

History, Amnesia and Public Memory

The Chittagong Armoury Raid, 1930-34

○ Sachidananda Mohanty

In this essay, I reconstruct the main outline of the Chittagong Armoury Raid and the uprising against the British at Chittagong (former East Bengal, now Bangladesh) between 1930 and 34. I also explore the reasons that might help explain the erasure of this significant episode from public memory in India as well as Bangladesh. I rely, in the main, on available historical evidence including Manini Chatterjee's well documented volume *Do and Die: The Chittagong Uprising 1930 and 34* (Penguin Books, India, 1999). I supplement this with information based on a recent visit to Bangladesh and my conversations with the only surviving member of the raid, Binode Bihari Choudhury.

The Chittagong story forms an intimate part of the larger history of revolutionary or militant nationalism in Bengal. On 18 April 1930, a group of armed revolutionaries raided the British Armoury and other military installations at Chittagong. They proclaimed an independent national government under the Indian Republican Army and waged a prolonged guerilla war in the ensuing three years in the countryside. Striking and graphic accounts at Dhalghat, the attack at Pahartali European Club and the underground resistance have been documented largely in Bengali by some of the survivors. Sadly, mainstream historians in India and Bangladesh neglect this story.

It is impossible to think of the Chittagong movement without the intellectual, political and martial leadership of Surjya Sen. During his college days, he came under the influence of the national movement and vowed to dedicate his life to national liberation. According to other accounts, Surjya Sen, Ambika Chakraborty and others were initiated into the movement by Hemendra Mukhoti, an absconder in the Barisal Conspiracy Case.

The Chittagong group's early inspiration came from the Bengal revolutionaries who came into prominence especially during the Partition of Bengal Movement in

1905. The chief architect of this phase was Sri Aurobindo, then known as Aurobindo Ghosh. His maternal grandfather, Rajnarayan Bose, had in 1876 formed a secret society called Sanjibani Sabha of which several members of the Tagore family were members. In a series of articles in *Induprakash*, a weekly from Bombay edited by KG Deshpande, Sri Aurobindo severely criticised the Congress policies for sticking to non-violence. He sent a Bengali soldier of the Baroda army, named Jatin Banerjee to Bengal with the objective of establishing a secret group to undertake revolutionary propaganda and recruitment. Jatin was later joined



Preetilata, who led the group that raided the Pahartali European Club.

by P Mitter and Barendra Ghosh, Sri Aurobindo's younger brother. Another figure who was influential was a Maratha named Sukhram Ganesh Deuskar. Domiciled in Bengal, he wrote a book called *Deshar Katha* that underlined the British commercial and industrial exploitation of India. He often addressed Jatindra's group of Upper Circular Road on history and economics.

On April 30, 1908 at Muzaffarpur, two revolutionaries, Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki threw bombs at Kingsford. Sri Aurobindo was arrested on 2 May, 1908 and sent to Alipore jail. The report sent from Andrew Fraser, the then Lt Governor of Bengal, to Lord Minto in England, declared that although Sri Aurobindo came to Calcutta in 1906 as a Professor at the National College, "he has ever since been the principal advisor of the revolutionary party. It is of utmost importance to arrest his potential for mischief, for he is the prime mover and can easily set tools, one to replace another." Sri Aurobindo ably defended by C.R Das was acquitted on 6 May 1909 while the other accused were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment.

Terrorist Upsurge in Bengal

There were principally two terrorist organisations in Bengal, Anushilan and Jugantar. Under the influence of Barrister P Mitter, a strong branch of Anushilan was formed in Dhaka.

Thus, while working under the banner of Gandhi's Non- Cooperation movement, Surjya Sen and his group were deeply influenced by the earlier revolutionaries of Bengal. They had undergone physical and armed training. In October 1926, Surjya Sen was arrested and, two years later, he and other members were released.

