

GS Foundation 2024: Modern India
Handout 35: Second Phase of Revolutionary Movement
(1920s and 1930s)

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"The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of tyrants. It is its natural manure."

Thomas Jefferson

Ab na agle valvle hai, aur na armanonki bheed

Sirf mit jaane ki ek harsat dil-e-bismil me hai

Ramprasad Bismil

Once again pushed the youth to the course of revolutionary nationalism. Revolutionary activities began in Punjab, United Province and Bengal.

Causes for its upsurge:

- Discontentment among Indian youths due to the sudden withdrawal of Non-Cooperation Movement.
- Many youth leaders were not satisfied with Gandhian techniques. They were under the influence of Russian Revolution (1917) and the success of the young Soviet state in consolidating itself.
- Journals publishing memoirs and articles extolling the self-sacrifice of revolutionaries, such as Atmasakti, Sarathi and Bijoli.

Two different currents of Revolutionary Nationalism:

During this period revolutionaries came under the influence of new ideological forces such as socialism & communism.

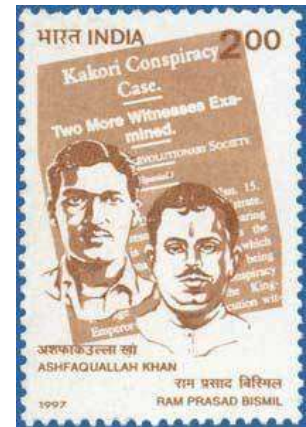
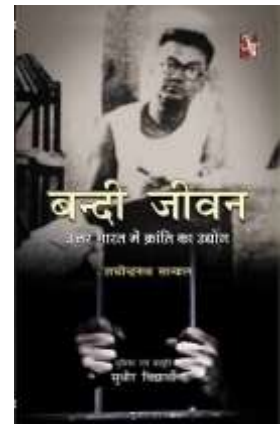
1. United Province and Punjab:

- In 1920s, two old revolutionaries such as **Sachin Sanyal & Yogesh Chandra Chatterjee** started to organize youths in UP and at their initiative **Hindustan Republican Association (HRA)** formed in 1924. Its objective was to organize an armed revolution. Later, this party was reorganized by **Chandra Shekhar Azad**.



Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya (1876-1938) was a Bengali novelist who wrote books like Parinita, Devdas. His novel Pather Dabi (1926) inspired the Bengali youth for sacrifice and it was banned by the British government for the revolutionary theme.

- Sachin Sanyal propagated militant ideology through his biography '**Bandi Jiwan**'. In 1925 he published a pamphlet in which he stated that stars are born in anarchy.
- Just after one year, **Kakori train Dacoity** happened in 1925. The Government took serious note of this development and decided to strike at it by putting a large number of revolutionaries under trial. So, the government cracked down and in this case, Ram Prasad Bismil, Roshan Singh, Asfaquallah Khan and Rajendra Lahiri got death sentence.
- Bhagat Singh help establish **Punjab Naujawan Sabha (1926)** as an open wing of revolutionaries to carry out political work among youth, peasants and workers. Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev organized **Lahore Students' Union** for open legal work among students. He soon joined HRA.
- Bhagat Singh, Azad and Rajguru killed a British police officer **JJ Saunders** (Dec 1927), who was responsible for the lathi-charge on a demonstration headed by Lala Lajpat Rai, who was seriously wounded in the incident.
- In 1928, the members of HRA convened a meeting at Ferozeshah Kotla in Delhi under the chairmanship of Bhagat Singh, and H.R.A was renamed as **H.S.R.A (Hindustan Socialist Republican Army)** on the advice of Chandrashekhar Azad. HSRA had three-fold objective.
 - To rouse the consciousness of people of India to the futility of the Gandhian methods of non-violence;
 - To demonstrate the need and desirability of Direct Action and Revolution to achieve complete independence.
 - To substitute British imperialism in India by a federated republic of the United States of India ideologically inspired by the Russian Revolution and the Socialist thought.



Debate with Gandhiji

Bhagwati Charan Vohra attacked Viceroy Lord Irwin by planting a bomb on a railway line in Delhi in 1929. Gandhiji criticized this act in his article titled **The Cult of Bomb** wherein he referred to HSRA's actions as cowardly. In response, **Philosophy of the Bomb** was written by Vohra. In it, HSRA defended their violent methods by terming them as important as Gandhiji's non-violent methods. It also urged the youth to join them in their journey to achieve freedom for India.

