

Chapter V

THE CHITTAGONG REBELLION AND ITS IMPACT ON PEOPLE, POLITICS AND RULERS

I.

The Calcutta Congress over (December 1928), the Chittagong revolutionaries came back to their home district, fully convinced that in spite of the assurance given by Gandhiji that a resolution in favour of independence instead of Dominion Status would be adopted in the next session (in Lahore, 1929) the compromising leadership of the national organisation would do precious little and the resolution would remain a pious platitude. So they decided to do something more substantial and thereby blaze a trail for the country's youth to follow.¹

There was no readymade plan at hand. It was gradually beaten into shape on the anvil of what was feasible. Surjya Sen knew that unless the party had a legal cover and arms and ammunition at its disposal, it could not strike at the opportune moment. With the help of the revolutionaries, he therefore got himself elected as Secretary of the district Congress; his other associates - Ananta Singh, Ganesn Ghosh, Lokenath Bal, Nirmal Sen and Ambika Chakraborty - became members of its executive council. In March 1929, the

1 Ganesn Ghosh : interview with Gautam Chattopadhyay, New Age, New Delhi, 20 April 1980.

party floated two organisations, one for students and the other for young men. A volunteer organisation was also formed into which, as Ganesh Ghosh remembers, hundreds of volunteers were enrolled; they used to parade in khaki uniform. The dream of the leaders was to build up, under the cover of this open volunteer organisation, an armed detachment of the party which in due time would blossom forth into the 'Chittagong Branch of Indian Republican Army'. This army would, when the hour of destiny struck, lead an armed struggle against the British and act as the Liberation Army of the people.² In March 1929, a series of conferences were held not only to forge close links with the militant sections of the youth, but also to test the people's readiness for direct action.³

In July, the leaders, after a prolonged discussion among themselves, drew up a very rough plan for future action. It was decided that in a few months' time, the details of the plan would be worked out in order to give it a final shape. Meanwhile, everyone was instructed to keep his mouth shut and think seriously as to how the plan could be made perfect and foolproof.⁴

The authorities in Calcutta seemed to have got some wind of these preparations. In a secret letter, the D.I.G. Bengal warned

2 Ganesh Ghosh : 'Biplab Tirtha Chittagong and the Armed Uprising of 1930'; The Contemporary, Vol XIX, No.3, March, Delhi, 1976, p. 23.

3 Ibid., No. 4, April 1976, p. 36.

4 Ibid., p. 37.

that the Chittagong revolutionaries were plotting to take by surprise the district police and capture the treasury and the armoury. If they could sustain the attack for an hour and die in the encounter even as the Irish Rebels had died in the Easter Rising in Dublin, it would, they thought, have a tremendous effect.⁵ So from November 1929, the Chittagong Police employed round-the-clock watch on the revolutionaries and this continued up to March 1930.⁶ In spite of constant vigilance, the police could not get any information of the plan. The revolutionaries, on their part, also kept 24 hours' watch on the IB officers. This counter-espionage helped them, to a great extent, to hide Ram Krishna Biswas and Tarakeswar Dastidar who were severely burnt while making bombs.⁷

The plan of action, in its final form, stood as follows : first, to destroy the main centres of state power in the district by sudden and simultaneous attack on all of them; secondly, to capture and destroy the nerve-centre of the communication system - the Central Telephone Office; thirdly, to prevent army units or armed police force from rushing to Chittagong from neighbouring districts, it would be necessary to disrupt rail lines linking Chittagong with other districts and to destroy

5 Home (Pol) File 243/1930 Part II W.B.S.A.

6 Home (Pol) File 45/1/1933 N.A.I.

7 Ganesh Ghosh : Biplabi Suriya Sen, 1st ed.
Calcutta, 1976, p. 71.

the telegraphic system so that no news could be sent out. Lastly, to render local enemies (Anglo-Indians employed in different services, and their Indian hirelings) completely harmless, it might be necessary to capture them alive or to kill as many of them as possible.⁸

The leadership was sure that within a short time the authority would mount a massive counter-offensive. It must be resisted, it was decided, to the last drop of blood. The participants were told only vaguely about the new perspective. Prepare to die for the cause of freedom, was the call that was given to them. The plan was given the code name of Death Programme.⁹

A high command of five was set up with Surjya Sen (popularly known as Masterda) because of his teaching profession) at its head - the four others being Ambika Chakraborty, Ananta Singh, Nirmal Sen and Ganesh Ghosh. Masterda warned the four : "Remember, our strength lies in sudden and surprise attack. Hence the entire plan must be kept an absolute secret. No body, not even a sixth man, must know anything of the plan, or else all our efforts will be frustrated."¹⁰

Then began the long painful period of meticulous preparations for the impending attack. Each volunteer was given a

8 Ganesh Ghosh : 'Biplabtirtha Chittagong and the Armed Uprising', op.cit., vol XX, No. 6, June 1976, p.35.

9 Ganesh Ghosh : Biplabi Surjya Sen, pp. 65-66.

10 Ganesh Ghosh : interview with Gautam Chattopadhyay, op. cit.

particular task to be performed within a particular date.

