
UNIT 13 REVOLUTIONARY TRENDS*

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13.1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of revolutionary thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the result of several internal and external influences working on the minds of the young men. The most vital factor was the growth of religious revival of the late nineteenth century. Besides this, there were several foreign influences, like the impact of the American War of Independence, the Irish struggle for freedom, the unification of Italy, the lives of Mazzini and Garibaldi, the Japanese victory over Russia and last but not the least, the revolution against the Tsarist regime in Russia. All these factors together introduced in the nationalist struggle a strong revolutionary element.

13.2 BACKGROUND

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 by the liberal politicians and succeeded in bringing together educated, upper class Indians on a common political platform. The Congress party, although representing the most progressive sections of Indian society, failed to keep pace with the wave of nationalism which was sweeping over India during the closing years of the nineteenth century. The renaissance had led to a rediscovery of an ancient Indian past. The spirit of militancy came in the wake of religious awakening, which lent its support to Hindu revivalism and strengthened the feelings of respect for national traditions. There was a curious blending of religion with politics. Most of the revolutionary leaders of this period were deeply religious men. They loved their country and loved everything Indian. There was contempt for alien rule and alien things, Western education, Western thought and Western ways of living.

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Maharashtra and Bengal emerged as the two powerful centres of the revolutionary activities. B.G. Tilak and V.D. Savarkar provided the ideas, organisation and leadership in Maharashtra, while Bankim Chandra, Aurobindo Ghosh and Swami Vivekanand did the same in Bengal. Tilak offered the revolutionary and political interpretation of *Gita* and was deeply inspired by *Bhagwat Gita*'s clarion call to duty and Krishna's exhortation to Arjun. Tilak also re-oriented the Shivaji and Ganpati festivals for political purpose and militant dreams. His speeches, writings and activities inspired the young Chapekar brothers to form *Hindu Dharm Sanrakshini Sabha*, which was responsible for the assassination of several hated British officers. Stirred by the suffering and martyrdom of Chaphekar brothers, V.D. Savarkar started an association called the *Mitra Mela* at Nasik in 1900. It was changed into *Abhinav Bharat Society* in 1904 and shifted to Poona. The title was taken from *Young Italy* of Mazzini. This society actively took part in organizing meetings, bringing out publications and celebrating Ganapati and Shivaji festivals.

The revolutionary movement in Bengal derived its inspiration from the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterji and the exhortations of Swami Vivekanand. The other notable contributor to the revolutionary creed was Aurobindo Ghosh. Pramathanath Mitra launched an organisation in 1901, called *Anushilan Samiti*, a name taken from Bankim's writings. It was joined by Aurobindo Ghosh, C.R. Das, Barindra Ghosh and Jatin Bannerjee. *Bhagwat Gita* was used in different ways in several publications. The greeting *Bande Mataram* (Hail Mother) of *Anand Math* became a war cry of the extremist party in Bengal. Bankim gave a religious significance to the idea of motherland by declaring that in the image of the benign goddess *Durga* could be seen the future greatness of the Motherland. The new revolutionary gospel or cult of *Shakti* called upon the Bengalis to shed the blood of their oppressors.

Though religious revival generated contempt for the imperialists and instilled a yearning for independence, it alienated a sizable population of Muslims from its ranks. It seems that the ideologues of this period articulated their nationalist appeal in such a tightly structured manner that there appeared no possibility for any outsider to share their vision of 'Hindu nationalism'.

As mentioned before, the Indian revolutionary movement was further influenced by the lives of Mazzini, Garibaldi, several Irish revolutionaries, the victory of Japan over Russia in 1905 and the revolutionary principles of France, America and Russia. B.C. Pal held Mazzini to be one of the principal sources of the birth of new nationalism in India. Annie Besant also compared Mazzini and Aurobindo and described them as the men of the same type. V.D. Savarkar translated Mazzini's Autobiography into Marathi.