The concluding paragraph of the article reads:

There is no crime that Britain has not committed in India. Deliberate misrule has reduced us to paupers, has 'bled us white'. As a race and a people, we stand dishonoured and outraged. Do people still expect us to forget and to forgive? We shall have our revenge – a people's

righteous revenge on the tyrant. Let cowards fall back and cringe for compromise and peace. We ask not for mercy and we give no quarter. Ours is a war to the end – to Victory or Death.

Gandhi differed with Bhagat Singh only on the merit of their path. He called militant revolutionaries as 'misguided youth.' He often said that militant nationalism was injurious to India's struggle for freedom.

Vohra died in Lahore in 1930 while testing a bomb on the banks of the Ravi.

- On April 8, 1929, when **Trade Dispute Bill** and **Public Safety Bill**, which aimed at curbing civil liberties, were being passed in the central council, Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw a **bomb and pamphlet in the Central Legislative Assembly Hall**. Their aim was to propagate their ideology. They were arrested.
 - The pamphlet had slogans like Inquilab Zindabad.
 - *"It takes a loud noise to make the deaf hear."*
- They also **used the spotlight to propagate their ideas** and inspire the country to action.
- The case is famous because of the draconian provisions incorporated by the British in this context in the otherwise reasonable laws of criminal procedure.
 - Those detained under the case resorted to hunger strikes and boycotts in jails. In December 1929, **Jatin Das** started hunger strike. He demanded that he should not be tried like any ordinary criminal but should be tried as a political prisoner involved in the freedom struggle. He died while he was on hunger strike and being force-fed.
 - Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukhdev were awarded capital punishment and executed in Lahore jail on the 23rd March, 1931. Batukeshwar Dutt was sent to Kalapani for 14 years (life transportation) in assembly bomb case.
- In 1931 **Chandra Sekhar Azad** was killed in a police encounter. With this, the government was finally successful in crushing HSRA.
 - Alfred Park, Allahabad



2. Bengal:

- After 1922, Revolutionary Nationalism became active in Bengal too. They started revolutionary propaganda and underground activities through the press at a large scale.

- **Surya Sena** (masterda) who was a teacher in a national school in Chittagong formed '**Indian Republican Army**'. In this group, apart from Surya Sen the other members were Anant Singh, Ganesh Ghosh, Amrita Chakravarti and Loknath Pal/Baul.
 - When the civil disobedience movement was at its climax, **captured the Chittagong armoury** on 18 April, 1930.
 - This was followed by a series of attacks on other European establishments in Chittagong by the same group. Soon after, a temporary independent government of India was formed, whose president was Surya Sena himself. (*Provisional Revolutionary Government*)
 - In this revolutionary organization, women decided to start a Guerilla war through staying at nearby villages. The **women associated** with this group were **Bina Das, Kalpana Datta** and **Pritilata Ohdedar**.
 - Despite severe police pressure, the revolutionaries received **protection from the villagers (mostly Muslims)** for nearly 3 years.
 - But Surya Sen was eventually caught and hanged in 1934.
- In Dec.1931, in another revolutionary incident we found that two Santhal girls, **Comilla Shanti Ghosh** and **Suniti Chaudari** assassinated Mr. Steven (judge).
- Likewise, in 1932, a revolutionary **Beena Das** tried to assassinate Lt. Governor of Bengal by firing at him point blank while receiving degree during convocation.



Government Reaction:

There was a panic at first in the government but finally they came down heavily on the revolutionaries. Armed with 20 repressive acts, Government let loose the police after the revolutionaries. Hundreds of revolutionaries were sentenced to long term imprisonment or transportation. In 1933, even Jawaharlal Nehru was arrested for sedition and given two years of imprisonment because he condemned imperialism and praised the heroism of revolutionaries.

The extreme government repression, violating all norms of civilised behaviour, ultimately led to the decline of the revolutionary movement of this phase. The martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad, followed by the martyrdom of Surya Sen, was the high watermark of the revolutionary movement of that period. The other revolutionaries were awarded life imprisonment and sent to the Andamans and those who were left behind were put behind bars.

Differences in revolutionary nationalism during 1920s and 1930s from earlier time

- Essentially a continuation of the revolutionary activities of the earlier period, though there is some ideological change. The importance of the second phase of the revolutionary movement was in its ideological content.
 - Influence of **socialism** and communism.
 - Earlier revolutionaries were organized based on religious symbols, but now based on **secularism**.
- Tendency towards a more concrete programme of action.
 - Secret organization of a violent armed uprising to drive the British out of India and collecting money and arms were collected in large quantities continued as before.
 - But, now, the revolutionary leaders of this period were fully aware of the role of the masses. They sought to arouse the masses through propaganda and agitation.
 - Yet, they were in practice compelled to keep 'terroristic activities' in the forefront of their movement. Eg target assassinations.
- One Pan-Indian movement
 - Although there were several revolutionary organisations operating during this time, in a broad sense, India only had one revolutionary movement working to advance the same goal of the nation's freedom and employing the same strategy. The various revolutionary organization interacted with one another and occasionally also engaged in talks for coordinated operations.

