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Revolutionary Nationalism

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ABSTRACT

The dawn of revolutionary nationalism can be traced to the end of the 19th century which remains a witness to the proliferation of secret societies in several parts of India like Maharashtra, Bengal etc. like Mitra Mela by Vinayak Savarkar and Ganesh Savarkar in Nasik (1899). Revolutionary Nationalism has been a novel methodology to counter the oppressive British raj through individual heroism and at times provided a formidable challenge to the raj. This paper, therefore, attempts to comprehensively analyze various aspects of revolutionary nationalism. Its emergence crests and troughs in different phases have been studied. The paper also delves deeper into its ground-level impact both in the short run and the long run primarily in the context of the Indian struggle for freedom. Although Revolutionary nationalism remained popular and relevant only for the first three decades of the 20th century yet during this journey it coexisted with several historic events, starting from the Swadeshi boycott movement in 1905, tiding through the First World War (1914-1918) and non-cooperation movement (1921-22) and collapsing eventually by 1930. Thus an enquiry into its role in the Indian freedom struggle deserves substantial attention which has been attempted in this paper. Through an analysis of this scheme of individual heroism vital insights have been drawn highlighting major causes of its early collapse. Further, the unidirectional evolving ideological overtones of this approach have been distinctly stressed. Finally, the paper strives to draw out some crucial learnings from the spirit of this system of protest in the current context of time and space.

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

- Subhash Chandra Bose

I. INTRODUCTION

Nationalism is inspired by patriotism and in all spheres attaches utmost importance to the achievement and maintenance of the nation's sovereignty. When this notion of nationalism is concentrated through the revolutionary means to achieve the ultimate objective, it gives rise to revolutionary nationalism.

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Revolutionary nationalism played a dominant role in the making of the Indian National Movement. The activities of revolutionary heroism kicked off as an offshoot of the growth of militant nationalism. The upsurge in the experiences of exploitation of Indians by the British government somewhere served as an influencing factor in amplifying the spirit of nationalism among youth.

The fallout of the Swadeshi movement highlighted the failed attempt on the part of the militant nationalist to provide effective leadership and apt guidance.

The absence of impactful leadership, on the part of, extremists leads to the building of an ineffective organization and no deliberate efforts have been made to provide a medium to concentrate the revolutionary energies of youth into a fruitful and productive impact on the whole movement. On one hand, youth faced the continuous repressive measures taken by the British government. On the other hand, the frustration and tension created among youth due to the political dead-end faced by them as all the peaceful avenues for the political protest closed in front of them. All these lead towards the path of force and violence. The youth find the non-violent way of revolution as the most viable option to achieve their ultimate goal of independence. This leads to the start of the first phase of revolutionary nationalism.

The revolution ideology that was emerged in India was inspired by individual heroism and not mass-based struggle congruous to Irish nationalists or Russian nihilists. Their belief was quite intact in the eye for an eye and tooth for tooth way, i.e. the force must be met by force. Their individual heroic actions include the assassination of unpopular British officials with the view to disrupting the government machinery and its functioning, manifesting terror in the hearts of the government, and encouraging people to adopt the means of force to expel the colonial rule and achieve independence.

The first phase of the revolutionary movement (1907-1917) in India principally set off in the region of Bengal, Maharashtra and Punjab as they were more politically engaged and active regions as compared to the other regions of the country.

(A) Research Objectives

1. To trace the emerging roots of the novel methodology of revolutionary nationalism and investigate its causes as well as ideological foundations guiding such activities.
2. To analyze the pattern of evolution of revolutionary activities during its first phases (1907-17) during important events like the Swadeshi boycott movement and First World War, and enquire into its consequent impacts.

3. To study about spatial and temporal spread of revolutionary nationalism in the context of the Indian freedom struggle against British raj.
4. To attempt an analysis of the causes of the resurgence of revolutionary activities in second phases after a brief lull during the non-cooperation movement (1921-22).
5. To observe revolutionary activities in this second phase and corresponding British response.
6. To understand the ideological reformation achieved and the factors responsible for such a clear crystallization.
7. To study draw out vital conclusions about revolutionary nationalism through a comprehensive analysis and attempt to develop the scope of its spirit in the modern world.