The more immediate inspiration for the Chittagong group came from the famous Easter uprising in Dublin in



Binode Bihari Choudhary, the only survivor of the Chittagong Armoury Raid in Bangladesh

1916. Eamon de Valera's exhortation spurred Surjya Sen to effective action. In a speech delivered in New York in 1920 entitled "India and Ireland", Valera declared:

We, of Ireland, and you of India, must each of us endeavour, both as separate people and in combination to rid ourselves of the vampire that is fattening on our blood, and we must never allow ourselves to forget what weapon it was by which Washington rid his country of the same vampire.

The second aspect that distinguishes the Chittagong Group from its predecessors and earlier models of revolutionary activities, including the Anushilan Group was its widening socio-religious base. No doubt, the Chittagong Group, like earlier revolutionaries like Khudiram, Bagha Jatin and Barin Ghose, came from the Hindu middle class *Bhadralok* background. But Surjya Sen did not have the advantage of a primarily Hindu ambience for revolutionary action. The entrenched socio-economic divide between the educated (in cases landed zamindars)

Hindu minority and the largely sullen Muslim peasantry, who were vulnerable to a communal mindset, was the greatest challenge the Chittagong Group faced. As events proved, they turned the challenge into an opportunity. Revolutionary terrorism at Chittagong was not a one-time affair, the spectacular shooting down of a hated political or administrative symbol of the British Raj, say by a Khudiram or a Bhagat Singh. The earlier attempt by Bagha Jatin to prepare an army under the shadow of World War I, with a shipload of German weaponry had met with a premature and aborted end in the fields of Kaptipada at Balasore in Orissa.

Rivalries and Betrayals

Due to various reasons including persistent internecine rivalry, betrayal and mutual suspicion among the rebels, such a plan did not fructify until the time of Subash Chandra Bose during World War II. We must also remember that Sri Aurobindo's argument in favor of the war-effort was induced by solid strategic reasoning. Apart from the permanent need to

resist and defeat the fascist forces of Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo, India, he reasoned, would have a standing army of nationalistic minded soldiers that could be relied upon to fight a war of national liberation, should the occasion arise and should the British decide to go back on their promise.

What Subhash did with the favourable support of the Japanese, by forming the Indian National Army (INA) in Singapore and what the mutineers in the Royal Indian Navy did in the wake of a vastly weakened British military in the naval dockyard of Bombay in 1946, Surjya Sen accomplished despite being vastly outnumbered and outgunned by the British. He and his men carried out, with the help of mostly looted weapons, a prolonged guerilla war against a formidable army in the face of the full might of the British military in undivided India. He did it by guts and idealism, no doubt joined primarily with strategy and careful planning and by overcoming the class and communal divide in east Bengal. Apart from this, he also enlisted the active support and combat participation of women like Preetilata and Kalpana Datta, who would be remembered as the most outstanding examples of female participation in revolutionary action.

Fallouts of the Raid

After meticulous planning on 18 April 1930, the Chittagong Group raided the AFI armory, the police station and the telegraph office simultaneously. Telegraph and communication lines were totally severed. Ananta Singh, Kalipada Chakraborty, Birabhadra, Dwija Dastidar, Surjya Sen, Ganesh Ghose, Ambika Chakraborty, Nirmal Sen, Binode Choudhury, Makhn Ghosal, Loknath Bal and others took part in the raids. Unfortunately they could not take possession of the magazines, which were stored

separately. Undeterred, they proclaimed a provisional revolutionary government, unfurled the national flag and Surjya Sen made the following declaration in English as part of a longer proclamation: "The great task of revolution in India has fallen on the Indian Republican Army. We in Chittagong have the honour to achieve the patriotic task of revolution for fulfilling the aspiration and urge of our nation."

Having made the proclamation, the group retreated, surviving on biscuits and water melons. Later, they fought a pitched battle in the surrounding hills of Jalalabad against a contingent of the Eastern Frontier Rifles under the command of Lt Col Dallas Smith. They lost several men and inflicted heavy casualties on the soldiers pursuing them. Some of the rebels like Ananta Singh escaped to Calcutta. Others, the largest group, remained underground and fought a guerilla war for nearly three years. Several encounters took place, including one at Dhalghat in June 1932. Later, Preetilata and her group attacked the European Club at Pahartali. Wounded, she took potassium cyanide and embraced martyrdom in 1932.