13.3 EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

When the revolutionary ideas were gaining ground under these influences, the partition of Bengal in 1905 fell like a bomb shell. The revolutionary forces discerned the old game of 'counterpoise of native against native' and the 'divide and rule' in the disguise of administrative efficiency. The people began to emulate Russian methods and an attempt was made to kill an ex-Magistrate of Dacca on December 23, 1907. The next target was Kingsford, the magistrate of Muzaffarpur, who had ordered several youngmen to be flogged. At Muzaffarpur, Khudi Ram

Bose and Prafulla Chaki threw a bomb on two innocent British ladies by mistake as they were traveling in a carriage similar to Mr. Kingsford. On the upshot of the Muzaffarpur case, Tilak remarked that ‘the appearance of the bomb in India had changed the outlook of Indian politics.’ He urged the government of India that ‘the answer to the bomb was political reform and not repression.’

Sachindranath Sanyal founded *Anushilan Samiti* at Benares in 1908, which was later rechristened as Young Men’s Association. Hardayal along with Amir Chand and Dinanath also became active. But Hardayal left for U.S.A. in 1911. So, till the arrival of Rash Behari Bose, the Delhi group remained languid. Bose activated the group and started a magazine called *Liberty* which taught people to make bombs. Soon an attempt was made on Viceroy Lord Hardinge’s life on December 23, 1912 in which he escaped unhurt. The organisers of this attempt issued a bulletin and commended the attempt on the Viceroy’s life. It invoked the authority of religious scriptures to justify the attempt on Viceroy’s life: ‘The *Gita*, the *Vedas* and the *Koran* all enjoin us to kill all the enemies of our Motherland irrespective of caste, creed or colour.’ Rash Behari escaped arrest while four persons were hanged in this Delhi Conspiracy Case. Rash Behari Bose and his associates next made a novel attempt at simultaneous uprising with the help of Indian soldiers. The plan leaked out before the appointed date of February 21, 1915 and all prominent revolutionaries were rounded up. Rash Behari again evaded arrest and reached Japan to continue this revolutionary struggle.

The British policy of repression led to the many conspiracy cases in which several revolutionaries were eliminated. There was a lull in the revolutionary activities, but Gendalal Dixit of Mainpuri kept the torch of revolution burning for some time. He was soon arrested in the Mainpuri Conspiracy Case and died after his release in the tragic circumstances. The leaders, who evaded arrest and secretly left the country, continued their struggle from the land of their exile. Many of them chose America because the Indian revolutionaries thought of America as being ‘the land of freedom and opportunity.’ Hardayal started a paper called *Ghadar* in May 1913 from San Francisco. Later *Ghadar* party was named after the name of the paper. The party was strictly secular and the aim of the *Ghadar* party was to overthrow the British *Raj* in India and to establish the *Panchayat Raj* (Republican State) based on freedom and equality.

The *Ghadar* spirit also travelled to the Far East and its branch was established by Barkatullah Khan in Japan and some others did the same in Hong Kong and Shanghai. With the outbreak of the Great War, Kabul also became a rendezvous of some leading rebels. It was here that a provisional government of India was established by Raja Mahendra Pratap, who became its President and Barkatullah, its Prime Minister.

13.4 EARLY FOUNTS OF IDEOLOGICAL INSPIRATION

The activities, writings and the speeches of the revolutionaries of this period reveal a strong religious bias, romanticism and emotionalism. Many of them were convinced that “a purely political propaganda would not do for the country, and that people must be trained up spiritually to face dangers.” But their religion was different from the one practised by the majority of the people of the country.

They were puritans to a certain extent. This was so because they thought it indispensable for the life of a revolutionary. At the same time they were against all sorts of narrow mindedness and prejudices which erect barriers between man and man. Despite the dominance of religiosity, the revolutionary groups were not totally devoid of a secular or even anti-religious trends. Bhupendradra Nath Dutta refused to take a vow on Hindu *shastras* alone. Some of the early revolutionaries complained that the Hindu rituals were alienating possible Muslim sympathisers. Hemchandra Kanungo and his comrades at Midnapore provided further strength to the anti-religious stance of a number of revolutionaries. Interestingly, three out of four early martyrs including Satyendranath Basu, Kanailal Dutta, and Khudiram Basu were among the sceptics.

