

BHAGAT SINGH AND HIS COMRADES*

A PAGE FROM OUR REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY

Few cases in this country have attracted such attention as the Lahore Conspiracy Case of 1929—30. From the day bombs exploded in the Central Assembly till the time the curtain was rung down with the execution of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdeo, the floodlight of public attention was focussed on the case, on the prisoners, on the countless struggles they waged for the cause of political prisoners and for the principles they cherished. Bhagat Singh and his comrades became the heroes of many legends — some of them true, some fond creations of the popular mind. Songs and poems about them could be heard wherever one went.

Who were these people that overnight became so popular? What was it they stood for? Why did they evoke such sympathy and admiration? These questions I shall try to answer in the following pages.

I believe it was sometime in 1923 that I met Bhagat Singh for the first time. A young boy of about my age — I was fifteen at that time — he was introduced to me by B. K. Dutt in Cawnpore. Tall and thin, rather shabbily dressed, very quiet, he seemed a typical village lad lacking smartness and self-confidence. I did not think very highly of him at that time and told Dutt so when he was gone.

A few days later I saw him again. We had a long

* *Bhagat Singh and His Comrades*, Bombay, 1945.

talk. Those were days when we used to dream boyish dreams of revolution. It seemed round the corner — a question of a few years at most. Bhagat Singh did not seem so confident about it. I have forgotten his words but I remember his speaking about the torpor and apathy that prevailed in the land, the difficulty of rousing the people, the heavy odds against us. My first impressions about him seemed confirmed.

Our talks drifted to past attempts at revolution and a change came over Bhagat Singh as he spoke of the martyrs of 1915—16 and especially of Sardar Kartar Singh, the central figure of the First Lahore Conspiracy Case. Neither of us had met Kartar Singh, he had already been hanged when we were yet kids but we knew how he, then a mere youth of 18 and a comrade of Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, Baba Rur Singh and Prithvi Singh Azad, had become the undisputed leader of the Ghadr Party men who came to India in 1915—16 with the aim of organising armed revolt against British rule. A fearless fighter and a superb organiser, Kartar Singh was a man admired even by his enemies. I literally worshipped him and to hear one talk inspiringly of my hero was a great pleasure. I began to feel a liking for Bhagat Singh. Before he left Cawnpore we were close friends though I never ceased to make fun of what appeared to me his pessimistic outlook.

Kakori Arrests and After

In 1925 like a bolt from the blue came the Kakori arrests. Most of our leaders were in prison within a few weeks. More round-ups followed: searches and arrests, harassment of suspects became the order of the day. But what really shattered my dreams was the effect of these arrests. Men who had professed sympathy with our cause would now avoid us. Boys who had talked tall began now to leave the gymnasium we had started in Cawnpore for physical culture and as a recruiting centre. The whole province was in the grip of panic.

In January 1926 I went to Allahabad to join the Uni-

versity. We tried to rebuild the Party out of the shattered remnants of the Kakori round-ups. It was an uphill task. Revolution, it seemed now, was far, very far off.

This sense of frustration which prevailed in the ranks of the revolutionary-minded youth of that period and inevitably drew them towards terrorism was the outcome of the general political situation then prevailing. Following the failure of the great mass movement of 1921—22 the Congress had split into two factions — No-changers and Pro-changers — and now the Swaraj Party with Gandhiji's blessing held the field. Of political activities outside the legislatures there were none, mass meetings were rarely held and scantily attended. Stillness hung over the land, the stillness of a stagnant pool.

Prolonged discussions took place in our ranks about what to do to break this stagnant calm. Socialist literature was trickling in, the triumph of the November Revolution, the consolidation of the Socialist regime in Russia and more than anything else, the aid given by the Soviet Union to Asiatic countries like Turkey and China against imperialist powers attracted us towards the new Socialist State and towards the ideas and principles it embodied.

Simultaneously, another phenomenon whose significance we could only vaguely grasp then was being witnessed in our own country. At a time when the whole country seemed quiet and sunk in the morass of apathy the Great Strike of the Bombay workers led by the Girni Kamgar Union, strike struggles in Calcutta and Cawnpore, were attracting universal attention.

Terrorism, armed action against the enemies of the people, we were convinced, was indispensable to rouse the nation. But, clearly, terrorism by itself could not lead to freedom. In what channels and by what means was the mass movement unleashed by terror to be directed, what sort of Government would replace British rule? These questions, vaguely formulated were beginning to be asked in our ranks.

Bhagat Singh was in the meantime active in the Punjab. He and his comrades had formed the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, a militant youth organisation which was

to propagate Socialist ideas, preach the necessity of direct action against British rule and serve as a recruiting centre for the Terrorist Party. The Sabha became tremendously popular in the years that followed and played a leading part in the radicalisation of the youth of the Punjab.

Bhagat Singh also worked for some time on the editorial staff of the *Kiriti* — a socialist journal edited by Sohan Singh Josh.

Hindustan Socialist Republican Association

One day in 1928 I was surprised when a young man walked into my room and greeted me. It was Bhagat Singh but not the Bhagat Singh that I had met two years before. Tall and magnificently proportioned, with a keen, intelligent face and gleaming eyes, he looked a different man altogether. And as he talked, I realised that he had grown not merely in years.

He was now, together with Chandra Shekhar Azad — the sole remaining absconder of the Kakori Conspiracy Case — the leader of our Party. He explained to me the changes that had been made in our programme and organisational structure.

We were henceforth the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association with a Socialist State in India as our avowed objective. Also the Party had been reorganised with a Central Committee and with Provincial and District Committees under it. All decisions were to be taken in these Committees, majority decisions were to be binding on all.

As for the most important question, however, the question in what manner the fight for freedom and Socialism was to be waged, armed action by individuals and groups was to remain our immediate task. Nothing else, we held, could smash constitutionalist illusions, nothing else could free the country from the grip in which fear held it. When the stagnant calm was broken by a series of hammer blows delivered by us at selected points and on suitable occasions, against the most hated

officials of the Government, and mass movement unleashed, we would link ourselves with that movement, act as its armed detachment and give it a Socialist direction.

Our very contribution towards ensuring the success of the movement would ensure that free India became Socialist India.

All those who met Bhagat Singh then and afterwards have testified to his remarkable intelligence and to the powerful impression he made when talking. Not that he was a brilliant speaker. But he spoke with such force, passion and earnestness that one could not help being impressed. We talked the whole night and as we went out for a stroll when the first streaks of red were appearing in the grey sky, it seemed to me that a new era was dawning for our Party. We knew what we wanted and we knew how to reach our goal.