The volunteers collected detailed information about the enemy : about the number of armed sepoy in the armoury barrack, the number of sentries on guard duties elsewhere, and so on.

Information was also collected about the operation of telephone and telegraph office. Two spots were selected for sabotaging the rail/lines, 60 miles and 70 miles away from Chittagong.¹¹

18 April 1930, was selected as the D. Day. Ganesh Ghosh recalls that sixty-three revolutionaries were picked up after proper screening. More than half the volunteers were kept in reserve. The remaining 30 were divided into five squads of six each. One squad was to attack the Armoury - Masterda, Ganesh Ghosh and Ananta Singh were in that group. Nirmal Sen and Lokenath Bal were to attack the Auxiliary Force Armoury. One squad was to attack the European Club. One squad consisting of two separate groups was formed to tear up the railway lines at two different places. Ambika Chakraborty was to attack the telegraph and telephone office. The zero hour was fixed at 10.10 p.m.¹² The plan was kept so secret that L.H.Colson, the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, had to admit that the defective intelligence had not warned the police beforehand of the exact date and timing of the rising.¹³

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Proceedings of the Civil and Military Conferences held in Government House, Calcutta, on 3rd and 4th July 1934, Sl. 32, B.G.Press, 1934-35, p. 23.

The operation began according to the plan. Ananta Singh fired at the sentry; others started firing in the air, shouting "Bhag jao, Gandhiji Ka Raj Ho Giya" (Run away, Gandhiji's raj has been established). The warning could not have been better phrased, though purists might decry it as a piece of political opportunism - advocates of armed struggle using the name of the votary of non-violence. But tactically, the warning was superbly expressed and perfectly timed with an immediate and spectacular effect. With the rising tide of the Civil Disobedience movement spearheaded by Gandhiji, the fight for freedom of any type had come to be associated in the mass mind with the name of the Mahatma. There was increasing apprehension in the ranks of the government and the revolutionaries took full advantage of the situation. In the darkness of night, their warning rang out like a clap of thunder and the guards were scattered like dry leaves before a gale. Leaving the barrack empty, some 500 policemen ran helter-skelter and within five minutes the armoury was captured.¹⁴ Soon they joined Ambika Chakraborty who successfully destroyed the telegraph line and set it on fire. The Auxiliary Force Armoury was stormed where Sergeant-Major Farrell tried to resist but was bayoneted to death by Tegra, a young lad of 13.¹⁵

14 Ananta Singh : Chittagram Jube Vidroha, vol.I, 2nd ed, Calcutta, 1968, p.92. Vide Appendix B for number of arms and ammunition looted by the revolutionaries, recovered by the police and apprehended by the authorities to be still with the revolutionaries.

15 Ganesh Ghosh : interview with Gautam Chattopadhyaya, op.cit.

The revolutionaries were in a jubilant mood. Surjya Sen standing amidst his followers proclaimed the independence of Chittagong. Next day, they circulated two printed leaflets in Chittagong as also in other parts of Bengal -- one leaflet proclaimed the independence of Chittagong in the name of the Indian Republican Army, with Surjya Sen as the President of the Provisional Republic of Free India; the second leaflet appealed to the students and youth to join the Indian Republican Army.¹⁶

For some four days, the British administration in Chittagong remained completely paralysed. Under instructions from Surjya Sen, all those who had participated in the raids withdrew to the Jalalabad Hills. On 22 April, the British and Gurkha troops, receiving an information from a cowboy, launched a counter-attack. It was an unequal battle at Jalalabad Hills. In the day-long encounter that followed, the revolutionaries lost 12 lives as against 82 of the British.¹⁷

Under the cover of darkness, the surviving revolutionaries dispersed in batches. Clashes followed during escapes resulting in fresh casualties : the Penni incident (23 April 1930) where Ganesh Ghosh, Ananta Singh and others stormed their way through the police cordon; the Kalarpole incident (7 May 1930); the Dhalghat clashes (13 June 1930) in which Nirmal Sen lost his

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sahayram Das : 'Chattogram Vidroha O Astragar Dakhaler Sangram', Saptahik Kalantar, Calcutta, 19 April 1980.

life; the Chandernagore skirmish (2 September 1930) in which Tegart arrested Lokenath Bal and Ganesh Ghosh; the Pahartali raid (24 September 1932) during which Preetilata fell fighting; and finally, on 16 February 1933, the arrest of Surjya Sen as a result of betrayal. With his arrest, the revolutionary activities of the Chittagong group drew to an end though sporadic attempts continued here and there for some more time.

II

The raid gave rise to mixed feelings among different sections of the people. Though official reactions were more or less predictable, non-official ones formed a curious pattern. In this section, the immediate impact of the raid on the people, as evident from reports submitted by different district magistrates within a few days of the incident and from other contemporary official reports, is now briefly stated.