Throughout 1932-33, Masterda and his men were on the run in the countryside. Unfortunately, he was betrayed on 7th February 1933 and captured by a platoon of Gorkha Sepoys. Later, Tarakeshwar Dastidar and Kalpana Dutta were arrested.

Sarat Bose, the brother of well-known Barrister Subash, came down to defend Surjya Sen. On 12 January 1933, Surjya Sen and Tharakeshwar Dastidar were hanged in Chauliaganj Jail. Fearful of popular backlash, the bodies were carried in a British Cruiser, and thrown into the Bay of Bengal. The renowned Kalpana Datta who was in the Rajasahi Jail was later released, given her young age and gender. With this, the curtain came down on the Chittagong Armoury Raid.

It is worth recalling, in this context, what Surjya Sen said in his last message before his hanging at midnight:

"This is the task for preparation: to embrace death as a friend and this is the time to recall the light of other days as well. At such a solemn moment, what shall I leave behind for you? Only one thing, that is my dream, a golden dream- the dream of a free



Binode Bihari Choudhary with the author

India. How auspicious a moment it was when I first saw it! Throughout my life, most passionately and untiringly, I pursued it like a lunatic ... onward my comrades! Never fall back! The day of bondage is disappearing and the dawn of freedom is ushering in!”

A Forgotten Legacy

The Chittagong Armoury Raid shook the foundations of the British Empire in India. Its echoes vibrated and reverberated across the length the breadth of the country, inspiring countless young men and women. Why was it subsequently erased from national memory and history? In this section, I shall rely on my recent trip to Chittagong, visits to various sites and monuments such as the Pahartali European Club and my conversation with Binode Bihari Choudhury, aged 93, the only surviving member of Surjya Sen’s group at Chittagong.

From Calcutta Netaji Subash Chandra Bose International Airport to the Shahi Amanat Antrajatik Biman Bandar of Chittagong, it takes less than one hour. My host was Professor Ghulam Sarwar Chowdhury who had promised to help me explore the Surjya Sen trail in Chittagong

A university colleague of Sarwar’s, Nuri, met me at the conference held at the auditorium of the Chittagong Chamber of Commerce.

With Nuri and Sarwar, I went to the J.M. Sen Center. There is a concentration of Hindu population here. We witness at this center the permanent homage to the martyrs. Helpful neighbours announced that the legendary Binode Bihari Choudhury aged 93 lived close by at 120 Momin Road.

Binode Bihari’s home resembles an average middle class household in Kolkata. His bedroom serves as the drawing room where he meets visitors. The wooden shelves against the wall



Monument to Preetilata in front of the European Club

house memoirs, books of history and other memorabilia. High up on the wall, there are portraits of Preeti -lata and Surjya Sen and some of his own photos of younger days. A framed photograph shows him receiving an award from Sheikh Mujeebur Rahman.

At 93, Binode *Babu* stoops a little. However, his voice exudes strength; he has a sharp memory and recalls facts quickly as he fixes his gaze upon you and recalls his younger days.

“Did you take part in action?” I ask him. “Yes”. He shows his neck which a bullet had pierced. He was sent to a jail in faraway Rajputana and shifted to a camp in the desert. Kalpana Datta was kept in the Hizli detention camp. Later, she became a communist. This was the time when many arrested revolutionaries came in contact with communists in jail, he explained. In April 1971, at the time of the liberation of East Bengal, Choudhury left for India through the Mizo hills and returned to Bangladesh on 3 January 1972.

I ask him about the legacy of Surjya Sen in Bangladesh. He shows a moment’s hesitation in the presence of Sarwar and Nuri. “Unfortunately

in many quarters, Surjya Sen is described as a dacoit, a Hindu leader!” he regretted. “I met Mujeeb four to five times. In 1972 idols of goddess Durga were destroyed in many places. Accompanied by Fani Majumdar, a minister in Mujeeb’s cabinet, I went to Mujeeb and warned him that he would not remain in power if pro-Pakistani elements were not checked. There was an upsurge of such elements that were not reconciled to the emergence of Bangladesh as a secular nation.”

