

HINDUSTAN SOCIALIST REPUBLICAN ASSOCIATION: ITS PHILOSOPHY AND CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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Abstract

As an independent and sovereign India takes strides towards a lead role in the world, it behooves well to look back at the freedom struggle not only to pay homage to those courageous people who fought tirelessly for freedom and made the supreme sacrifice of their lives but also to understand the nature of it and have a deeper, wider perspective of the various streams of thoughts and actions prevailing to attain the same goal. While there existed a massive movement around Mahatma Gandhi's Non-violence ideology, another parallel effort was made through the revolutionary activities. In the realm of the latter, a very prominent organization was the Hindustan Republican Socialist Association (HSRA), associated with Bhagat Singh and others. This research paper will delve into the formation, ideology, activities and the overall contribution of the HSRA. Though termed a 'terrorist organization' by the British at that time, the association with its bold actions and vocabulary of sacrifice for the nation galvanized the youth, and even Mahatma Gandhi was forced to accept the valor and the patriotic spirit of these young revolutionaries. The paper will endeavor to bring out the true intent and thinking behind the HRA and present its role in the freedom movement in a broader perspective, through critical and comparative analysis, with a special focus on the Central Legislative Assembly bomb case.

Keywords

Revolutionary, Association, Republican, Freedom, Bhagat Singh.

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 21.11.2023

Approved: 22.12.2023

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RJPSSs 2023, Vol. XLIX,

No. 2, pp.263-270

Article No.34

Similarity Check: 8%

Online available at:

<https://anubooks.com/journal/research-journal-of-philosophy-amp-social-sciences>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2023v49i02.34>

Introduction

The study of the Indian freedom struggle presents an eclectic mix of varying philosophies. Various political leaders, and prominent figures in the independent movement propagated their own plan to wrangle independence from the British. At times these methodologies were dramatically opposite, as in the case of Gandhi's non-violent struggle against the foreign rule and the revolutionaries armed struggle to uproot the yoke of an alien government. To understand the nature of the Indian freedom struggle comprehensively, it is imperative to study both the streams as well as their variants deeply, and without bias, as whatever co-exists at any period of time, be it the people, events, ideologies, or organizations, is directly or indirectly related, interlinked, and impacted by everything around it. Therefore, study of one particular stream is not the negation of the other, but a quest for a deeper understanding of one piece of the entire mosaic.

Indians had realized the importance of forming associations to fight for their rights against the British way back in 1882 itself after the Illbert Bill controversy, when even the well-meaning Governor-General Lord Ripon could not grant equality to the Indians in the judicial services due to the vehement objection and lobbying by the groups of his own fellow countrymen.¹ The establishment of the Indian National Conference in 1883 and the Indian National Congress in 1885 provided a platform for the Indian intellectuals to raise their demands before the British, but the methods and manner initially were that of pleading rather than demanding. A drastic change came in the form of willful non-cooperation when Gandhi entered the scene of Indian polity in 1915. His unique method and appeal greatly expanded the canvas of involvement in the freedom struggle by attracting students, peasants, women and common people into the freedom movement, arousing national consciousness at a wider scale for the political cause. However, from his movements emerged other branches that were not convinced about the efficacy of his methods and devised a method of their own, along with their own separate organizations to fight for the same cause of India's freedom. One such stream was that of the revolutionaries, and one prominent organization following this path was the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA). They were frustrated with the slow pace of political actions based on persuasion or low-grade pressure and were convinced that the western imperialism could only be defeated by the use of force, and aimed to expel the British from India by terrorizing them. Therefore, they followed the path of armed struggle, recruited young people, manufactured bombs, used firearms, and assassinated British officials. To finance their activities, they conducted dacoities, looted banks and derailed trains.² They were much decried by the political leaders at

that time, however, this paper aims to put in perspective their philosophy, and intent in a broader perspective as visualized and at times articulated by many of the revolutionary leaders of HRA turned HSRA.

Origin of HSRA

Gandhiji's withdrawal from the Non-Cooperation Movement in the aftermath of the Chauri Chaura incident laid the foundation for the second phase of revolutionary activities. The youth had become disenchanted with the non-violence theory and was averse to seemingly unnecessary wait for the action to throw out the British. The unutilized, and directionless energy and angst in the wake of the suspension of NCM needed a vent out. Therefore, the erstwhile secret societies such as Yugantar and Anushilan were revived. However, this time they were accompanied by the realization of the imperativeness of an All-India organization. Thus, a meeting of revolutionaries from across India was organized in Kanpur in October 1924. It was here that the HRA (Hindustan Republican Association) was formed in the presence of leaders like Ram Prasad Bismil, Sachindranath Sanyal, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, and the younger revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh, Shiv Verma, Chandrashekhar Azad, Bhagvati Charan Vohra, and Sukhdev. The same organization was renamed as the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) in September 1928 at Ferozshah Kotla Maidan, Delhi. Its avowed aims were to reveal the futility of the Gandhian method of non-violence, to present the need for revolutionary action to attain independence, and to establish a federal Republic of the United States of India.³

Activities Undertaken by HRA/HSRA

To finance their activities, the revolutionaries of HRA conducted a dacoity on the Sahranpur-Lucknow train, at Kakori on 09th August 1925. Ten revolutionaries led by Ramprasad Bismil made away with Rs. 4,679 of the government treasury.⁴ The subsequent arrests and trial attracted widespread sympathy in the newspapers and even a resolution was brought in the U.P. Legislative Council regarding this. Ramprasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan, Roshanlal, and Rajendra Lahiri embraced the gallows raising patriotic slogans of 'downfall of British empire' and 'Bande Matram'. Their sacrifice generated a wave of anti-British feelings in the youth.