To begin with, Congressmen in different districts of Bengal were taken aback "at the suddenness with which the disturbances broke out and at the enormity of the outrage committed"¹⁸. Some militant sections of the Congress who were

18 A.C. Datta, DM, Faridpur to the Commissioner, Dacca Division, 22 April 1930; Home (Pol) File 243/1930, Part VII, W.B.S.A.

taking an active part in the Civil Disobedience movement vaguely suspected that the government might have had a hand in the matter so as to use it as a pretext for violently crushing the movement.¹⁹ In general, Congressmen looked upon it as a work of agent provocateurs²⁰, disapproved this act of violence and denied any sympathy for it. According to the district magistrate of Murshidabad, this stand of the Congressmen was nothing but an eye-wash and was merely "a lip-deep abhorrence of the incident"²¹. This view was also shared by the magistrate of Birbhum who believed that the Civil Disobedience volunteers and Salt Satyagrahis privately approved of this act of violence and sympathised with the perpetrators.²²

From the report of the magistrate of Noakhali it is learnt that the entire Hindu population felt secret satisfaction at the "bravery" of the raiders "who have shown themselves capable of killing and being killed for their country"²³. To the Hindus of Pabna and Bogra, the news of the raid came as a welcome

19 A.B.De, DM, Bogra to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 23 April 1930; Ibid.

20 H. Quinton, DM, Khulna to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 23 April 1930; Ibid.

21 J. M. Chatterjee, DM, Murshidabad to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 22 April 1930; Ibid.

22 N.K.Sen, DM, Birbhum to the Commissioner, Burdwan Division, 23 April 1930; Ibid.

23 B.R. Sen, DM, Noakhali to the Commissioner, Chittagong Division, 25 April 1930; Ibid.

surprise; they saw in it the beginning of the end of the British Raj.²⁴ More or less similar reaction was noticeable among the students and youths of Bengal to whom the Chittagong uprising was an event of great elation and pride. They denounced the policy of repression adopted by the government immediately after the raid.²⁵

The law-abiding citizens of Hooghly, however, appeared to be shocked beyond measure at this "dastardly act". To them, it was the result of years of Congress preaching of sedition. But they would not speak out in public. According to the district magistrate of Hooghly, "the loyal people, though by far the most numerous, are too timid" to hold any meeting in condemnation of this act of violence.²⁶ The loyalists of Mymensingh were a braver lot who condemned outright the revolutionaries and gave full-throated support to all kinds of repressive measures undertaken by the government.²⁷

24 S. N. Banerjee, DM, Pabna to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 22 April 1930 & A.B.De, DM, Bogra to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 23 April 1930; Ibid.

25 G.S.Datta, DM, Mymensingh to the Commissioner, Dacca Division, 24 April, 1930 & J.M. Banerjee, DM, Bankura to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 25 April 1930; Ibid.

26 J. B. Kinderly, DM, Hooghly to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 22 April 1930; Ibid.

27 G.S. Datta, DM, Mymensingh to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 25 April 1930; Ibid.

As to the richer sections of the Bengali populace, some among them were perturbed at the gravity of the situation and started strengthening their home guards. They were prepared to extend all sorts of co-operation to the authorities.²⁸

The Muslims were so alarmed and perplexed that for some-time they would not express themselves. As they regained their mental poise, they hastened to condemn the "ferocity" of the raiders. The Muslims of Pabna apprehended similar disturbances in their district.²⁹ In the Presidency Division, the Muslim reaction was somewhat different. They preferred to dissociate themselves from the Civil Disobedience movement.³⁰ The Muslims of Chittagong, as reported by the district authorities, apprehended molestation or retaliation by the revolutionaries if they did not co-operate with them; some of them hesitated to offer any assistance to the authorities.³¹ It was perhaps an indirect admission of the fact that local Muslims, at least a part of them, felt a secret sympathy for the revolutionaries, as evidence mentioned in subsequent paragraphs would suggest.

28 J.D.V. Hodge, DM, Burdwan to the Commissioner, Burdwan Division, 22 April 1930; Ibid.

29 S.N. Banerjee, DM, Pabna to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 22 April 1930; Ibid.

30 F.W. Robertson, Commissioner, Presidency Division to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 26 April 1930; Ibid.

31 M.A. Momin, Off. Commissioner, Chittagong Division to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 25 April 1930; Ibid.

The situation after the raid was so tense and the nerves of British officials were so jittered that the administration in Chittagong frantically requested the government not to withdraw troops until the main body of absconding revolutionaries were rounded up and appealed for a permanent posting of troops, preferably British troops at Chittagong.³² A secret report admitted that casualties and other causes had depleted the ranks of the civil service and there was shortage of good senior officers. Nervousness and lack of confidence prevented the officers from discharging their duties effectively and they had a feeling that they were losing rather than gaining ground.³³ L.H. Colson had to admit that the prestige of the government suffered "a shattering blow in the public estimation by the Chittagong Armoury Raid"³⁴.