Such was our Socialism in those days. We had lost faith in the existing national leadership, its constitutionalism, its slogan of boring from within disgusted us. And we looked upon ourselves as men who by their example would create the basis for the rise of a new leadership. Socialism for us was an ideal, the principle to guide us to rebuild society after the capture of power.

The First Blow

The visit of the Simon Commission in 1928 was the occasion for country-wide strikes and demonstrations. The Bombay workers came out in a gigantic one-day protest strike. "Simon Go Back" was the slogan that rose from the seething sea of humanity wherever the Commission went. Such scenes had not been witnessed since the Non-Co-operation days.

A wave of indignation swept over the country when news came that at Lahore the protest demonstration had been broken up by the police and Lala Lajpat Rai, who was leading the procession, had himself been seriously injured. A few weeks afterwards he died. The country was plunged in mourning.

Even more than sorrow the common feeling was one of hatred and anger and also of frustration. Here in broad daylight in full view of tens of thousands, an aged and universally respected leader had been done to death and nothing could be done to mete out justice to the cowardly perpetrators of the crime.

Our Party decided to strike a blow. In November 1928 Saunders, the Assistant Superintendent of Police, the man who had led the lathi charge, was shot dead in front of the Police Headquarters in Lahore. Well-timed and daringly executed, it was an action that was acclaimed by the public with joy. The first of the blows by means of which we expected to stir the country had been struck.

Bombs in the Assembly

Things seemed to be moving apace. At its Calcutta session in December 1928 the Congress resolved to unfurl the banner of independence if Dominion status was not conceded within a year. Torpor that had hung over the land like a black cloud for years was slowly lifting. Youth Leagues were springing up everywhere, another gigantic strike was impending in Bombay.

We felt a big fight was ahead, an upheaval like that which had convulsed the country in 1921—22. We were feverishly busy preparing to play our part in it — collecting arms and money, training our cadres in the use of arms. Jatin Das was brought from Calcutta to teach us how to make bombs.

In April 1929 streamer headlines announced the arrest of Communist and Trade Union leaders all over the country. P. C. Joshi, then a student in the Allahabad University and a Youth League leader, was arrested; his arrest being followed by a huge protest demonstration of students.

Bhagat Singh and some others among us had already met a number of Communist leaders. We felt sympathetic towards them and at one time even contemplated some sort of a working alliance with them — Communists to

organise the masses and conduct the mass movement, we of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association to act as its armed section. But when we learned that Communists considered armed action by individuals to be harmful to the movement, we dropped the idea. While we did not look upon Communists as revolutionists — revolution for us meant primarily armed action — we felt one with them in many respects: in their hatred for imperialism, in their opposition to constitutionalism and insistence on direct action, in their striving for Socialism.

And so the country-wide arrests of Communists were felt by us to be a matter of vital concern for the revolutionary movement. It was imperialist attack against a cause which was our own, against a movement which had our love and sympathy. We resolved to protest not merely against the arrests but against the whole imperialist policy of fostering the growth of constitutionalist illusions on the one hand, and unleashing terror against the people on the other.

A few days later bombs exploded on the official benches in the Central Assembly just after the Trades Dispute Bill — a measure directed against the working-class movement — had been passed. Bhagat Singh and Dutt were arrested on the spot.

In a ringing statement that revealed the powerful pen that Bhagat Singh wielded they admitted their responsibility and explained what had led them to it. They were sentenced to transportation for life.

Soon followed the accidental discovery of our bomb factory in Lahore and the arrests of Sukhdeo, Kishori Lal and others. Jai Gopal confessed, then Hansraj Vohra, and the result was more round-ups, more confessions and within a few weeks most of our active workers and leaders of Bihar, United Provinces and the Punjab were in the hands of the police. Others went underground. My arrest came just when I was preparing to go underground.

It all seemed over, our dreams and our hopes. More depressing than anything else was the shocking fact that, unable to stand police torture, no less than seven — two of them members of our Central Committee — had turned approvers.

The Trial Begins

In July 1929 we were produced in court — 13 of us* — and there we met Bhagat Singh and Dutt again. No longer was he the Bhagat Singh of the magnificent physique whose strength had been a byword in our Party. A shadow of his former self, weak and emaciated, he was carried into the court on a stretcher. For months he and Dutt had been tortured by the police and now they were on hunger strike demanding human treatment for all political prisoners. Our eyes filled with tears as we greeted them.

Though sentenced already to transportation for life Bhagat Singh and Dutt were our co-accused in the new case that now began — the Lahore Conspiracy Case of 1929. For three days we paid no attention to the proceedings but held prolonged discussions about the line of defence — discussions in which Bhagat Singh, though so weak that he had to recline in an easy chair all the time, took the leading part.

The first thing, he emphasised, was the need to get rid of the idea that all was over. Ours was not to be a defence in the legal sense of the word. While every effort must be made to save those who could be saved, the case as a whole was to be conducted with a definite political purpose. Revolutionary use was to be made of the trial, of every opportunity to expose the sham justice of the British Government and to demonstrate the unconquerable will of revolutionists. Not merely by our statements when the time came, but even more by our actions inside the court and prisons, we were to fight for the cause of all political prisoners, hurl defiance at the Government and show the contempt we had for its courts and its police. Thus we were to continue the work we had begun outside — the work of rousing our people by our actions.

These talks had a galvanising effect on us. As a first

* Bejoy Sinha and Rajguru were arrested after the trial had begun. Bhagwan Das and Sadasiva (now members of the Communist Party) were arrested at Bhusaval and sentenced to long terms. A number of comrades were tried in Bihar separately in a dacoity case.

step we resolved to join the hunger strike that Bhagat Singh and Dutt had already begun. Our central demand was the placing of all political prisoners in a single class, better diet for them, newspapers and reading material and writing facilities.

The Hunger Strike

Thus began the great Lahore Conspiracy Case hunger strike that continued for 63 days resulting in the self-immolation of Jatin Das and stirring the country to its very depths.

In the beginning the Government and the jail authorities did not take the strike seriously. They believed it would peter out in a few days and this belief on their part was strengthened when two of the prisoners gave up the strike after a few days. Some of us were none too confident either, and I for one wondered how long it would be possible for me to remain without food. All of us had undergone hardships before, physical conflict with the police now did not frighten us, but the prospect of starving ourselves for days, weeks and even months — this was a chilling prospect indeed.