No doubt, there were weaknesses in the ideology of the early revolutionaries and there were defects inherent in their reliance on religious teachings for advancing the cause of revolution, yet it is also clear beyond any shadow of doubt that to the staunch revolutionaries the emancipation of India through armed struggle was the supreme goal and that they looked upon religion only as a means to serve this end. This aspect should not be lost sight of or underestimated while making an assessment of the earlier phase of the revolutionary movement. They initiated the search for a revolutionary ideology and revolutionary programme by drawing lessons from our own history as well as from the histories of the revolutions in other countries. They did not preach social reform but broke down the barriers of age-old revered customs. They revolted against anything that tried to place obstacles in the path of the onward march of the revolutionary movement. Their weaknesses of emotionalism and romanticism could be overcome only by the realisation that revolution is a social process governed by definite laws. This realisation dawned upon the revolutionaries with the impact of Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

13.5 BEGINNINGS OF A NEW REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT

The world economic situation worsened during the First World War. The peacetime industries and agriculture were in a miserable shape in all the belligerent countries. This was accompanied by direct and indirect taxes, which were levied on workers and peasants to replenish the empty treasury. The British government was aware of the storm of political feeling in India during the period of the First World War. The optimism generated by the Wilsonian sentiments, the solemn pledges during the war and the Montague Declaration of August 1917 was not enough to contain either the masses or the classes. They wanted these declarations to be matched by concrete actions. But all illusion about British promises was soon torn to shreds by the introduction of the Rowlatt Bill, calculated to smother free expression and political activities. The provisions of the Defence of India Act were to expire six months after the end of the war. The threat of revolutionary “terrorism” and Bolshevism goaded the British to arm its Indian administration with powers of preventive detention.

There was a chorus of universal condemnation joined even by the sophisticated elements of Indian polity like the moderates and the Congress. Gandhiji gave a call to organise protests and *hartals* all over the country. In the wake of this agitation, on 13th April 1919, the Jallianwala Bagh massacres took place at

Amritsar. It was an indirect gain to the tremendous growth of national consciousness in India. Gandhiji wrote to the Duke of Connaught in February 1921, “We are determined to battle with all our might against that un-English nature which has made Dyerism possible.” He launched the non-cooperation movement and the boycott of the British goods. He assured freedom by the midnight of December 31, 1921 and appealed to the revolutionaries to desist from their activities for one year. The revolutionaries assured Gandhi that they would suspend their violent activities for one year. Many of the students, in enthusiasm, gave up their studies at the Mahatma’s call and devoted wholeheartedly to the struggle for freedom. The economic and labour crisis of the time added fuel to the fire. However, the sudden suspension of the movement after Chauri Chaura led to utter frustration among Mahatma’s young cadres. Many youngmen like Chandra Shekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Manmathnath Gupta and many others could not appreciate Gandhi’s concept of combining politics with morality which had dealt a fatal blow to the popular movement. They were drawn towards the violent creed and thus, the sudden bottling up of a great movement saw the revival of the revolutionary activities in India.

13.6 BIRTH OF HRA (HINDUSTAN REPUBLICAN ASSOCIATION)

Besides the frustration with the Gandhian experiment, the impact of the Bolshevik revolution was being felt more and more and this led to a widening of horizon among the revolutionary groups. ‘Socialism, though not clearly understood, was attracting their minds and the ideals of social justice which were in a nebulous form in the earlier period were turning towards taking a distinct shape.’ It was not only the young generation of revolutionaries which was exposed to the new ideas but the elders ‘have also started discussing Soviet Revolution and Communism in 1924.’ The upsurge of the working class after the Great War greatly influenced all of them. They watched this new social force carefully. They could see the revolutionary potentialities of the new class and desired to harness it to the nationalist revolution.