The non-official Europeans were so benumbed that for days they could not express themselves. Their tension would have reached the breaking-point if further outrages or murders of non-officials had occurred. They were critical about the steps taken by the government and demanded more vigorous action against

32 Ibid.

33 Home (Pol) File 32/14/1932, N.A.I.

34 Memo by L.H. Colson to the Chief Secretary, Bengal, 13 June 1934; Home (Pol) File 277/1934, Sl. 54, p. 1, W.B.S.A.

the "miscreants"³⁵. Similar sentiments were expressed in another document, according to which, the lives of ^{the} Europeans were in danger, the executive faced continual attacks and witnesses were afraid of giving evidence; in short, the law-abiding elements were too alarmed to stand up and protest.³⁶

The government, immediately after the raid, let loose an orgy of violence. It did not delay in enacting repressive legislation. The Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1925 had expired in March 1930. The police demanded that the Act be retained permanently. Considering all the pros and cons, the government re-enacted the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment (Part continuance) Act for five years with sections relating to trial by special procedure. After the raid, fresh powers of arrests and detection were immediately conferred on the district authorities by an ordinance and this was soon replaced on 16 October 1930 by a permanent piece of legislation - Act VI of 1930. 2,167 persons were dealt with under this Act of whom 1351 were kept in jails and detention camps, 288 in village domicile, making a total of 1639 on 30 November 1933. Besides, there were 19 state prisoners under Regulation III of 1818.³⁷

35 Home (Pol) File 32/14/1932, N.A.I.

36 Home (Pol) File 4/63/1932, N.A.I.

37 R.C.Majumdar, History of Freedom Movement in India, Vol. III, Calcutta, 1963, p. 501.

By the end of July 1931, the government felt so disturbed by anti-government publications containing incitement to violence that on 9 October 1931 the Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act came into force, giving the authority power to stop any publication, deemed subversive. In addition to that, the Government of India promulgated Ordinance IX of 1931 on 29 October, which empowered the authority to take action against those who were either members, or helpers or sympathisers of revolutionary party³⁸. Finally, after a careful consideration of the situation in Chittagong, the authority promulgated on 30 November the Bengal Emergency Power Ordinance XI of 1931 which empowered the local authority to combine military and police action to round up the revolutionaries. The district magistrates were empowered to commandeer property, issue certain restrictive orders e.g., promulgation of curfew, control of traffic etc. Chapter II of the Ordinance provided for special tribunals, special magistrates and a procedure designed to overcome routine delays. On the expiry of the Ordinance, two more laws were passed -- the Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act 1932 and the Bengal Criminal Law (Arms and Explosive) Act 1932 which embodied powers conferred by the Ordinance.³⁹

38 David M. Laushey : Bengal Terrorism and Marxist Left, p. 78.

39 Home (Pol) File 4/41/1932, N.A.I.

Fully armed with all kinds of repressive weapons, the Gurkha Rifles and the Maratha Light Infantry started combing operations in Chittagong.⁴⁰ During the cold weather of 1931-32, curfew order was imposed in four thanas. By May, the police adopted a policy of regular searches of all houses reported to be used as shelters for absconders and from May 1932 to February 1933 not less than hundred houses were searched each month.⁴¹ After the murder of Asanulla (30 August 1931), a notorious police officer, the government used this occasion for engineering communal riot in Chittagong and carried on Wanton raid on private dwellings by the members of the Eastern Rifles⁴². The government succeeded only partially and for a while.

The government had to admit police excesses in executing punitive measures.⁴³ It appointed an enquiry committee but did not dare publish its report. It only censured the officers who were found guilty.⁴⁴ The Government of India, perhaps suffering from a sense of guilt, proposed to give compensation to the victims. But the local authorities did not approve of it on various grounds. Firstly, this grant of compensation would be

40 Home (Pol) File 277/1934, Sl. 22, p.3, W.B.S.A.

41 Home (Pol) File 45/7/1933, N.A.I.

42 B.N.Sasmal and others : Report of the Non-official Enquiry Committee on recent disturbances in Chittagong, September 1931, Calcutta, 1931, p.6.

43 Report on the Disturbances in Chittagong in August, 1931 and following days, B.G.Press, 1931, p.23.

44 Home (Pol) File 737/1931, W.B.S.A.

regarded as sign of weakness on the part of the government. Secondly, the revolutionaries would look upon it as a victory for themselves. Thirdly, the Muslims and the Europeans would be perturbed and this would give rise to a new set of problems. Lastly, the growing confidence among the government officers would be shaken by this proposed appeasement.⁴⁵

Ultimately, the opinion of the local administration prevailed as would be evident from the subsequent narrative. After the Dhalghat incident, a collective fine of Rs.5000 was imposed on the villagers and a platoon of Eastern Rifles was quartered in that locality. Even after the Pahartali incident, a heavy fine of Rs.80,000 was imposed on the local Hindus to make them realise "that their interests were to suffer as long as the local campaign against terrorism continued unsuccessful."⁴⁶

From March 1932, apart from imposing collective fines and carrying out cordons and searches, the authority issued other punitive orders, especially on the Hindus: curfew was imposed on all Hindu young men in certain areas requiring them to remain in their houses from sunset to sunrise; use of cycles without permit was prohibited; the movement of all traffic at

45 Ibid.

46 Home (Pol) File 45/7/1933, N.A.I.

night in the vicinity of European and Anglo-Indian quarters was prohibited.⁴⁷

This was not all. In order to bring pressure on schools, a 25% cut in the grant of all aided schools was imposed until such time as the district magistrate could be sure that the boys were no longer under evil influence.⁴⁸ All these measures aimed at depriving the revolutionaries of any kind of local support and thus crushing them with relative ease.