For ten days nothing big happened. Hunger grew and with it physical weakness. Some had to take to bed after a week and, as the trial continued, it was a real strain for them to sit in the court room. But our first terror had gone. Hunger strike did not seem such a hard job after all. But we did not know that the real fight was yet to come.

After ten days forcible feeding was started. We were all in separate cells at that time. Accompanied by a number of tough and strong *Nambardars* (convict overseers) the doctors came to each cell, the hunger striker was thrown on a mattress, a rubber tube was forcibly pushed into his nostril and the milk poured into it.

Violent resistance was offered by everyone but with little effect at first. It almost seemed as if they had already beaten us.

In the night on the thirteenth day of the strike news

reached me in my cell that Jatin Das was in a bad state and had been removed to the jail hospital. At first I could not make out what had happened for Das had appeared quite fit only a few hours ago. Then the man who had brought the news — he was a subordinate jail official — hesitatingly told me that something had “gone wrong” during forcible feeding and Das was now lying unconscious.

This was shocking news indeed. I, like most others amongst us, had never met Das before my arrest. But during the few days that we had come to know him in prison he had won everyone’s affection. Though quiet and unassuming, he had a keen sense of humour and a fund of stories and anecdotes, which he used to narrate to us and make everyone laugh.

I called the jailor and by bullying him got the permission to visit the jail hospital.

Das was lying there on a cot, unconscious, with doctors attending on him. They feared he might die that very night. He recovered but developed pneumonia and that weakened him so much — he refused all medicines and nourishment — that forcible feeding was now out of question.

From now on the strike became grim and determined. Das was followed by Shiv Varma and others. Soon the hospital was full. Court proceedings were now adjourned.

It was a veritable race for death that now began. Who would be the first to die — this became the subject of competition.

Many were the methods we devised to defeat the doctors. Kishori swallowed red pepper and boiling water to cause sore throat so that the passage of the tube led to such coughing that it had to be taken out lest he might die of suffocation. I swallowed flies immediately after forced feeding to induce vomiting. These devices came to be known to the doctors and guards were kept on us.

Determined to break us the jail officials removed all water from our cells and placed milk instead in the pitchers. This was the worst ordeal imaginable. After a day thirst grew unbearably. I would drag myself towards the pitcher, hoping every time to find water but drew back

at the sight of milk. It was maddening. If the man who had hit upon this device had been there before me, I would have killed him.

Outside the guard sat — watching every movement — mute, impassive.

I could not trust myself much longer. I knew that a few hours more and I was bound to give way and drink the milk. My throat was parched, my tongue swollen.

I called the guard. As he stood outside the barred door I asked him to get me a few drops of water at least. His reply was: “I can’t do it. I have no permission.”

Fury took possession of me. I snatched the pitcher and hurled it against the door, breaking it to pieces, spilling the milk on the guard. He recoiled back in horror. He thought I had gone mad. He was not far from right.

The same torture was being undergone by Kishori and others who were then in cells. And everyone, as I learnt later, had done the same thing — broke their pitchers before their guards.

The jailor gave away. Water was brought to our cells. I drank and drank. Then I fell sick and vomited out every drop.

In the meantime sympathetic hunger strikes were taking place wherever there were political prisoners. A powerful mass movement had grown to back our demands. Mass meetings and demonstrations were taking place in every part of the country.

The Meerut Conspiracy Case prisoners went on hunger strike after a few days. The news was flashed across the seas. It created a stir in England. World attention was now focussed on conditions in Indian prisons.

Several times during the hunger strike Bhagat Singh came to our jail on the plea of consultation but really to meet us and know how we were faring. Though himself weak and emaciated he would sit by the side of Das and other comrades and cheer them up. His very presence infused new life in us and we looked forward eagerly to these visits.

At last when Jatin Das was on the point of death and the conditions of Shiv and others were very serious, the

Government yielded. A Committee with a non-official majority was appointed to recommend changes in jail rules. The Committee met us in prison, assured us that most of our demands would be conceded and on the basis of its assurances we resolved to end the strike.

Jatin Das was now beyond any hope of recovery. He could no longer talk or even hear. Victory, so it seemed at that time, had been won but the man who had more than anyone else contributed towards it, was not to live to share its fruits.

There he lay, with all of us sitting round him, and a lump rose in my throat. As he passed away and I lifted my head, I saw tears even in the eyes of hardened jail officials. When his body was borne out of the jail gate, to be hauled over to the huge crowd that was waiting outside, Hamilton Harding, Superintendent of Police, Lahore, bared his head, bowing in reverence before the man whom all the might of the British Empire had failed to defeat.

The promises made by the Government on the basis of which we abandoned the strike were not kept forcing us to resort to two more hunger strikes, and even afterwards the new rules were interpreted in such manner as to exclude the vast majority of political prisoners from any benefit. But public attention was focussed on the terrible conditions prevailing in the jails — conditions far worse than today. The sham pretensions of the Government stood exposed.

One event during the hunger strike moved us deeply. Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, the founder of the Ghadr Party and a hero of the Lahore Conspiracy Case of 1915—16, who was then in the Lahore Central Jail, joined the strike; he had already served 14 years in the Andamans and in Indian prisons and was about to be released. We were informed by the Superintendent that if he persisted, he would lose his remissions and would have to remain in prison much longer. Moreover, Babaji was old and in ill health, 14 years of hell had shattered his body and the hunger strike might end disastrously for him.

In vain, however, Bhagat Singh saw Babaji and

pleaded with him — he was in tears when he reported the interview to us — to desist. Babaji continued the strike as long as we did. He lost a good part of his remissions and had to remain in jail for a year more.

The Man and His Ideas

Bhagat Singh had none of the characteristics of the traditional terrorist leader. We had differences amongst us on many occasions, several of the meetings we held were stormy and more than once Bhagat Singh had to follow a course of action with which he did not agree. Impetuous and strong-willed, he lacked the coolness and imperturbability of Azad and would at times fret and fume and lash at those who seemed to vacillate. But only seldom did he give offence and whenever he did so he felt mortified and begged forgiveness with such candour and sincerity that one could not bear any grudge against him. Of affectionate nature, tender towards ailing comrades, frank and open-hearted, with no trace of pettiness in his make-up, he was a man who claimed the love of all who were even acquainted with him.

Always passionately fond of studying Bhagat Singh spent most of his time in prison reading Socialist literature. Perhaps the first among us to be drawn towards Socialist ideas, he was an avowed atheist and had none of the religious beliefs of earlier terrorists. It would be an exaggeration to say that he became a Marxist, but more and more as a result of his studies, of discussions which we held frequently and under the impact of events outside — stirring events took place while we were in prison: the Sholapur uprising, the Peshawar upheaval, the heroic stand of Garhwali soldiers led by Chandra Singh — he began to stress the need for armed action only in co-ordination with and as an integral part of the mass movement, subordinated to its needs and requirements.