(B) Literature Review

1. The book, 'A Brief History of Modern India' by Rajiv Ahir has been reviewed liberally during the creation of the research paper. Going through the relevant chapters concerned with the subject matter of this research was indeed a captivating experience. The book presents the critical details, linkages and historical junctures in a lucid yet holistic manner. The chronological consistency provided the much needed systematic design and orientation to the otherwise vast topic spanning across more than 30 steady years. The spatial features of historical events were also covered in a reader-friendly style in this book. For instance, tracing the development of revolutionary activities in Bengal and Maharashtra and how the former differed from the latter provided a comprehensive scope for comparative analysis.

2. The book, 'India's struggle for Independence' by Bipin Chandra also deserves credit as far as this research project is concerned. This book provided immense guidance especially during the study of the second phase of revolutionary activities in the early 1920s. The book has logically and clearly explained in a persuasive fashion the occurrence of events and how one particular event led to another leading to the ultimate conclusion. This book does not seem to believe in just studying history, but rather accompanies the reader into indulging in an even more important activity i.e. "exploring history".

(C) Research Questions

1. What factors necessitated the rise of revolutionary activities in India?
2. What were the ideological footings of such a scheme of things in the context of the Indian freedom struggle?

3. How did the Pandora box of individual heroism activities unfold itself during its "first phase" before its initial lull (1907-1917)?
4. What factors precipitated the brief respite consequent to the first phase of revolutionary nationalism and what was the response of revolutionaries to this respite?
5. Why did the gathering storm of revolutionary nationalism become inevitable after the fallout of the non-cooperation movement (1921-22) and what made the decade of 1920s critically significant for revolutionary nationalism?
6. What was the overall impact and contribution of revolutionary activities to the cause of India's struggle for freedom?
7. What was the ideological vision of prominent revolutionary nationalists and how it enabled them to redefine the very foundations of "revolution" from individual heroism to mass-based movements?
8. How did the brave acts of individual heroism leave an indelible mark upon the legacy of India's tale of Independence and the long term scope of the "spirit" of revolutionary nationalism?

(D) Research Methodology

The research methodology adopted for this research study is doctrinal research. It is also known as secondary research. The data collected from the sources which include books, research articles, short articles and online sources.

II. FIRST PHASE OF REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITIES

The rise of revolutionary activities witnessed significant events of the revolution mainly in the areas of Bengal, Maharashtra, and Punjab. This phase preached the belief of sacrificing oneself in the service of the nation and advocated the violent means as they believed that their sincere endeavour will help the country free from the clutches of British rule.

In Bengal, the formation of the first revolutionary group took place in 1902 at Midnapore under the patronage of Jnanendranath Basu and the same year witnessed the emergence of the prominent secret society, Anushilan Samiti², headquartered at Calcutta. This ³secret society was founded by Satish Chandra with barrister Promotha Mitter engaged in several revolutionary activities. Furthermore, it started a weekly journal *Yugantar* to outspread the revolutionary ideology. To keep the revolutionary spirit alive, the yugantar group indulged in

² Roy, K., & Roy, K. (2008). FROM TERRORISM TO SOCIALISM : THE ROLE OF ANUSHILAN SAMITI (1935 – 47). *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 69, 574-586. Retrieved May 21, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147221>

³ Secret Societies in Bengal 1905-1920, Aritra Gopal Mazumder

few abortive actions which include failed attempt of taking the life of unpopular British officials like Sir Fuller and Sir Andrew Fraser.

Rashebari Bose and Sachin Sanyal also attempted to organize revolutionaries in UP, Delhi and Punjab. They have made efforts to carry out revolutionary activities. Other events of revolutionary activities included bombing the carriage, killing of the public prosecutor, the assassination of deputy superintendent of police, dacoities to gather funds for the revolutionary organizations, etc.

In Maharashtra, the revolutionary activities came into movement with the establishment of the Ramosi Peasant Force by Vasudev Balwant Phadke. The prominent secret society that was actively operational was Abhinav Bharat formed by V.D.Savarkar, later on, merged the secret society named Mitra Mela with itself. In the later period, Nasik, Poona and Bombay were recognized as the centres of bomb manufacture.

The violent measures and activities comprised a major portion of the revolutionary movement. On the other hand, the role of media was duly appreciated. Revolutionaries were acquainted with the power of media⁴ and therefore used it as a medium and an impactful tool to preach the ideology of revolutionary nationalism and encouraged people to resort to the means of violence to achieve the ultimate objective of freedom of the nation. The famous journals during this phase that holds the potential to create an impact on the minds of the people included Sandhya and Yugantar in Bengal, Kal in Maharashtra and Bharat Mata in Punjab.