An attempt was made during this period to introduce "group" system in all aided schools and colleges. This system compelled the teachers to exercise supervision over the boys even after school hours. Teachers were asked to visit the guardians and enquire how their wards were behaving, with whom they were mixing etc. A government report admitted that the guardians looked upon this system with suspicion because "the guardians for the most part are still in secret or open sympathy with the terrorists".⁴⁹

Steps were also taken to form an organisation of the guardians - The Chittagong Anti-Terrorist Organisation. It consisted of Hindu bhadralok parents and guardians and it operated in the Hindu villages of the Anushilan and the Jugantar areas.⁵⁰

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Home (Pol) File 277/1934, Sl.22, p. 23, W.B.S.A.

50 Ibid., p. 24.

Village Committees were also set up to keep watch on the behaviour of the youth. The Committees issued cards to the youth. If a holder was away from home, he was asked to leave the card at home and "this is prima facie a certificate that his house will be exempt from search when the police and military are searching a village for absconder. Complete lists of card-holders and specimen cards have been supplied to all military posts"⁵¹. Young members of the Buddhist Community were found to be in secret sympathy with the revolutionary movement. So a Buddhist Anti-Terrorist Organisation was established in 25 Buddhist villages.⁵² Similarly, the Muslims had organised a Young Muslim Self-Reliance League with the aim of issuing anti-terrorist leaflets and addressing meetings.⁵³

Two more orders were issued in July 1932 under the provision of the Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act 1932. The first order required all Hindu male bhadralok between the ages of 12 and 25 in the areas of Double Moorings, Boalkhali and Patiya to carry identity cards.⁵⁴ White cards were issued to those upon whom no special watch was necessary, blue cards to those who had been dealt with under the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act; and those who were living in home or village domicile were issued red cards. Up to November 1933, in eight

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 27

⁵² Ibid., p. 28

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., Sl. 22, p. 42, Vide Appendix C for Map of Chittagong showing military operations in the Anushilan and the Jugantar areas.

thanas 14,081 white cards, 77 blue cards and 15 red cards were issued.⁵⁵ The introduction of this system enabled the police to check persons coming in and going out of Chittagong by train or boat, or moving on feet. The second order required the Hindu students to read only in those schools which were within 3 miles of their residence. This prevented members of the party from extending their influences in schools widely distributed.⁵⁶

The government employed various types of agents - the first being the agents inside the party. The second type was termed as casual agent who helped in locating the absconders. The police claimed that the whereabouts of Kalpana Datta and Tarakeswar Dastidar in Gairala were reported by a party member but he did not locate the place. A casual agent of Gairala then supplied the detailed information. As a result both were arrested. There was another type of casual agents, called the living agents who served as links between all kinds of sources and the district intelligence.⁵⁷ The district intelligence officers were ordered to walk at least 2 miles away from their camp to meet their sources in disguise. These meetings were to be held during the "hours of darkness" and "during the time of meeting curfew must be imposed

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Home (Pol) File 605/1934. Home (Pol) Dept., W.Bengal Secretariat.

⁵⁷ Home (Pol) File 272/1934. Sl. 22, pp.32-34, W.B.S.A.

so that people must not come out at night and troops must be trolled to keep the terrorists out of the areas selected for meeting"⁵⁸.

During Surjya Sen's confinement in the Chittagong jail, a plan was hatched by his comrades for his rescue. The plan somehow leaked out and the authorities were panicky. There arose a general demand from the commissioners and district officers of Bengal to remove all the detenus out of the province, preferably to the far-off Andamans as this would stop conspiracy and would subject the detenus to stricter discipline.⁵⁹ These recommendations were soon embodied in the amended Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act; 100 detenus from all over Bengal were sent to the Deoli camp in 1932 and two batches of prisoners totalling 58 were deported to the Andamans.⁶⁰

A government report observed that up to April 1934, 78 members of both the Jugantar and the Anushilan had become police agents, 127 had become detenus and 141 had been convicted under Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act and other laws, of whom seven were sentenced to imprisonment for four to seven years and two were executed.⁶¹ As a result of all these, the political

58 Ibid., p. 36

59 Home (Pol) File 4/65/1933, N.A.I.

60 Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1931-32, Calcutta, 1933, p. XIX.