On 08 April, 1928, at 12.30 p.m. two young men later identified as Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw two bombs along with revolutionary leaflets into the Central Legislative Assembly, after which both of them courted arrest.⁵ K. C. Yadav, a renowned historian who has produced a number of works on Bhagat Singh writing about the coverage of the event in the newspapers noted that the incident of the bomb explosion in the Central Legislative Assembly made the banner

headline of the *The Tribune* on April 10th, 1929. Bhagat was then an underground revolutionary, so his identity wasn't known at that time, therefore, the report read so, "Two young men, one a Punjabi and the other a Bengali entered the Legislative Assembly, dropped Red leaflets, threw bombs and fired pistols. They were arrested." Yadav further noted the impact of the event, "From an unknown person in 1929, Bhagat Singh grew into a national hero by the time he was executed in 1931 because of his remarkable speeches in the court."⁶

The trial began on 07 May and the accused made the statements before the Sessions Judge Leonard Middleton. In the judgment pronounced on 12 June 1929, both were sentenced to Transportation for Life. However, another trial in the Lahore Conspiracy case began on 10 July in which Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were sentenced to Death. They were hanged in Lahore Central Jail on 31 March 1931 at 7.30 p.m.⁷ However, they deliberately utilized the court sessions to clarify their philosophy to their fellow countrypeople, as well as to the British and the posterity. They took it as an opportunity to spread the revolutionary thought and zeal in the youth across the nation.

The Debate on the Usage of Force and the Philosophy of the Bomb

Following a bomb explosion in Viceroy Irwin's train from Agra to Delhi on 23 December 1929, the revolutionaries' action and ideology met with criticism in Gandhiji's essay in *Young India*, titled, 'The Cult of the Bomb' in 1930. Mahatma Gandhi made deep observations on the usage of force as the means to attain any goal, and envisioned its outcome in these two ways: First, it leads to an 'increased repression by the ruler', enhancing the state's expenditure on police/military. Second, the culture of using violence to get rid of the society's problems, ultimately starts eating the same society that breeds and nourishes this ideology. It doesn't remain restricted to the 'foreigners' but even the own countrymen who are considered an obstacle, begin to be killed. Ramachandra Guha, making the note of these two observations, cites the example of Kashmir militants and Maoists who follow the cult of the bomb to redress certain grievances and ultimately turn their violence to kill their own countrymen.⁸ The deployment of Force by the State in these areas puts enhanced expenditure on public exchequer.

In the reply to Gandhi's essay, Bhagwati Charan Vohra, a member of the HSRA drafted 'The Philosophy of the Bomb', it was signed by the President HSRA and a copy of which was posted to Sabarmati Ashram also. Refuting the charges of 'delaying the day of independence', it reasoned with examples of Russia and Turkey that the use of force has everywhere around the world has only hastened the change. As to the 'increased state repression and enhanced military expenditure' it replied that

even a non-violent mass action would result in the same. It posed a question in return on the efficacy of non-violent methods in converting foes into friends by asking the names of a few O'Dawyers, Readings and Irwins who had been converted thus by the use of non-violence and the soul force alone consistently by Gandhi and the entire Congress paraphernalia. Accusing the Congress of begging for 'compromises' and thus damaging the cause of freedom, they retorted as to how someone who roamed around having their life at risk all the time, and ready to lay it down fearlessly for the cause of freedom, be called a 'coward'? They ended with an appeal to the youth, peasants and the laborers to join them to 'hold aloft the banner of freedom'.

The actions of revolutionaries were deeply rooted in their deep convictions. The writings of revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, their manifesto and pamphlets reveal the level of their knowledge of world affairs, history, the present condition of the nation, current happenings, and their erudition and depth of thought. They gave a detailed explanation of their actions and the philosophy and intent behind them. It wasn't merely a manifestation of hatred against the British Rule but a well-thought-out plan against imperialism, an attack on its symbols and machinery. It was accompanied by a vision for the future.