“Where is Bangladesh heading today?” I ask Binode Babu as he shows signs of fatigue. “The BNP and the four party alliance are squeezing out Hindus from this country. The majority of Hindus in villages are a harassed lot especially after Sheikh Haseena’s Awami League lost the recent election”, he replies. His parting request to Sarwar is: “I have given away the award money of one lakh received from Haseena to Chittagong university for an endowment lecture in the name of Surjya Sen. Will you kindly follow this up?” he pleads. Sarwar promises to do what he can and we depart.

The European Club opposite the present Pahartali Railway School is in a state of dilapidation. In front, there is an old marble plaque which enshrines Preetilata's heroic act. The letters are faded and the area looks forsaken.

It takes a while to locate the Dampara police lines, the old armoury looted by the revolutionaries. The policemen appear uncooperative until Sarwar tells them that his late father was a sub-inspector in the same area some years back!

In the evening, my local host Professor Mohit Alam, currently a Professor at Premier university, takes me to a marriage dinner at the Chittagong club. Here I meet Robert Kadir who was a communist and a student leader in Rangoon university. In 1950, he had met comrade PC Joshi who had married Kalpana Dutta in the forties the Chairman of the Communist Party of India at Beijing.

The next day, I was invited to the English department of Chittagong university for a lecture. After the talk I enquired about Preetilata. "I shall show you Preetilata's *basha*(home)" says Kachi, a student whose father is a former communist. This time I am armed with a tape recorder. Binode Choudhury, we are told, is at the nearby temple. He gives tuitions for his livelihood. At the Sadharan - Bramho Samaj temple, he pushes away the recorder, obviously fearful of the safety of his community. I understand the reasons for fear. At Kachi's place, I see graphic accounts and photographs of atrocities committed against minorities, men killed, women violated and all because of their support to the Awami League.

Mohit Alam, a secular Muslim, suggested I buy JN Dixit's excellent memoir *Liberation and Beyond* brought out by University Press, Dhaka after the Indian imprint appeared. As I read the chilling



The Pahartali European Club

account I begin to understand the reasons for neglect of Surjya Sen's legacy in Bangladesh.

The Muslim League was established in Dhaka in 1906 and flourished under the leadership of Fazlul Huq, Hassan Shaheed Suhrawardy, Mulla Jan Mohammed and Maulana Bhashani. Mujeeb continued to support the Muslim League and Pakistan till his denial of the premiership on 2 March 1971. Between 1945 and 1947, he actively participated in Muslim League agitations in Calcutta.

The imposition of Urdu began in 1956 and ended with the war of 1971. These led to his disillusionment with Pakistan as a failed state.

Many factors were responsible for the end of Bangladesh as a secular republic: Mrs Indira Gandhi was preoccupied with increasing domestic turmoil at home. Between 1972 and 1975, food shortages, floods and the cyclones increased Mujeeb's problems. By 1974 he had formed a one party State and a presidential form of government. The assassination of Mujeeb and all the top leaders of the Bangladesh liberation struggle between August

and November 1975 led to the primacy of the country's armed forces.

Surjya Sen's legacy of the freedom struggle rested on a composite culture and inter-religious harmony. Bangladesh today continues to manifest an ethno- religious identity crisis, seriously questioning the earlier legacy of Surjya Sen. The erasure of the Chittagong Armoury Raid from public consciousness in Bangladesh has been a logical corollary. Back in India, there is little appreciation of the movement. Such narratives lie trapped on the other side of the political divide. Thus public memory continues to be inhospitable to the Chittagong Armoury Raid.

Today, this memory lies neglected and forsaken, waiting for better days. Its belief in a composite culture, religious harmony, individual freedom and social equality are polar opposites to the various forms of fundamentalism sweeping the subcontinent. □

Sachidanand Mohanty is Professor, Department of English, University of Hyderabad.