With this objective, the revolutionaries of U.P. and Punjab set in motion an organisation called the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) in 1924. The Constitution of the HRA declared its objective “to establish a Federated Republic of the United States of India by an organised and armed revolution.” The association envisaged that the “basic principle of the republic shall be universal suffrage and the abolition of all systems which make any kind of exploitation of man by man possible.” It was committed to “the organisation of labour and *kisans*” as it was necessary for the successful struggle against capitalism and feudalism. The programme of the HRA reveals that its members and founders had become advanced in their ideas. They were not inspired only by the *Bhagwat Gita*, *Anandmath*, Aurobindo, Vivekanand and the militant nationalists but they have also read about Russian, French and Irish revolutions. Jogesh Chandra Chatterji, its principal founder, was exposed to socialist thought in jail during 1916 and 1920.

13.6.1 Ideology and Programme of HRA

The Hindustan Republican Association shifted ideologically from a narrow selfless patriotism to a vague sort of socialism—and even internationalism. This

came out clearly, in its pamphlet entitled '*The Revolutionary*' published on January 1, 1925, and which was said to be the manifesto of the revolutionary party of India. This pamphlet revealed to a very large public that the revolutionaries were committed to certain lofty social ideals. The pamphlet '*The Revolutionary*' began with the words of Nietzsche that "Chaos is necessary to the birth of a new star" and the birth of life is accompanied by agony and pain. India is also taking a new birth, and is passing through that inevitable phase, when chaos, and agony shall play their destined role, when all calculations shall prove futile, when the wise and mighty shall be bewildered by the simple and weak, when great empires shall crumble down, and new nations shall arise and surprise humanity with the splendour and glory which shall be all its own. The HRA, crossing the barriers of narrow nationalism, proclaimed in its manifesto: 'The revolutionary party is not national but international in the sense that its ultimate object is to bring harmony in the world by respecting and guaranteeing the diverse pointed interests of the different nations; it aims not at competition but at co-operation between the different nations and states.'

The HRA did believe and acted according to the methods of older revolutionaries. It also believed in the armed overthrow of the imperialist government. The manifesto categorically declared that the foreigners "have no justification to rule over India except the justification of the sword, and therefore the revolutionary party has taken to the sword." However, the advancement made by the HRA was spelt out clearly in the next sentence: "But the sword of the revolutionary party bears ideas at its edge."

13.6.2 Kakori Conspiracy Case

One of the major actions of HRA was Kakori Train dacoity Case, which is also known as Kakori Conspiracy Case. As pointed out above, the HRA did believe in armed action against the imperialist government, they planned this dacoity to generate money, which they desperately needed. On August 9, 1925, a group of HRA activists including Ram Prasad Bismil, Ashfaquallah Khan, Chandrashekhar Azad, Manmathnath Gupta, Rajen Lahiri and others stopped a train at Kakori near Lucknow and walked away with the government cash from the guard's coach. No innocent passenger was harmed. Within a few months, most of the revolutionaries were arrested and tried in the famous Kakori Conspiracy Case. Four of them including Bismil and Ashfaquallah were hanged while others were sentenced for different jail terms.

13.7 FORMATION AND ACTIVITIES OF HSRA (HINDUSTAN SOCIALIST REPUBLIC ASSOCIATION)

The late 1920s saw severe economic depression followed by intense labour upsurge. The Indian working class was increasingly coming under Bolshevik influence leading to the formation of a number of labour unions with distinct communist leanings. Besides, there were youth movements in 1928 and 1929, raising the demand for complete independence and radical social and economic changes. Both Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose organised the Independence for India League as a pressure group within the Congress to carry forward the campaign for acceptance of the goals of complete independence and what the

U.P. branch of the League in April, 1929 described as a ‘socialist democratic state in which every person has the fullest opportunities for development... (with) state control of the means of production and distribution.’ But once again, this left theoretical radicalism of the Congress could not find adequate expression in concrete action or organisation. Jawaharlal Nehru, when questioned by Gandhi, went back to the liberal, bourgeois politics of the Congress, leaving the youth charged but frustrated.