61 Home (Pol) File 277/1934, p. 19, W.B.S.A.

See also Appendix D for graph showing progress in obtaining sources and arresting absconders and recovering weapons from January 1933 - April 1934.

situation in Bengal in general and Chittagong in particular changed so much that a government note recorded in a triumphant mood :

" ... up to 1931 it was very difficult to get magistrates and judges to serve on Special Tribunals or as Special Magistrates ... some magistrates used to say ... 'for God's sake get me out of this because my wife is very much against the idea'. But after the arrival of troops, instead of officers hesitating to serve as special magistrates, it became a matter of emulation with them..."⁶²

III

For nearly three years, from April 1930 to Surjya Sen's arrest in February 1933, the Chittagong revolutionaries carried on heroic, though unequal, battles against the British authorities. Was there any popular support behind them? Ganesh Ghosh's emphatic reply to this question is that had there been no popular support it would have been impossible for Surjya Sen and his valiant comrades to have remained underground in Chittagong itself

62 Proceedings of the Civil and Military Conference held in Government House, Calcutta on 3rd and 4th July, 1934, p. 11.

for so long.⁶³ Actually after the raid, the attitude of the middle class of Chittagong turned almost overnight into one of admiration for the heroes and they gave them all kinds of help - shelter, money and legal defence. According to a secret report, the revolutionaries enjoyed support from the population who usually warned them beforehand about the approach of the forces. Surjya Sen became a legendary figure and was worshipped as a god by his followers and looked upon as a hero by a large section of the population.⁶⁴

Another report had to admit that the Hindu land-owners discouraged the people from giving information to the police regarding the rebel's whereabouts. The report adds that the Hindus did not co-operate with the authorities on account of sympathy for the rebels; nor did the Muslims who felt that since the government was no longer an effective force, it would be unwise to incur the displeasure of the Hindus.⁶⁵

To what extent did the heroism of the revolutionaries touch the minds of the people will be evident from a few incidents. In May 1930, during the Kalarpole clash, the villagers helped the police in chasing Debaprasad and three others taking them for mere dacoits. This resulted in their death. When the villagers

63 Ganesh Ghosh : interview with the author.

64 Home (Pol) File 277/1934, Sl.53, p.3, W.B.S.A.

65 J. C. Farmer, Deputy Inspector of Police, Burdwan Range to Lowman, I.G. Police, 6 May 1930; Home (Pol) File 243/30, Part V, W.B.S.A. .

came to know the real identities of the deceased, they repented and wept in sorrow.⁶⁶ During the Chandernagore raid by Tegart, people collected at both ends of the lane, obstructed the police and adopted a threatening attitude. "Their demeanour throughout was insolent and antagonistic..."⁶⁷ A secret official note admitted "the fact that even the Muslims and the Buddhists have been drawn into the movement is an indication of the virulent nature of the infection..."⁶⁸ According to another report, the Muslims had to be carefully handled; unless properly patronised and supported, they, as the authorities apprehended, might join the enemy camp.⁶⁹

It had been the practice of earlier revolutionary leaders to emphasise the performances of certain Hindu religious rites at the time of initiating their recruits. Such practices kept the Muslims away from the revolutionary movement in most of the districts. But the Chittagong group shunned all religious practices and succeeded in drawing a number of Muslim young men into their fold. These boys performed their duties no less energetically than their Hindu counterparts.⁷⁰

66 Ganesh Ghosh : interview with the author.

67 Charles Tegart to Chief Secy., Bengal, 2 September, 1930; Home (Pol) File 693/1930, Home (Pol) Dept., W.Bengal, Secretariat.

68 Note by S.N.Roy, Addl. Secy., Home (Pol) File 605/1934, Sl. 1-3, W.B.S.A.

69 Home (Pol) File 243/1930, Part I, W.B.S.A.

70 Ganesh Ghosh : Biplabi Surjya Sen, p. 35.

Here some examples of Muslim sympathy and support for the Chittagong revolutionaries are cited. Almost all of them who are alive testified to the fact that many a member of the Muslim middle class and especially the poor Muslim peasants helped the absconders with food and shelter after raid. Even Muslim women did not hesitate to give them shelter in their zenana. Subodh Roy still recalls how, after the Jalalabad fighting, he was warmly received by an old Muslim peasant as "Amader chelle" (our boy). How can he forget the help given to him by his comrade-in-arms, Abdus Sattar of Kaipara (P.S. Rouzang) ? The deep sympathy of the Muslim peasants did not die out. During the peasants' movement in the 40s, Subodh Roy witnessed the same warmth of feeling among the Muslim peasants for these revolutionaries, then turned into peasant organisers.⁷¹

Ranadhir Das Gupta, another participant of the raid said that the Muslims helped them both as covers and as couriers. During the days of the Special Tribunals, they, like their Hindu counterparts, freely donated to the legal defence fund.⁷² This was corroborated by Kali Kinkar De of Chittagong. He told the author how his revolutionary associates Mir Ahammad of Boalkhali,

71 Subodh Roy : interview with the author, Calcutta, December, 1982.

72 Ranadhir Das Gupta : interview with the author, Calcutta, May, 1981.

Congress leader Asrafuddin, Nawab Ali and Abdul Haq Dovasi of Chittagong town stood by them against all odds. Mir Ahammad once gave shelter to Surjya Sen; Nawab Ali was an intimate member of the Chittagong party for which, as a school boy, he had to suffer torture at the hands of the notorious officer, Shooter.⁷³ De gratefully recalled the two following incidents:

a) After the Jalalabad encounter, when nobody was sure who had died and who had survived, one old Muslim peasant of his village, on seeing him alive, rushed to him, embraced him with tears rolling down his cheeks and cried out "Hail to Allah! you are safe"⁷⁴.

b) Rahim Bux, a coachman of Chittagong town, used to carry explosives from one dump to another. During the trial, when he was put on the dock as a witness and was closely cross-examined, he declined to divulge anything or identify any one.⁷⁵

Instead of lengthening this list, it is perhaps more pertinent to ask why, unlike the other Bengal districts, the Muslims of Chittagong offered such assistance to the revolutionaries on so many occasions. Ganesh Ghosh, Ranadhir Das Gupta, Subodh Roy and other participants of the Chittagong Armoury Raid have tried to answer this question in the following manner.