The Red Pamphlet by the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, signed by Balraj, Commander-in-Chief, begins by citing the statement used by Valiant, a French anarchist, and justifies the action of throwing the bombs in the Central Legislative Assembly, to create a loud voice to make the deaf hear, and goes on to present their disdain of the results of Montague-Chelmsford Reforms, the enactment of Public Safety and Trade Disputes Bills, the Press Sedition Bill, and their angst and anger over Lala Lajpat Rai's 'callous murder'. By citing the examples of the vanquished Bourbons and Czars, they reminded the British that the 'great empires crumbled while the ideas survived'.⁹

The statements made by Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Datt in the court during the trial made their standpoint on many aspects clear. They called the Bomb Incident a 'historic event' as if they were foreseeing its impact. The whole event had rather been planned and executed with the desired impact in mind. Thus, they set out to utilize the court room in clearing the misconceptions about the revolutionary movement. They first agree with Lord Irwin, the then Governor-General's observation that the attack was not against any individual, 'but against an institution itself', the institution being the 'so-called Indian Parliament', which the revolutionaries regarded to be a place where resolutions brought by its members to repeal repressive and unjustified measures have been 'trampled under foot', and where the government utterly disregards any objection by the elected members to its measures. They even

wonder at the political leaders' sagacity to be complicit in the waste of public money by thus indulging in this "stage-managed exhibition of India's helpless subjection".

As to the accusation upon them of terrorizing the nation, they clarify that 'we hold human life sacred beyond words.' They said that they were not perpetrators of dastardly deeds, nor were they the 'Lunatics' that the newspaper Tribune of Lahore had described them.¹⁰

Contribution:

V. N. Datta (2013) in his book *Gandhi and Bhagat Singh* writes, "Undeniably Bhagat Singh by his sacrifices had aroused national consciousness in the country. The question is what was his legacy? What was his achievement?"¹¹ The question applies to the entire revolutionary movement, the answer to which is provided in the following paragraphs.

Publication of Nationalistic Material

HSRA published various nationalistic and secular documents. One of these is its Fourth Manifesto: War of Freedom of 1857, which was published in 1933. It was banned at that time by the British government. It drew a comparative analysis between the 1857 War of Independence and the Non-Cooperation Movement. It accepted that both had taken bold steps for India's independence but the reason for their failure was the inherent differences in the Indian society. It urged that it was necessary to remove the differences between caste, and religion to fight the foreign oppression. It urged the people to unite and fight as one force. It thought of an equal and just society and advocated a secular version of the Indian independence movement.¹²

The Message of Unity

Baba Prithvi Singh Azad, a noted revolutionary remarked observing the unity of purpose between Ramprasad Bismil and Ashfaq Ulla Khan thus, "Ashfaq Ulla Khan and Ramprasad Bismil were patriots to the core and united in their ultimate purpose, they had become one. From their lives we have drawn one lesson as to how Hindus and Muslims can become one soul and two bodies; how two people following the tenets of humanity and harmony can live together and die together".¹³

The Awakening of Nationalistic Sentiments

The ultimate sacrifice by the revolutionaries of HSRA aroused the flame of national consciousness in the youth unprecedentedly. A witness to this Baba Prithvi Singh Azad, himself a fiery revolutionary, one of the founding members of Ghadr Party and a close associate of Chandra Shekhar Azad and Bhagat Singh, writes in the preface to the book, *Amar Shaheed Ashfaq Ulla Khan* (2018), "how the revolutionaries sacrificed their lives for the nation between 1924 and 1931 and what enthusiasm it had ignited in the country! How the patriotic men and women

had been aroused to lay down their lives: I am a live witness to that.” “The sound of Inqelabzindabad and the revolutionaries’ songs had splashed a new color across the hearts of the youth, who had joined the chorus. If the political leaders had supported them, our country would have been freed much sooner than 1947.” He further urged the then government to publish biographies and memoirs of the revolutionaries and make them a part of the educational curriculum, stating that, “There is no doubt that only such books can keep the integrity and unity of the nation intact”.¹⁴

Conclusion

Whether the path chosen by the revolutionaries for the attainment of freedom was right or wrong, may remain a matter of debate, however, their sense of patriotism, their level of awareness of their surroundings and the world events, their dedication to the cause and their willingness to give the ultimate sacrifice for the nation was beyond question. They no doubt added to the spectrum of the freedom struggle by giving it a new dimension, by setting an example of sheer grit and valor.

Immediately before he was hanged for the Kakori Conspiracy, Ashfaq Ulla Khan left a message for the countrymen, in which he wrote, “We have played our part on the stage of Mother India. Whatever right or wrong we did, it was with the intent of achieving independence. Some would applaud us, some would criticize, but even our enemies have to praise our courage and valor. Revolutionaries always fight for the good of the country. People say that we terrorize the nation, which is not true. Our trial continued for so long, but we didn’t even terrorize any witness or kill any spy, as this was not our aim. What we wanted was to be martyred like Kanhailal Datt, Khudiram Bose and Gopimohan Saha”.¹⁵

The legacy that the revolutionaries have left behind is the message of patriotism, unity and brotherhood. Ashfaq Ulla Khan’s last message to his countrymen before being hanged, read thus, “Indian brothers, whichever religion or sect you belong to, contribute together for the welfare of the nation. All religions are the same, only the paths are different, and the destination is the same, so why fight? Unite for us the Kakori convicts who are dying for the nation, and fight the bureaucracy together!”¹⁶ The nature of the fight may have changed, but the fight continues. The ‘exploitation of man by man’ hasn’t ended yet, and herein lies the significance of the understanding of the vision that the revolutionaries had for their beloved nation, for which they lay down their precious lives.

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