Contribution of revolutionary nationalism

The reactionary attitude of the government evoked popular anger and protest. The deep sense of patriotism, courage and determination displayed by the revolutionaries helped to disseminate a growing sense of nationalism and socialism all over the land.

- Every time the morale of the people became low and national movement was on wane, these young revolutionaries **enthused their countrymen** with their unprecedented acts of sacrifice and sufferings.
- They made a tremendous impact on the minds and hearts of the youth, enthusing them to fight relentlessly for the freedom of the country. Their martyrdom become a living **source of inspiration for the youth of the country**.
- The lasting contribution of these revolutionaries was to demand and **popularise the idea of Purna Swaraj**. They were the first to raise and popularise it by making supreme sacrifices.
- They underlined the essential unity of our people and thus blazed a new trail on the front of **secularism**. Their contribution to promoting the secular fabric of India appears more

spectacular as it was during that period when various communal groups had started eating into the vitals of India.

- They also made some contributions towards linking the fight of independence with the **fight for socialism** and tried to put the sufferings of the poor and the downtrodden on the national agenda. Influence of Bhagat Singh's views on the socialist proposals of the **Karachi Session** of Congress in 1931.

Limitation:

- The critics point out their lack of organisation, and their failure to mobilise and carry the masses along with them. As they worked as a secret organization, these revolutionaries could not go to the masses to lead them. Therefore, their socialist programme remained simply on paper.
- With the acts of open defiance and bravery, these young people made it easier for the government to lay their hands on them.
- They may add that some of these young revolutionaries even appeared to be in a hurry to seek martyrdom.

All these observations might contain some grains of truth. But there is no doubt that these limitations do not diminish their seminal contributions to the cause of Indian freedom.

Bhagat Singh (1907-31)

- He wasn't simply a revolutionary, but he was a great ideologue as well.
- He was a well-read man and he widely read the text on socialism, communism, and anarchism. He presented an alternative method for nation-building based on socialism & secularism.
- **Redefining Revolution:**
 - Revolution was **not about violent movement against imperial rule**, but for national liberation including end to the exploitation by landlords. Similarly, although an admirer of Gandhi because he managed to mobilise the masses, he did not believe that Gandhian philosophy and programme would lead to a fundamental transformation of society. Gandhian politics, he observed, would only result in the replacement of one set of exploiters by another. It would enable the exploitation of Man by another Man.
 - Bhagat Singh understood that **revolution means mass movement** of the suppressed and exploited sections by the revolutionary intelligentsia. Bhagat Singh used to say “...**real revolutionary armies are in villages and in factories.**”

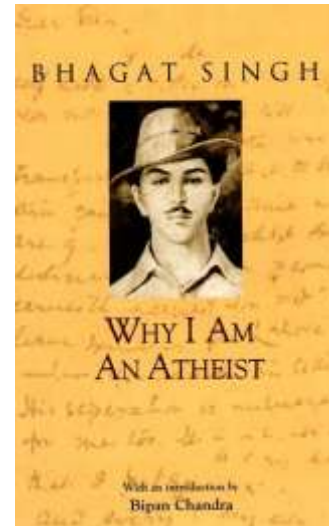


His main objective was not to create headlines by using pistols and revolvers but to create awareness among the masses.

What distinguished him from the earlier revolutionaries was this **ideological factor**.

- **Socialism:**

- The alternative was found in socialism, which he incorporated in the ideology and programme of the movements with which he was associated.
- Bhagat Singh conceived of socialism as the abolition of capitalism and class domination. It is unfortunate that his book entitled **The Ideal of Socialism**, which was smuggled out of the jail along with three other manuscripts, has not survived, as it would have given a much fuller account of his ideas on socialism.
- HSRA clarified its position '*We don't believe in the **cult of bomb & pistol**, rather my objective is to destroy such a system in which the exploitation of man by another man would become possible*'. According to him, violence is permissible only for a transitional phase for socialist transformation. Once this Objective would be achieved then, the method of violence would automatically be discarded. Then, through education & persuasion, the socialist programmes would be carried out.
- He also published a series of articles on **anarchism** in *Kirti*. On anarchism he said, "*The ultimate goal of Anarchism is complete independence, according to which no one will be obsessed with God or religion, nor will anybody be crazy for money or other worldly desires. There will be no chains on the body or control by the state. This means that they want to eliminate: the Church, God and Religion; the state; Private property.*"