The revolutionary movement in this phase was inspired by individual heroism and owing to which this phase witnessed various events of individual acts of heroism and not mass-based actions. The actions undertaken by the individual revolutionaries like the killing of government officials and public prosecutors were aimed to disrupt the whole system and working of the government machinery. Their courage and strong respect towards the motherland is indeed appreciable but owing to certain challenges this movement failed to achieve the success and goal it had aimed.

The revolutionary activities in this phase were restricted in their scope because of the absence of strong mass-based actions and the movement, later on, took the shape of a confined upper-caste social movement. Furthermore, the immense importance was started to being attached with the Hindu religion as compared to the Muslim religion which in turn paved the way for quixotic heroism. These challenges somewhere contributed towards the less impactful results

⁴ Gagandeep Kaur, Role of Journalism and Indian freedom movement, Excellent Publishers, <http://www.ijcrar.com/abstractview.php?ID=456&vol=6-3-2018&SNo=4>

of this revolutionary movement.

If an active leadership under a great leader had grabbed the opportunity, then it would have been accompanied by the potential to outcast the strength of unity. As a result of which a strong social mass base could have been formed this could have created a great impact on the whole National movement.

The British government instead of getting feared by the attempts of the revolutionaries of creating terror it opted to resort to the repressive policy which also includes passage of the draconian act, i.e Rowlatt act and other harsh measures. Thus, the first phase of the revolutionary movement experienced a decline as it failed to stand against state repression.

III. REVIVAL OF REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITY IN THE DECADE OF 1920

In early 1920, the British government brought the Montford plan and to gather a peaceful and wider acceptance of reform injected in the system, it tried to build a harmonious environment. This was further backed by the release of revolutionaries.

In this phase, the Non-Cooperation movement was set off by Mahatma Gandhi. This movement turned out to be a silver lining and thus accepted as a feasible alternative. It was capable to gather wide support and many revolutionaries agreed to join or suspend their activities.

The Non-Cooperation Movement experienced sudden withdrawal owing to the horrifying incident of Chauri-Chaura⁵ where a large group of protestors resorted to violent means. This incident witnessed the death of three civilians and twenty-two policemen. Since Mahatma Gandhi supported and preached only non-violent means of revolution and with the involvement of violent measures he decided to withdraw the Non-Cooperation Movement.

The sudden withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement leads to many questions on the strategy of nationalist leaders and also upon non-violence as an alternative. In this period, youth found the alternative of violence and force as a means to achieve goals as most convincing and this lead to the revival of revolutionary activities. This period gave rise to two revolutionary groups- one was operational in Punjab-UP-Bihar province and another one in Bengal.

Punjab-UP-Bihar

The revolutionary activities in this region were governed and controlled by the Hindustan Republican Association/Army or HRA(later renamed as Hindustan Socialist Republican Association).

⁵ Civilsdaily, Centenary of Chauri-Chaura incident (Feb. 03, 2021), <https://www.civilsdaily.com/news/pib-centenary-of-chauri-chaura-incident/>

HRA was founded in October 1924 in Kanpur by Ram Prasad Bismil and other important figures associated with HRA are Chandrasekhar Azad, Ashfaqulla Khan, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev Thapar and Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee.

The main objective of this organization is to bring down the British rule by resorting to violent means and establish in its place the Federal Republic of the United States of India whose basic fundamentals would be an adult franchise.

The revolutionary activities of HSRA were:

- **Kakori Conspiracy was a train robbery:**

The most famous incident was the Kakori Conspiracy. This occurred on 9th August 1925. Some members attempted to loot a train carrying government money near Lucknow. An innocent passenger was killed within the process. People whose involvement was concerned in this episode were Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan, Rajendra Lahiri and Thakur Roshan Singh. All four were eventually hanged to death by the British government in 1927 for their involvement. Chandrasekhar Azad was also involved in this episode but he evaded arrest.

- **The killing of John Saunders to seek revenge:**

Bhagat Singh and Rajguru (Born on August 24, 1908) shot another police officer John Saunders although they intended to shoot Scott. However, the HSRA still claimed that revenge had been extracted.

- **Central Assembly Bombing Case:**

Bhagat Singh and BK Dutt bombarded the Central Legislative Assembly, Delhi on 8th April 1929. Their only intention was to “make the deaf hear” and not to harm anyone. Nobody was found injured in this case and both the revolutionaries courted arrest after the incident. As they were arrested, they shouted slogans like ‘Inquilab Zindabad’ and ‘Down with Imperialism’.