Studies in prison deepened the love that we already cherished for the Soviet Union and on the occasion of the 1930 anniversary of the November Revolution, we

sent greetings to the Soviet Union, hailing its victories and pledging support to the Soviet State against all enemies.

Ex-Parte Justice

Throughout the trial we strove to carry out the policy we had chalked out in the very beginning, the policy of propaganda by action. The success of that policy and the tremendous publicity that our case received made the Government furious. Every opportunity was seized to break us. We were equally determined never to give in to humiliating orders, never to bow before the court and the police. And the result was frequent struggles, physical clashes with the police, prolonged adjournments.

The effect of each of these was better exposure of the Government, more publicity and more popular sympathy for us.

After nine months of trial before the Magistrate and long before even a small number of Prosecution witnesses had been examined, the proceedings were abruptly ended and "in view of the emergency" that had arisen threatening "peace and tranquillity" a Special Ordinance was promulgated by the Viceroy to try us, known as the "Lahore Conspiracy Case Ordinance" of 1930: its provisions were of an unheard of character. We were to be tried before a Special Tribunal that could, if it deemed it necessary, dispense with our presence. There need be no lawyers, no Defence witnesses, no accused in the court. Any sentence, including the sentence of death, could be passed by the Tribunal. And to crown it all, against its judgement there was no right of appeal. Never had any Government calling itself civilised adopted such measures.

What the Government intended, above all, was to defeat our policy of using the trial for revolutionary propaganda. Another thing, it seemed, was worrying them. Mr. Farne, the only police official present at the spot when Assistant Superintendent Saunders was killed,

had failed to identify Bhagat Singh. Due to the tremendous popular enthusiasm that the case had evoked, a number of key witnesses had turned "hostile", more were likely to follow suit and two of the approvers had retracted their confessions.

The whole case was in danger of ending in a fiasco if ordinary legal procedure were followed and ordinary legal facilities allowed us.

Before the trial had proceeded in the Court of the Special Tribunal for a fortnight the expected clash came. Orders were passed by the President of the Tribunal to handcuff us for raising slogans when entering the court. On our pointing out that this had never been objected to in the Magistrate's Court or even in the High Court where we had been taken once, the police were ordered to use force.

There, in the presence of lawyers and visitors, scores of policemen armed with lathis and batons pounced upon us. This was the order they had been waiting for. We fought back with bare fists but the odds against us were too heavy. Blows rained on our heads, on our chests, on our arms. Thrown on the ground, we were kicked and beaten with lathis. We were removed from the court by force, bloodstained and severely injured. The injuries were so serious that several comrades could not move for days together.

We demanded withdrawal of the order and assurance that such things would not be repeated. This was not forthcoming. Justice Agha Haider, the only Indian member of the Tribunal, was so moved by the scene he had witnessed that he issued a statement that he had been no party to the order to handcuff us and to use force. A few days later the Tribunal was "reconstituted". His name was missing from the "reconstituted" Tribunal.

And so the "trial" proceeded, without the accused, without Defence lawyers, without Defence witnesses, before a court from which the one judge whose sense of justice would not permit illegal beating-ups and who therefore might take an independent stand on the question of sentences also had been removed. What the judgement would be was a foregone conclusion.

In October 1930, after a farcical trial lasting five months, the judgement was announced. Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdeo were sentenced to death, seven to transportation for life, others to long terms of imprisonment. I was among those acquitted because the only evidence against me was that of two approvers, the third approver who had deposed against me having retracted his confession. As the jail gates closed behind me and I stood on the street outside, I felt like a man who had deserted his comrades.

What Bhagat Singh had come to mean to our countrymen I realised only when I was out. "Bhagat Singh Zindabad" was the slogan that rent the air wherever a meeting was held. "Inquilab Zindabad"—the slogan he had been the first to raise—had replaced "Bande Mataram" as the slogan of the national movement. His name was on the lips of millions, his image in every young man's heart. My chest swelled with pride as I thought of my long association with such a man.

Hopes there were still of saving Bhagat Singh and his comrades. Everyone expected that the release of the Lahore Case prisoners or at least the commutation of their death sentences would be one of the terms of any agreement between the Congress and the Government. That expectation was belied. We had been guilty of violence and so while the Congress leaders "desired" to save Bhagat Singh, that could not be made one of the conditions of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact.

In April 1931, just on the eve of the Karachi Session of the Congress, the death sentences were carried out. Bhagat Singh was barely 24 at that time.

I was then on my way to Karachi. Men who heard the news wept like children. As for me I was too stunned even to think.

Like a meteor Bhagat Singh appeared in the political sky for a brief period. Before he passed away, he had become the cynosure of millions of eyes and the symbol of the spirit and aspirations of a new India, dauntless in the face of death, determined to smash imperialist rule and raise on its ruins the edifice of a free People's State in this great land of ours.

Chandra Shekhar Azad

For the youth that were drawn into the terrorist movement in the thirties the name of Chandra Shekhar Azad was at once a legend and an inspiration.

A participant in the Kakori train action in 1925, Azad escaped arrest during the round-up that followed. With gallows staring him in the face if he got caught, he was not, however, the man to lie low even for a day. A great organiser, he continued his work with redoubled energy and together with Bhagat Singh and Sukhdeo rebuilt the Party.

In many respects he was a striking contrast to Bhagat Singh. Calm and collected—most so when leading armed actions—never perturbed, never upset, Azad had nerves of iron. He had none of the impetuosity of Bhagat Singh, nor his breadth of vision and intellectual attainments. Not having had much opportunity for study he was slow to grasp the new ideas that were entering our ranks. He had accepted them and even supported altering the name of the Party to Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, but I do not think that at that time he cared much for these things. Essentially a man of action, what mattered to Azad was the immediate task. And a braver man never lived, or one abler to plan out actions and execute them in the face of what appeared insurmountable odds.

Robust and steady, he had muscles of iron and phenomenal strength and agility. On top of it all he was a crack shot, the best in our Party. No wonder therefore that his name sent shivers down the spine of police officials in the Punjab, U. P. and Bihar—the provinces where he operated. No man, not even Bhagat Singh, evoked such terror in their minds.