The HRA was frustrated with the verbal radicalism of the Congress, and was itself rendered weak and powerless after the Kakori Conspiracy Case. Thus it decided to rebuild the organisation. Most of the experienced revolutionaries were behind the bars and the rest were underground to escape arrest. In these circumstances, the young members of the HRA led by Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Shiv Verma, Chandra Shekhar Azad and Vijay Kumar Sinha, undertook the task of reorganising the party. A meeting of the important members was held in 1927 at Kanpur, primarily for this purpose. It was soon followed by another crucial meeting for the formation of the Central Committee of HRA on 8 and 9 September, 1928 in the romantic surroundings of the ruins of the *Feroz Shah Kotla* at Delhi. This was an important meeting which was attended by ten participants from U.P., Bihar, Punjab and Rajasthan. The meeting resulted in the adoption of a revolutionary programme with an advanced revolutionary socialist outlook for their organisation. Finally Bhagat Singh and his friends succeeded in convincing their critics who agreed to rechristen the association by including socialism as one of the main goals. Thus, the name of the Hindustan Republican Association was finally changed to Hindustan Socialist Republican Association.

The HRA aimed at the establishment of a Federal Republic of the United States of India where the basic principle would be adult suffrage, while the HSRA, as indicated by its name, proclaimed the goal of establishing a socialist republic. Long before this, Bhagat Singh and his comrades formed *Naujawan Bharat Sabha* in Lahore with a distinct goal of establishing a socialist republic in India. Bhagat Singh was convinced that the salvation of India lay not merely in political independence but in economic freedom. The newly formed HSRA also decided that the soldiers of the HSRA will leave their homes, keep no contact with their families and devote full time and energy for the party work. Religious communalism and ritualism were banned.

13.7.1 Simon Commission and the Revolutionaries

“The year 1928 was, politically, a full year,” writes Pandit Jawaharlal, “with plenty of activity all over the country.” The Trade union movement was pushing itself steadily and its militant ideology was fostering class consciousness among the workers. In this electrified atmosphere, the Simon Commission landed in Bombay on February 3, 1928. It was an all-white commission appointed to report and review the political situation of India. No Indian was given a place on the Commission which was considered an affront to national respect by all the political parties of the country. The major segments of the country unanimously decided to boycott the Commission. It was greeted with *hartal* in Bombay and slogans like ‘Go Back Simon’ were raised.

There were conflicts between the police and the people at various places but Lahore brought matters to a head. The anti-Simon Commission demonstration

was led by Lala Lajpat Rai in Lahore and as he stood by the roadside he was assaulted and hit on his chest with a baton by a young English police officer. For Lalaji, being a heart patient, a severe blow on the chest proved fatal. His death sent a wave of indignation and the young of the country took it as an insult to the nation. The HSRA decided to kill Scott, the Chief police executive, who was present on the spot.

Apprehending fear to his life Scott took shelter in the police training school from where he seldom came out. Later on Saunders, his deputy was chosen as the target and his movements were watched for several days. The December 17 1928 was fixed for Saunders' murder and Rajguru, Bhagat Singh and Chandra Shekhar Azad were entrusted with the responsibility. A great sensation spread in Lahore at the murder of the Deputy Superintendent of Police. The next day, red leaflets written in English were distributed by the HSRA men saying "Bureaucracy alerted. Lala Lajpat Rai's death is avenged by the murder of J.P. Saunders." The revolutionaries repeated their objective in the leaflet saying, "We are sorry for shedding the blood of a man but it is necessary to shed blood on the altar of revolution. We aim at such a revolution which would end exploitation of man by man." Though it became known that the Saunders' murder was an act of revolutionaries but the police failed to arrest them. Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Azad escaped by adopting various guises.

13.7.2 Assembly Bomb Explosion

The HSRA planned to bomb the Assembly Hall if the Public Safety Bill and the Trade Disputes Bill were passed by the special powers of the Governor General. They wanted to show that if the government can ignore the voice of the majority and rush through the passage of the Bill by resorting to Governor General's powers, then the HSRA can also pay back in the same coin. These bills were brought by the Indian Government to suppress the struggle being waged against the establishment by the workers and revolutionaries. Bhagat Singh, while commenting on these bills said:

'There is no place for justice in British imperialism. They do not want to give even a breathing space to the slaves and instead, want to suppress them. They want to rob them and kill them. More and more oppressive laws will be passed and the dissenting voices will be put down. Let us see what happens. Only sacrifice can save us from this suppression. The eyes of Indian and British members of the Assembly will have to be opened.'