When the judgement for this case was passed, both Singh and Dutt were sentenced to ‘transportation for life. But in the meantime, the case of the murder of Saunders was linked to Singh. In 1931, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were hanged to death for it. Azad was also killed by the police during a shootout at Allahabad in 1931.

- Conducting robberies and raids in an effort to boost funds to accumulate arms and ammunition.
- In 1929, the HSRA also bombed a train carrying the then viceroy of India, Lord Irwin. Although he was unharmed.

Bengal

Owing to the repressive actions by the British government, revolutionary activities suffered a setback. But soon they started regrouping.

Chittagong Armoury Raid (April 1930):

Under the leadership of Surya Sen, revolutionaries continued to advocate violent measures as a form of revolution. They attempted to take control over two main armouries in Chittagong with the objective to seize and supply the arms and ammunition to revolutionaries. They also attempted to tear down the telephone lines and displaced the railway link of Chittagong district that connects it with the rest of Bengal. The raid was quite successful. Surya Sen was arrested in February 1933 and later hanged to death in January 1934.

Participation of Women in Revolutionary Activities in Bengal

This revolutionary movement also witnessed the active involvement of women up to a great scale. They undertook various activities which include aiding in providing shelter, transferring messages and important information and fighting with guns in hand. This phase witnessed the role played by the women revolutionaries in Bengal and some of the prominent women revolutionaries include Pritilata Waddadar, Kalpana Dutt, Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Chanderi, Bina Das.

IV. REDEFINING REVOLUTION

Revolution is concerned with the undertaking of certain actions by resorting to a particular kind of means to achieve the end objective. The goal to seek national liberation and put an end to imperialism remained the same. But the additional goal that was added to the list was to achieve a novel socialist order and to fight against exploitation. A significant improvement was made by Bhagat Singh and other revolutionaries in terms of revolutionary ideology, forms of revolutionary struggle and the goals of the revolution. He was greatly inspired by Marxism and also concentrated the importance on the ideologies of socialism and communism.

- Change in goals of revolution:

Initially, their objective was confined to the achievement of freedom from colonial rule. But later on, it also embraced the idea of the new socialist order and to lay a strong fight against the system of exploitation. It also advocated the idea of communism intending to adopt the idea of equal right for every citizen on natural resources. It also emphasized upon Hindu-Muslim unity.

- Changes in the forms of revolution:

It involves significant changes in the way of seeking the objective. Revolutionaries strive to achieve national liberation by employing ideological changes and adopting mass-based movement instead of utilizing terror. They also started to detach the importance of individual heroism and started opposing communalism.

Despite the existence of some contemporary challenges and limitations, Bhagat Singh and his comrades were quite successful in bringing changes to the ideology.

V. CONCLUSION

As this paper looks at the birth, crests, troughs and decline of revolutionary nationalism, it appears to be substantially convincing that indeed this novel scheme of protest, though uncommon was hugely inspiring and appealing. Beginning with the fresh dawn of the 20th century it surprisingly not only survived but also thrived for three long decades till 1930 despite ruthless suppression attempts by the British raj. What makes the revolutionary pathway of protest special wasn't just its contribution to the independence movement, but rather the eternal guidance of its very spirit that reflects in countless ways and means even in contemporary times. It was probably their passionate embrace of socialism that it became an inalienable part of our constitution and policymaking, acquiring a permanent place in the preamble. Their quest for political, social and economic democracy has certainly influenced in complex and subtle ways parts on fundamental rights, directive principles of state policy and fundamental duties. Their courage and dedication continue to inspire quests for justice. Whether the cause is of human rights or gender justice or minority protection or climate change, their spirit guides us to stop not until justice is achieved. One can hardly deny, for instance, the revolutionary character of the celebrated #me too movement. Treading upon the path of revolutionary socialism seems to be a perfect way forward, especially as poverty, ignorance and inequities resurface in testing times of the covid 19 pandemic. Perhaps the greatest lesson one can learn from the revolutionaries is to abandon fear and embrace justice. When one internalizes intolerance to injustice, it hardly matters whether one is a party to the case or not. It is at this point of realization that a creed of selflessness emerges, defying narrow and restrictive lanes of individualism and egoism, paving way for true harmony. It was perhaps their enchanting aura that compelled the popular Urdu poet Hasrat Mohani to pen down the slogan Inquilab Zindabad (Long Live The Revolution) and rightly so.