⁷³ Kali Kinkar De : interview with the author, Dum Dum, August, 1981.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Chittagong, according to them, was largely free from the communal virus and relations between the two major communities were more cordial than elsewhere. There was no communal riot in Chittagong during this period except the one which was deliberately engineered by the authorities soon after the murder of the notorious police officer Asanulla. As the meeting-ground of different races, languages, religions and cultures and as the immediate hinterland of a busy port, Chittagong and its people lived and felt somewhat differently. The crews of the merchant fleet were drawn mostly from the local Muslims who, in pursuit of their trade, came in frequent contact with the wide world. This broadened their outlook and widened their range of sympathy far beyond the narrow confines of sectarian loyalties. They could, therefore feel, almost spontaneously, a sense of oneness with those who fought and died for India's freedom.⁷⁶

Again, why did the Buddhists lend their support to the revolutionaries ? According to Subodh Roy, the Buddhists of Chittagong were so few in number and were so like the Hindus in observance of customs, ceremonies and rituals that they considered themselves as part and parcel of the larger Hindu community. Since no social or religious barrier divided them,

⁷⁶ Author's interview with Ganesh Ghosh, Ranadhir Das Das Gupta and Subodh Roy.

what agitated the Hindus agitated the Buddhists as well. Linked by a common fate, many a young patriotic Buddhist fraternised with the revolutionaries. Perhaps the current militant anti-British struggle of the Burmese Buddhists right across the frontiers also spurred them on. Among the Buddhists Dhiren Barua took part in the armoury raid, Mahesh Barua actively helped the raiders and perished on the gallows.⁷⁷

A section of the Indian sepoy, however small in number, cherished secret sympathy for the revolutionaries. On 21 April 1930, Amarendra Nandi, a young volunteer was sent to town to get some information, but being encircled by 200 policemen, he hid himself under a culvert. By the time they spotted him, Amarendra was already dead, having committed suicide. The British officer furiously kicked the dead boy. At this, an Indian jamadar protested : "We have come here to fight, not to insult a dead man. Don't do it again".⁷⁸

Another incident of this type was narrated by Kalpana Datta : " I was taken to a Subedar who slapped me. At once some soldiers cordoning the house rushed there and warned the Subedar: 'you touch her again and we shall refuse to obey you'. What an experience in that grim hour ! I felt like crying in joy.

77 Subodh Roy : interview with the author.

78 Ganesh Ghosh : interview with the author.

Our message had touched even the hearts of the army"⁷⁹.

But it must be conceded that in spite of the wide popular sympathy they enjoyed, the revolutionaries utterly lacked any organised mass base, far less any liberated areas. As the cordon of repression tightened, they had no rear to fall back upon, no space for manoeuvre and this sealed their fate. This was the great limitation, from which not only they, but also all parties and groups of Bengal revolutionaries, suffered. Surjya Sen must have been conscious of this limitation. Perhaps because of this he used to admire the great Sayasan Rebellion of Burma where in 1930 thousands of peasants rose in arms against their exploiters.⁸⁰

IV

The Chittagong raid had a galvanising effect on revolutionaries all over the province.⁸¹ Some of them could not even believe that such a daring exploit had been undertaken by the Bengali youth. But as the details became known, there was a change in the outlook of the Bengal revolutionaries. The younger members of

79 Kalpana Datta : 'Chittagong's Role in Freedom Struggle';
New Age, New Delhi, 20 April 1980.

80 Kalikinkar De : interview with the author.

81 Home (Fol) File 277/1934, Sl. 53, p.4, W.B.S.A.

all parties who were already fired with the idea of giving the British a decisive blow "clamoured for a chance to emulate the Chittagong terrorists"⁸². The message of the Chittagong heroes reached even the farthest corners, stirred up womenfolk and young girls "who from this time onwards are found assisting the terrorists as house-keepers, messengers, custodians of arms and sometimes as comrades"⁸³. Within a month of the raid, the Jugantar in Calcutta under Bhupen Datta drew up a plan for major acts of revolutionary violence. The plans, according to a government document, were as follows : (a) murder of Europeans in hotels, clubs and cinemas, simultaneously in Calcutta and in the districts by bombs; (b) burning down of the Dum Dum aerodrome with petrol; (c) disruption of gas and electric supply of Calcutta, by blowing up the gas works and electric power stations; (d) cutting off the petrol supply of Calcutta by burning down the depot of the Burma Oil Company at Budge Budge; (e) disorganisation of tramway service in Calcutta by cutting wires; (f) destruction of telegraphic communication between Calcutta and the districts of Bengal; and (g) blowing up of bridges and railway lines by dynamites and hand grenades.⁸⁴