He felt that the awakening of the working class indicated a new turn in the political life of the country. Thus, he wanted the HSRA to do an 'action' which should express the solidarity of the party with the labour and peasant movement. The Central Committee of HSRA at first decided to send Jaidev Kapoor and B.K. Dutt to throw the bombs, but on Sukhdev's exhortation and friendly advice, Bhagat Singh accompanied B.K. Dutt. On 8th April, 1929, the deafening voice of the bomb explosion in the Assembly shook the empire to its foundations. Members of the Assembly ran helter skelter. Both the bombs exploded without doing serious harm to anyone. The young men could have escaped under the cover of smoke but they held their ground and shouted slogans at the top of their voice:

“Long Live Revolution”

“Down with Imperialism”

“Workers of the World Unite”

They threw bundles of red leaflets on behalf of HSRA and gave its message to the whole world. The message began with the quotation of the French revolutionary Valliant: “It takes a loud voice to make the deaf hear.” Both of them were arrested on the spot. Thus occurred the great event, which sent a chill down the spine of British imperialism and gladdened the hearts of freedom fighters throughout the world. Bhagat Singh used the court as a platform to popularise the cult of socialism. Bhagat Singh’s statement made it clear that the HSRA was, in the true sense, fighting for the masses and also specified that he intended to bring about a classless society. Within a few months, the court found them guilty of waging a war against the state and transported both of them for life on June 12 1929. However, Bhagat Singh was taken to Lahore to stand trial in the Lahore Conspiracy Case for the killing of J P Saunders.

13.7.3 Lahore Conspiracy Case

The trial went on for about two years, and the revolutionaries used the court platform very effectively to clear the misunderstandings being spread by the government about them. They even organised long hunger strikes to fight for better living conditions and facilities for all the political prisoners in jail who were treated like ordinary criminals by the British government. One of the revolutionaries Jatin Das sacrificed his life on September 13 1929, after 63 days of hunger strike, which caused a huge uproar in the whole of India. Finally, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were hanged on March 23 1931 on the banks of river Sutlej. The execution of the three martyrs was condemned all over the country and Bhagat Singh in particular became a household name.

13.7.4 Chittagong Armoury Raid

While Bhagat Singh and his associates were in prison and facing trial in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, Surya Sen planned a revolutionary action in Bengal called the Chittagong Armoury Raid. The well organised raid was conducted on April 18 1930 under the leadership of Surya Sen, popularly called Master da. They took control of the telegraph office as well as telephone exchange and cut off all communication channels to Calcutta and Dacca and the other group took control of the club. They distributed leaflets explaining the object of the raid, the leaflets were signed by Surya Sen as president of the Indian Republican Army, Chittagong branch. The attacks continued for few years and gradually the revolutionaries were arrested and punished in sham trials. Surya Sen himself was arrested in February 1933, while Kalpana Dutt and Tarakeshwar Dastidar were captured on May 19 1933. In the Armoury Raid Case, Surya Sen and Dastidar were sentenced to death while several others were sentenced for life imprisonment. Surya Sen was hanged on January 12 1934 in Chittagong jail with his last message of “ideal and unity” and “a golden dream...a dream of free India.”

13.8 SUMMARY

The revolutionary groups remained active till the mid 1930s but later most of the groups were weakened due to arrests and propaganda. However, they had an

important role in creating an upsurge and awareness among the youth, which was constructively harnessed by mass movements led by the Mahatma. We normally ignore this important contribution of the revolutionary actions from early sporadic ones to Saunders' murder, Assembly Bomb explosion to Chittagong Conspiracy Case. Despite the fact that the Indian National Congress remained in the forefront, fighting for Indian independence, we cannot ignore the immense contributions made by the Indian revolutionaries in advancing the cause of freedom.

13.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the early developments of revolutionary movement in India.
- 2) What were the differences between HRA and HSRA?
- 3) Discuss the ideology and activities of the revolutionaries during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