- **Secularism:** In his pamphlet, '**Why I am an atheist**' he clarifies his vision of secularism.
 - He believed that God was brought into imaginary existence to encourage man to face boldly all the trying circumstances. **The idea of God is helpful to man in distress**. He thus recognised the role of religion in the life of the masses. At the same time, **he rejected the existence of a benevolent God**, as otherwise there would not have been any injustice in the world.
 - According to him, **normally religion is misused by the dominant class to exploit the people**. Thus, secularism means the denial of that kind of exploitation. Emancipation from the bondage of religion and superstition was, in his reckoning, crucial for revolutionary practice and, therefore, **he tried to instill rational thinking** in the minds of all his comrades. "to be a revolutionary, one

requires immense moral strength, but one also requires criticism and independent thinking.”

- Bhagat Singh **opposed to communal politics** from which he tried to distance the organisations he was associated with. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha, for instance, did not entertain those belonging to religious-communal organisations as its members.

Armed revolutionaries' role in freedom struggle not given due recognition: Shah

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 10

SAYING THAT the freedom struggle led by the Congress succeeded only because of the “fire of patriotism” ignited by armed revolutionaries, Home Minister Amit Shah said on Wednesday that the latter, unfortunately, did not get due recognition in India’s written history.

Shah was speaking at the launch of the book, *Revolutionaries: The Other Story of How India Won Its Freedom*, written by Sanjeev Sanyal, a member of the Prime Minister’s Economic Advisory Council.

Shah said only one story about the freedom struggle has been “repeatedly narrated”. “Only one point of view has been thrust upon people through education and history books. I don’t say that the non-violent movement had no contribution in the freedom struggle, or that it is not part of history... But this narrative that no one else had any contribution is not right,” he said.

“Many people like me believe that the Congress’s movement was successful because of the fire



Home Minister Amit Shah with Sanjeev Sanyal at the launch of the latter’s book in New Delhi, Wednesday. Prem Nath Pandey

of patriotism ignited by the armed revolution. I believe it, and I can prove it also. If the armed struggle had not continued parallelly, it would have probably taken many more decades to get independence,” he said.

“The history of India should be written not on the basis of victory or defeat, but by judging the struggle and efforts of all. That is how history is complete,” Shah said. “To rid the country of colonial mindset, the biggest work, I feel, needs to be done in the field

of written history, to free India’s written history of the colonial mindset,” he said.

He said many historians did not mention the contributions of armed revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and Aurobindo Ghose. Shah said their efforts have been portrayed as sporadic acts of individual bravery, whereas the truth was that they were a well-thought-out, collective effort driven by a common ideology. “We have to understand it, accept it, and propagate it as well,” he said.

“Some people have suppressed this narrative but I want to say to those people that history is very cruel... no one can distort history... it comes out eventually,” he said.

“They don’t know that when Bhagat Singh was hanged, no fire was lit in the kitchens from Lahore to Kanyakumari. Now, if you write history saying the country was not free when Bhagat Singh was martyred, that is not the right judgement,” he said.

Shah said Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and the INA also did not get the respect and place they should have got in the history of the country.

Saying that the armed revolutionaries were not violent by nature but viewed violence as a means to achieve freedom, Shah said: “We have to bring our history out of the binary of extremist versus moderates”.

He said it is time to remove “distortions” from the history of India’s freedom movement. “Many people blame the Communists or the British mindset while talking about how history was distorted. Sometimes, even the Congress is

blamed. But I ask, who is stopping us now,” he said.

He asked students and scholars of history to take up the responsibility, adding that it cannot be the government’s responsibility alone.

Shah said Veer Savarkar was the first to challenge the established narrative of India’s freedom struggle. “The entire world used to view the 1857 revolution as a mutiny. He was the first to call it the country’s first freedom struggle. That was the start of altering the narrative,” he said.

Sanyal’s book, he said, would start a new narrative on India’s freedom struggle.

Shah said literary personalities like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, farmers and tribals were equally responsible for India’s independence. “But those who were responsible for telling the story of freedom struggle from our point of view after Independence, I think, were somehow at fault,” he said.

“The British had left, but history was written with the British-ness that they had left behind, and because of that, there is this confusion even today,” he said.

Sociology

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by **NISHAT SINGH**



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