None should think, however, that he was a man without human qualities, a monster thirsting for blood, as the terror-stricken police sought to make out. Jovial and always cheerful, attentive to the needs of comrades, fond of jokes and with a keen sense of humour, he was not merely respected but loved by all who knew him. A strict disciplinarian, he spared neither himself nor

others for slackness or failure to carry out jobs. But seldom was he unjust.

And, above all, he inspired such confidence that one felt that an action which Azad undertook was bound to succeed.

Such was Azad as I knew him then. After our arrest he baffled the police as he had done once before during the Kakori round-up four years earlier, and gathering together the broken threads he reorganised the Party. The bomb explosion that almost killed the Viceroy while he was travelling in a special train in December 1929 made the police realise that the situation was still "grave and menacing." No peace for them while Azad lived!

They spread the net far and wide but Azad, slipping through their fingers, reached Lahore with a daring plan to effect our rescue while we were being conveyed to the court — a plan that would have succeeded but for the untimely explosion of a bomb in the centre he had set up. This time Azad was almost caught but soon afterwards the police heard of him again leading an armed action in Delhi.

Then came a series of bomb explosions in different districts of Punjab which killed a number of police officers and injured more. And this was followed by the Delhi and the Second Lahore Conspiracy Case arrests, arrests involving hundreds. But once again eluding the police, undaunted by set-backs and failures that would have dispirited even the bravest, with rewards running into tens of thousands of rupees on his head, Azad strove to rebuild the Party anew.

When I met him after my release towards the end of 1930 I found him as undaunted as ever. In the midst of incessant revolutionary activity he had devoted all his precious spare time to studies. His ideas had matured, he had made others read and explain things to him as his own knowledge of English was inadequate. He had developed deep love for the Soviet Union and wanted to send comrades there for study and training.

Failures had failed to cow him down, but already rumours of truce between the Congress and the Govern-

ment were in the air and it was obvious to Azad as to others in the Party that things had not developed as we had hoped. Despite the self-sacrificing efforts made by him and his comrades, despite the blows they had struck, the national movement had not moved into revolutionary channels. The hopes raised in our breasts by the happenings in Peshawar, Sholapur and Chittagong had remained unfulfilled.

All these had made Azad think deep and long. It was not that his faith in terrorism had been completely shattered. But clearly something was wrong with the notion that a band of heroic and self-sacrificing youths could by their action influence the national movement as a whole in a revolutionary direction. He was anxious to know what Bhagat Singh thought, what discussions we had in prison about what should be done.

Azad's own view was that as many comrades as possible should now go in for mass work and organise the workers and peasants to develop a mass Socialist movement leaving him and a few others to resort to armed action only when the needs of that movement demanded it and to train cadres in the use of arms for the future revolutionary uprising.

It was on this basis that Azad wanted to rebuild the Party but he did not live to carry out his plan. Thanks to the information supplied by a traitor he was surprised by a police force in the Alfred Park of Allahabad and after a prolonged exchange of shots during which two police officials were seriously wounded Azad was killed. Thus ended the eventful life of a man whose indomitable courage and iron will had made him a legendary figure in the whole of Northern India.

STILL IN PRISON

Seven of the comrades of Bhagat Singh were sentenced to transportation for life in the Lahore Conspiracy Case. One of them, Mahabir Singh, laid down his life in the Andamans during the first hunger strike that was fought there. Among the remaining, four — Kishori

Lal, Jaidev, Shiv Varma and Gaya Prasad — are still behind the bars.

They have already spent sixteen years and a half in prison. Their jail lives have been an unbroken succession of hunger strikes and struggles. These have also been years of sustained study which matured their vague Socialist ideas and have led them to Communism.

During the last great hunger strike that was fought in the Andamans, the pledge was given by the nation's leaders that no efforts would be spared to secure their release. That pledge, given eight years ago, has yet to be fulfilled.

They are men of whom any country will feel proud. When yet in their teens, an age when life hardly begins, they spurned its joys and pleasures.

Smarting under foreign domination, inspired by passionate love for their country, galled by the spectacle of wide-spread demoralisation, they were drawn towards the idea of direct action — to be carried out by armed revolutionaries who by their heroism, by dying on the gallows, would shake up the whole land and infect their countrymen with their own hatred of their oppressors and their love for their motherland.

For this crime they have already paid heavy penalties. Young men on the threshold of life when the prison gates closed on them, they are today middle-aged men who have grown prematurely old after 16 years of burial in the cemeteries that are the Andamans and Indian prisons. One of them is down with T. B.

Criminals, common murderers and dacoits, men actuated by the worst of motives, when sentenced to transportation for life, are freed and leave the prison after 14 years. Yet these four, not one of whom was charged even by the police with participation in a single armed action and all of whom were sentenced after a farcical trial in their absence, are denied even that freedom. Their great crime is that their spirit remains as undaunted as ever. And as long as that spirit remains unshattered they will remain in prison and even die there — if the Government has its way.

Kishori Lal

I met Kishori for the first time after my arrest in the Lahore Conspiracy Case. It was the 10th of July 1929. The under-trial prisoners were taken to the jail gate for being conveyed to the court. Our hearts were heavy — not so much at the prospect of heavy sentences as because of the shattering of our Party. At the gate we saw Kishori — short and sturdy with a mischievous grin on his face and a moustache which he twisted frequently to give himself — as he explained with a smile — a presentable appearance. That smile seemed out of place in those grim surroundings but during the year and a half following, it seldom left his face.

No matter what happened, no matter how bad things were, Kishori would always manage to find something humorous about them. And he never kept his thoughts to himself. He made us go into fits of laughter with his jokes and remarks even during the darkest days of struggles and hunger strikes.

While sitting in the court he would discover something funny about the appearance of a lawyer, of the Magistrate or of a police official and pass on his comments to us. Peals of laughter from our dock interrupted the proceedings, our lawyers were shocked at our "improper" behaviour, we ourselves would reprove Kishori and then he would make a face so long and so sad that that became the cause for renewed laughter.

Nor did he spare us. Everyone, from the oldest to the youngest, was the target of his jokes but they never had a sting, they would make everyone laugh — their victim the most.

Beneath that smiling exterior lay a will of iron and also, as I came to know, a tender heart. Unspeakable tortures had been inflicted on him when he was in the dreaded Lahore Fort to make him reveal secrets but for once even the Punjab police realised that they had met their match, a man who would keep on smiling no matter what they did.

An incident that took place in June 1930 is worth relating. The Civil Disobedience movement was on. Our

jail was full of Congress prisoners, most of them young men. We were, of course, kept in a separate enclosure, severely isolated. For the one thing which the jail officials wanted to prevent was any contact between them and us. We knew they were being beaten up and ill-treated in other ways and we had frequent discussions as to what we could do to help them. But we felt helpless. So carefully had our warders and watchmen been selected that we learnt of these incidents only long after they had taken place. Before we could act we had to get fresh and precise information.

