on Kangsari Haldar *vs.* the State.

[83] Sukhen's report, 6 November 1948, in M.B. Rao (ed.), *Documents of the History of the Communist Party in India*, Vol. VII (1948–50), New Delhi, 1976, pp. 340–41.

[84] 'Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Feudal Struggle of the People in the Sundarbans and the Role of the Communist Party'.

[85] Sukhen's report, 6 November 1948, in M.B. Rao (ed.), *Documents*, Vol. VII, pp. 340–41.

[86] Political thesis adopted at the Second Congress, 28 February–6 March 1948, ibid., pp. 39–50.

[87] Ibid., pp. 68–117.

[88] Draft Report of the West Bengal Party, 1948–51, File No. 1948/52, P.C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

[89] Resolution of the PC West Bengal, CPI, '*Krishir Sankat o Krishaker Ladai*' (The Agrarian Crisis and the *Kisans*' Struggle), 26 November 1948, *Communist Bulletin* (in Bengali), 22 December 1948.

[90] 'Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Feudal Struggle of the People in the Sundarbans and the Role of the Communist Party'.

[91] Three other women, Batasi, Uttami and Sarojini, died in the firing. The men who died were Aswini, Gajen, Adhar and Deben.

[92] His name was Paresh Das.

[93] Maitreya Ghatak reconstructed an account of the incident by interviewing the observers and participants in Chandanpiri in November 1978. See Mahasweta Devi and Maitreya Ghatak, '*Prayata Asoke Bose Smarane*'.

[94] The circumstances and impact of Ahalya's death closely resemble those of the martyrdom of Doddi Komarayya on 4 July 1946 in Kaduvendi village, Janagaon taluk, Nallagonda district, which sparked off the armed struggle in Telengana.

[95] Folklore grew in the Sundarbans over the Ahalya legend and a popular song by the late Benoy Roy was broadcast by Radio Moscow.

[96] His name was Gopi Giri.

[97] *Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj*, pp. 43, 48.

[98] They were Dwarik Samanta, Aditya Samanta, Pulin Das and Krishnapada Mazumdar.

[99] *Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj.* Also see *Shibir* (Bengali weekly), 12 October 1949, pp. 17–18.

[100] Ibid., p. 2.

[101] Ibid., p. 3.

[102] Ibid., p. 4.

[103] *Shibir*, 12 October 1949, pp. 17–18.

[104] *Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj*, pp. 8–10.

[105] *Matamat* (Bengali weekly), 15 January 1950, p. 1.

[106] Secret Fortnightly Report, Home Pol. Dept, Government of West Bengal, Writers' Building, Calcutta, second half of December 1949.

[107] This is the rough estimate of those who participated in the Kakdwip uprising.

[108] *Banglar Shishu Telengana: Lalganj*, pp. 22–23.

[109] 'For Telengana today means Communists and Communists mean Telengana', Review of the Second Congress of the CPI, Politburo, CPI, March 1948, in M.B. Rao (ed.), *Documents*, Vol. VII, p. 197.

[110] 'Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Feudal Struggle of the People in the Sundarbans and the Role of the Communist Party'.

[111] 'Strategy and Tactics in the Struggle for People's Democratic Revolution in India', Politburo, December 1948, in M.B. Rao, ed., *Documents*, Vol. VII, p. 221.

[112] Ibid., p. 289.

[113] 'On the Agrarian Question in India', Politburo, CPI, December 1948, in ibid., p. 505.

[114] 'Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Feudal Struggle of the People in the Sundarbans and the Role of the Communist Party'.

[115] Ibid.

[116] *Matamat* (Bengali weekly), 15 January 1959, p. 1.

[117] Secret Fortnightly Report, Home Pol. Dept, Government of West Bengal, Writers' Building, Calcutta, first half of January 1950.

[118] Major Jaipal Singh was brought to Kakdwip at this point to organize and train guerrilla squads. The visit, however, was not very productive.

[119] Nowhere else in India has a peasant agitation covered such an extensive area and so large a population as the Tebhaga movement did.

[120] D.N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India, 1920–50*, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 172–73. In his rather superficial study of the Tebhaga movement (chapter VII), Dhanagare fails altogether to locate the significance of the happenings in Kakdwip before and after 1947.

[121] In this regard, the opinion of the late Charu Mazumdar, founder and ideologue of the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist), is not altogether pointless. In his opinion, the ripening of one mango is indication enough of the ripened state of all the mangoes in a tree. Mazumdar, incidentally, was one of the prominent leaders of the Tebhaga movement in Pachagarh, Jalpaiguri.

[122] It was for the first time in the history of left politics in Bengal that a substantial number of educated, middle-class, young communist activists (some of whom were students) came to the countryside in the wake of the famine of 1943, and attached themselves sincerely to the *kisans* and their cause through the following seven years.

[123] Bhowani Sen's article in *Swadhinata* (Bengali daily), 15 February 1947, cited in Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movement in India*, p. 114.

[124] Bhowani Sen's report, in *People's Age* (weekly), 30 November 1947.

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