82 Memorandum on the history of terrorism in Bengal, 1905-1933, pp. 15 - 16.

83 Terrorism in India, 1917-1936, p. 34.

84 Ibid., pp. 35 - 36.

Only the first item of the above programme could be taken up. The Jugantar struck the first blow on 25 August 1930. Anuja Sen and Dinesh Majumder attacked Tegart with bombs at Dalhousie Square. The bombs missed the target but one bomb which exploded near the "assilant" hurt Anuja seriously and he died due to haemorrhage.⁸⁵ Two more bomb attacks took place in Calcutta on 26 and 27 August.

The government acted promptly. 18 persons were arrested, including Dr. Narayan Foy, Commissioner, Calcutta Corporation. All were put on trial in the Dalhousie Square Bomb Case.⁸⁶

The Madaripur group, a faction of the Jugantar, committed a dacoity at Tala, Calcutta in April 1930. Members of Dacca Sri Sangha shot at Lowman, I.G. Police and Hudson, S.P. on 25 August 1930. Bullets hit the spine of Lowman, who died immediately, and Hudson was shot in right buttock and the bullet wounded his rectum.⁸⁷

One week after this incident, the B.V. struck. On 8 December 1930, Benoy Bose, Badal Gupta and Dinesh Gupta entered the Writers' Buildings, shot at Col. Simpson, I.G. Prison and wounded

85 Home (Pol) File 674/1930. Home (Pol) Dept., W. Bengal Secretariat.

86 Ibid.

87 Home (Pol) 683/1930. Home Dept., W. Bengal Secretariat. See also Appendix E for arms distributed by the Jugantar group for their proposed rising.

a few officials. Next year, two girls, Santi Das and Suniti Chaudhuri of Sri Sangha, murdered Stevens, the District Magistrate of Comilla. Then followed the murders of three successive magistrates in Midnapore - Peddie in 1931, Douglas in 1932 and Burge in 1933 and finally, an attempt on the life of Anderson, Governor of Bengal, at the Lebong Race course in Darjeeling in May 1934.

The Chittagong raid had also inspired the young militants of the Anushilan who demanded immediate action. But the prompt action of the government against the leaders, leading to the Inter-Provincial Conspiracy Case in 1933, dealt a hard blow from which it could not fully recover.

The Chittagong uprising, in several respects, marked not only the peak of revolutionary activities in Bengal, but also a point of departure. Not so much the killing of individual enemies, but the symbolic destruction of British power in a small part of India, even if for a short time, was the main object of the Chittagong uprising. This is clear from the Proclamation of the Indian Republican Army. Secondly, after the heroic battle of Jalalabad, Surjya Sen planned to retreat into the villages for organising guerilla sorties against the British administration throughout Chittagong. This revealed a new and higher level of revolutionary consciousness. It has been stressed by some of the closest comrades of Surjya Sen that by 1931 he was leaning towards

mass revolutionary activities, as is indicated by his appreciative reference to the Burmese revolutionary Saya Sen⁸⁸. All these tend to invest the Chittagong uprising with a degree of uniqueness which is unprecedented in the annals of the revolutionary movement in India.

Before concluding this section, a few brief words of comparison between Bagha Jatin (1880-1915) and Masterda may not be out of order. Both stubbornly believed in and staunchly followed the path of armed struggle against British rule in India. Both made supreme sacrifices for the cause they upheld. Bagha Jatin grew into a legend after his martyrdom (September 1915), while Masterda became a legend during his lifetime. These apparent similarities notwithstanding, there was a vast difference in their outlook and practice.

Bagha Jatin's basic plan of armed struggle was grounded on the hope of securing arms from abroad, from Kaiser's Germany in particular. He hoped to overthrow the British imperialist power with armed assistance from its rival which, however, was no less imperialistic.

88 Kalikinkar De : interview with the author.

But Masterda thought and planned differently. He insisted on self-help. He did not depend on arms aid from abroad, from questionable sources overseas. He looked within, not without, for the necessary supply of arms with which to equip his revolutionary contingents. Masterda firmly believed that there should not be any dearth of arms if only the revolutionaries were determined and organised enough to secure them. The enemy could be and must be fought with arms seized from its own arsenals. In fact, the revolutionaries must look upon the enemy's armoury as their principal source of arms supply. That this was no idle hope but an eminently feasible plan was proved to the hilt by the exploit that has justly immortalised him and his comrades.

As a technique of struggle, the Balasore episode was an unmitigated disaster. Masterda's master plan also failed. But it was a heroic failure and on a much higher plane. The successful armoury raid failed because it was not followed up by any armed struggle of the masses. Despite this basic limitation, the raid succeeded in vindicating the great revolutionary principle : a people determined to wage an armed struggle against their oppressors do not lack arms.