Kishori refused to give in. Highly resourceful and with a knack for making friends, he obtained information about a Congressman who had that very day been beaten and placed in cross-bar fetters. We held a meeting. We knew that mere talking to the Superintendent would be of no avail as he would deny the allegation. Something more was needed. But what?

Out came Kishori's plan: scale the walls of our enclosure, push aside all who came in the way, rush to the cell where the prisoner was and demonstrate and raise slogans there till the Superintendent came. We could face him with facts about unauthorised beatings and demand that they be stopped. It was a bold and risky plan but it seemed worth trying.

Things proceeded as we expected. Taken by surprise, the warders could hardly resist, and within a few minutes we reached the cell, saw the prisoner, got the facts we wanted.

By now alarm bells were ringing furiously. Word had gone round that the "Bomb Case prisoners" had mutinied. The Jailor rushed to the spot with a large force of warders who charged us with batons. We hit back but they were too many and, moreover, they were armed. Inevitably, we got the worst of the fight. Kishori, among others, was badly injured. Then, fearing that the whole jail population of political prisoners might mutiny, the Jailor stopped the fight.

An hour later the Superintendent saw us, pleaded that we should not "take the law in our own hands" and promised to make enquiries and issue orders against

beating-ups. That promise was not kept for long, but for the time being things improved. Kishori was the hero of the day.

Kishori was sentenced to transportation for life. To this day he retains that buoyant optimism, that cheerful countenance which made him so popular with those who came to know him. His studies in prison led him to Communism and it is precisely that for which the Punjab Government hates him most. The boot-lickers of the bureaucracy and the landlord hoarders, at whose head stands the "Soldier Premier" of Punjab, know that Communism under whose banner the sturdy Punjab peasantry is gathering in ever-increasing numbers, is their deadliest enemy. They will not release Kishori unless they are forced to do so.

Shiv Varma

Among the under-trials in the Lahore Conspiracy Case Shiv was one of the most studious and one who pondered most seriously on the events outside and the problems of the revolutionary movement. We knew — and he knew it better than any of us — that the minimum he might expect was transportation for life. Even something worse might be in store for him for he was the chief organiser of the Party in U. P. and a member of the Central Committee. Broad hints were given to us at the very commencement of the trial that the prosecution might demand death sentences for all CC members. His pre-occupation with studies therefore seemed a bit out of place and we often made fun of it. Besides studies, the one thing he loved most was chess, a game he played remarkably well.

I had met Shiv many times before the trial but in accordance with our prevailing code I never enquired about his past, though he excited my curiosity in more ways than one. Thin and frail, his hair prematurely grey, seldom excited, talking slowly and with a pause every now and then as though he weighed every word he uttered — he seemed a misfit in our ranks and it

was difficult to believe that he was one of the most active members of the "party of bombs and revolvers".

Born in 1906 in a village in Hardoi district, Shiv was drawn in the political movement when he was only fifteen. He left studies, joined the Non-Co-operation movement taking an active part in the Boycott campaign. The movement over, he resumed studies at the same time devoting himself to social work. In 1925 he came to Cawnpore and was soon drawn in the underground organisation. So effective was his work that his college became one of our strongest centres within a year.

The arrest of the older leaders of the terrorist movement in the Kakori Case of 1925 threw the whole burden on the young shoulders of those few, mostly students, who remained out. The majority of them had never handled a revolver. Inexperienced, without money, without resources, with few friends and contacts — their erstwhile friends and sympathisers avoiding them like plague after the searches and round-ups that followed Kakori — they strove to build the Party again.

Shiv was one of those who played a leading part in carrying through this task. He was indefatigable in his work and had remarkable organising capacities. The great strength that the Party attained in U. P. within a short time after the shattering blow it had received in 1925 was largely due to his work.

Our faith in terrorism had not been shaken by the Kakori arrests. On the contrary, armed action against the most hated Government officials seemed more than ever necessary to galvanise the nation. But simultaneously, influenced by the November Revolution, the great triumph of Socialism in Russia and the rising tide of the working-class movement inside India we were being attracted towards Socialist ideas, studying whatever books on Socialism we could get, discussing and debating about the nature of the Government that was to replace British Raj.

This groping towards Socialism while retaining faith in armed action by a band of disciplined and self-sacrificing youths as the most effective form of revolutionary work led to the reorganisation of the Party under the

name of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. Shiv, on whom the new ideas had made deep impression, was one of the chief protagonists of this change.

He left his studies and plunged into revolutionary work. As a member of the Central Committee of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association and as its chief organiser in U. P., he moved from district to district, strengthening existing centres, starting new ones.

He was arrested in Saharanpur in May 1929. Since then he has been in jail.

During the great 63-day hunger strike which was fought to win better conditions for political prisoners, Shiv, it appeared at one stage, would be an early victim. After a fortnight of the strike he was carried into the jail hospital unconscious and in high fever. He had developed pneumonia.

For days he tossed in bed, unable to get a wink of sleep due to shooting pain in his chest. Doctors pleaded with him to have some medicines or at least a sleeping dose but he refused. "We decided," he whispered slowly and with visible effort, "to refuse all medicines, and I am going to stick to that decision." How he survived is a miracle.

In every one of the subsequent struggles he displayed the same calm courage. In one of the encounters that took place in the court he was beaten by the police so severely that he fainted on the spot. But nothing could break his spirit.

He displayed remarkable talents in another sphere also. Unlike some of us, he followed the court proceedings carefully and then subjected the Prosecution witnesses to fierce cross-examination, often tearing their evidence to shreds. Bitingly sarcastic when dealing with approvers, he would make them wince and flinch and contradict themselves again and again, raising peals of laughter among visitors.

Soon, however, the court proceedings ended and in October 1930 the Special Tribunal that tried us in our absence delivered judgement. Shiv was sentenced to transportation for life.

With a shamelessness that has few parallels the Government went back on the assurance that its spokesmen had given when we were on hunger strike. Every one of the Lahore Case prisoners was placed in "C" Class and treated with vindictive brutality. Transferred to Madras prisons Shiv and Jaidev when in Rajamundry Central Jail had to be on hunger strike for five months and a half and there were numerous other fights before they were sent to the Andamans. There the struggle began anew and with few breaks continued till, as a result of the hunger strike in 1937 and the powerful movement it generated in India, they were repatriated.

While in the Andamans, Shiv came over to Communism, and not for a day since has he wavered from that path. When the fascists stood on the threshold of India, he, Jaidev and Gaya Prasad issued a stirring "Call to Our Countrymen" to unite, win National Government and hurl back the invaders.

With the same calm fortitude with which Shiv met the trials and tribulations of his early revolutionary days, he spends his prison life now, confident that one day his countrymen will secure his release and enable him to do his bit for the liberation of our motherland.

Jaidev

Jaidev comes from the same district as Shiv. Though three years younger he was Shiv's childhood friend. And in the years that have passed that friendship has grown. One cannot think of the one without thinking of the other.

In many respects they were poles apart. There seemed little in common between tall, well-built and athletic, passionately fond of games, impulsive and impetuous Jaidev, and frail, studious, cool-headed Shiv. There was one thing, however, which drew them together — a burning love for the country and for the common man, a love that made both of them plunge in the Non-Co-operation movement and later in social service work in their district.

In 1925 Jaidev joined the D. A. V. College in Cawnpore and was soon an active member of the terrorist party. Like others his mind began to move towards Socialism, influenced by events abroad and in India. But he did not stop there. In order to know from personal experience the condition of the peasantry he moved about in rural areas of Lucknow and Hardoi, especially among the poorest peasants and *Pasees* — an untouchable caste classified by the Government as a "criminal tribe." What he saw in the villages — the wretched condition of peasants, the social degradation and the legal disabilities from which those in the lowest rung suffered — gave flesh and blood to his ideas. No change, he concluded, was worth the name unless it meant the abolition of all exploitation and the establishment of a real People's Raj.

For a time he was in the Benares Hindu University continuing his revolutionary work there. Later he gave up studies and became a whole-timer. In May 1929 he was arrested along with Shiv and Gaya Prasad in a bomb factory they had set up in Saharanpur.

Jaidev was in the thick of every struggle we waged as under-trials. His would be one of the first hands to go up in favour of action — no matter whether it was hunger strike, a clash with the police, or a demonstration in sympathy with political prisoners. And once the decision had been taken he would oppose anything that savoured of compromise.

Once while our trial was proceeding in the Magistrate's Court, a shoe was hurled by Prem Dutt, the youngest of the accused, at the approver Jai Gopal who was behaving in a most provocative manner, making fun of our Party and our activities. It was done on the spur of the moment and Jai Gopal was not hurt at all but on the advice of the police, the Magistrate issued orders that all of us must be kept in handcuffs throughout the rest of the trial.

The court was adjourned for the day. The next day when we reached the jail gate, we were informed that the order would be enforced.

On our refusal to submit we were suddenly attacked by a large number of policemen, resulting in a free fight

in the jail yard and serious injuries to Kanwal Nath, Bejoy Sinha and Rajguru. At the end of an hour of struggle the police succeeded in bundling only five of us into the prison van.

Word was sent to us the next day that if we agreed to come to the court in handcuffs, they would be removed and the order rescinded. Followed a hot debate in our ranks as to what to do. Jaidev strongly opposed the compromise, so did Kishori and I. But we were in a minority. Weighty arguments were advanced by Shiv and Bejoy: "What happened yesterday in the jail yard the people don't know. The lathi charge on unarmed prisoners remained unreported because it took place here. If the Magistrate refuses to remove the handcuffs, we can fight again. But this time we shall fight in the court room itself. Let the people see what brutalities are committed in the name of law and what stuff we are made of." Cold logic won. Kishori, whose smile never left his face, was now in tears as he put his hands together to be chained.

The Magistrate went back on the assurance he had given. Our handcuffs remained. We could see the gleam of triumph in the eyes of the police officials. They believed they had broken us. Jaidev sat in the dock, his head down, overwhelmed by a sense of shame and humiliation.

During the lunch interval one of our hands was unchained to enable us to eat. In the lunch tent, an improvised structure just outside the court, we all resolved not to be handcuffed again.

Then followed a scene the like of which few court rooms have witnessed. Handicapped by one hand in chains, we were attacked by more than fifty constables and inspectors, beaten with lathis and kicked as we fell down. They dragged us to the court room where we were thrown like sacks over the railings that surrounded the dock. Shiv, whose head struck the hard floor as he was dashed down, fainted on the spot. Some were bleeding, others had bruises all over their bodies.

Being one of the sturdiest of the lot Jaidev came in for special attention. Held down by force he was merci-

lessly beaten. He struggled to his feet, his clothes torn to shreds, a big bump on his forehead, and made an impassioned speech calling upon the Magistrate who permitted such atrocities in his court to resign, asking the visitors never to forget what they had witnessed.

The next day the order to handcuff us was rescinded.

Though little evidence was produced against Jaidev his mere presence in the "bomb factory" of Saharanpur was enough for the Tribunal that tried us in our absence to sentence him to transportation for life.

His prison life since then has been crowded with struggles. For five months and a half he was on hunger strike while in Rajamundry Jail, the strike being given up only at the intervention of Pandit Malaviya and other leaders. Once he was flogged for refusal to be cowed down by the Jailor.

A leading figure in all the many struggles that were fought in the Andamans, Jaidev was also one of the chief organisers of the Communist Consolidation* and for a time its Secretary and Editor of the *Call*, the organ of the Consolidation. A powerful writer in Hindi, an impressive speaker, a man who has made a deep study of Marxism, he would be an invaluable asset for our freedom movement.

For more than sixteen years he has been in prison. The ordeals he has undergone — repeated hunger strikes, beating-ups, floggings — have failed to shatter not merely his morale but even his body. Years have matured his judgement — no longer is he the impulsive youth of sixteen years ago — but the spirit that made the boy of thirteen throw himself in the Non-Co-operation movement remains the same.

Dr. Gaya Prasad

Most of the members of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association were students in their teens. Not so

* The Communist Consolidation consisted of those prisoners who had come over to Communism and resolved to work under the direction of the Communist Party of India.

Gaya Prasad. He was a married man, settled in life with a good practice. He had been in the thick of the Non-Co-operation movement of 1921—22. The failure of that movement and the demoralisation that followed made him think hard. Most of his political co-workers went back to their old ways of living. He could not. He joined the revolutionary terrorist movement.

In those days he had a thick well-trimmed beard that made him look much older than his years and gave him a most "respectable" appearance. It was impossible for a layman to imagine that this apparently middle-aged man in spectacles who looked so dignified and gravely examined patients could be a most active member of a party that was trying to subvert British rule by means of bombs and revolvers. That beard of Dr. Gaya Prasad and his medical skill were invaluable assets — a cover not merely for him but for the Party as well, for whenever necessary, he could set up a small dispensary and practice — his dispensary, needless to say, being a Party centre.

Active in U.P. and the Punjab, he was ultimately arrested in Saharanpur along with Shiv and Jaidev. When I met him in jail again he was minus his famous beard. It was something like a shock.

Though slightly stoutish Gaya Prasad was never very strong and in the struggles and clashes which were frequent, he suffered terribly. But not even once did he flinch.

He was a sort of mother to our group of unruly boys. Always spick and span he hated chaotic ways of living and all disorderliness. He would change his bed-sheets every third day, wash his clothes, keep his shelf clean and his books and articles in order. Not content with that he insisted on everyone doing the same and many a time tried to put us to shame by doing our jobs for us. Being one of the most unruly and chaotic I became his special target and several times I ran out of the barracks when I saw him approaching. On returning I generally found my sheets changed and my articles arranged in order.

Systematic and methodical in everything he under-

took, Gaya Prasad was the best manager we had. The onerous job of looking after the kitchen, handling the convict cooks, getting various dishes prepared — a job which I for one dreaded — he used to perform not merely conscientiously but with real pleasure. Immensely proud of his cooking talents, especially of meat preparations, he gave us dishes of rare quality during his regime as manager, a regime we took full advantage of. And his face beamed with pride and joy when we would comment, "*Doctor Saheb, aj to apne kamal kar diya.*"

The jail doctors who on the whole were not a bad lot also liked Gaya Prasad. When any of us fell ill, he not merely nursed him with tenderness and motherly care, he would consult the case — no matter how trifling the illness — with the jail doctors, and never give them rest till the proper medicine was secured. And then — the hardest job of all — he saw that the medicine was taken at prescribed hours. The patient might forget all about it — he often did — but not Gaya Prasad. He was our manager, our chief cook, our "attendant doctor", our nurse — all rolled into one.

The Prosecution failed to produce evidence that Gaya Prasad had been present on the scene of a single armed action. That did not bother them. He was an active member of a party that had "waged war against the King". Also, he had been arrested in a bomb factory. The exparte judgement came — transportation for life. Like others he too got "C" Class.

A participant in innumerable jail struggles since then, including the great hunger strike of 1937 in the Andamans, Gaya Prasad is now in Sultanpur Jail. He embraced Communism while in the Andamans and the years that have passed since then have strengthened his conviction.

Sixteen years of living death have shattered his body. For over a year he has been suffering from T. B., his condition now is serious. Ordinary human decency — if the Punjab Government whose prisoner he is, had a spark of it — would have led to his release. A man of sterling qualities, a man who has spent his whole life in the service of the country, a man, moreover, who has

already spent two years more than the allotted period of 14 years which life-term convicts have to serve — they are determined not to let him live or even die in peace in the midst of his friends and family members.

Will they have the final word? It is for Gaya Prasad's countrymen — those for whom he lived and for whom he is dying — to answer.

HOW I CAME TO COMMUNISM

The death of Azad in February 1930 dealt the HSRA a blow from which it never recovered. It was not merely Government repression that killed the Party. It was something more fundamental. Azad was the one man whose personality, whose capacity for inspiring confidence and whose immense prestige had held the HSRA together in face of repeated failures and growing internal dissensions. After his death demoralisation grew apace. Already betrayals by leading terrorists like Kailashpate had shocked the ranks. It came to be known that Azad's death was itself the result of betrayal by another well-known leader.

There was no knowing now who would be the next traitor, who the next to be revealed as a police spy. None was exempt from suspicion. Mutual confidence was gone. Personal squabbles, charges and counter-charges, vitiated the atmosphere. Police spies and degenerate elements that had managed to sneak their way in made the most of this situation. Misappropriation of funds, dacoities for personal ends, moral depravity became an increasing phenomenon.

Break-up of the HSRA

Disgusted by these developments the majority gave up politics altogether. They lost faith in terrorism, in their colleagues, in themselves and even in the cause of freedom. Nothing can happen in this country, we are a nation of cowards and traitors — such was the burden

of their song. One by one those who had managed to evade arrest were rounded up and sentenced to long terms while the rest sank into apathy and despair.

Corroded from within, unable to withstand blows from outside the Party that Azad and Bhagat Singh had built up by years of selfless work and with their precious blood lay in ruins. Never was the truth more evident than now that a party of middle-class revolutionists looking upon action by individuals as the highest form of struggle and operating in isolation from the people could not only not rouse the nation but was dependent even for its internal unity and morale on the personalities of its leaders. Life itself had smashed all the pet illusions we had held till then.

Whatever lingering faith I had in terrorism was now fast vanishing. But what was the alternative?

Aftermath of Gandhi-Irwin Pact

The question did not admit of a simple answer. In 1930 it had seemed at one time that the Congress had finally broken with constitutionalism and under its leadership the country was heading towards revolution. The Gandhi-Irwin Pact belied those hopes. Not even the most optimistic could look upon that Pact as a victory for the country, and the event immediately following it — the execution of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdeo and Rajguru in defiance of universal popular demand for commutation of the death sentences — justified all their doubts and fears. There was all-round stagnation and demoralisation. The stirring events of a few months before — Sholapur, Peshawar, Chittagong — seemed like incidents of a long-forgotten epoch.

Almost every Congressman I met spoke bitterly against the Pact and it seemed to me that it could not be easily ratified by the Congress. I went to Karachi expecting to see the Pact repudiated or at least determinedly opposed by a large body of delegates. Subhas Bose, when I met him there, declared openly that he would

oppose the Pact tooth and nail. "Between us and the British Government," he said in the course of a speech at a meeting of leftist Congressmen, "lies an ocean of blood and a mountain of corpses. Nothing on earth can induce us to accept this compromise which Gandhiji has signed."

To my amazement, when the time came Subhas Bose quietly contented himself with a statement in the Subjects Committee meeting, a statement in which while criticising the Pact he also made it clear that he would not vote against the resolution endorsing it. With few abstentions and with almost no opposition except that voiced by Sardesai and a few others, the Pact was ratified by the Congress. My disillusionment was complete. If terrorism was not the way to freedom, neither could left nationalism suggest an alternative path.

It was at Karachi that I met Sardesai for the first time. That meeting and the talks I had with him made me break finally and decisively with terrorism.

Sardesai was the first Communist I came to know intimately. Till now I had come across many political workers but outside the terrorist movement I had not yet met men whom I could consider ardent revolutionists, men who conveyed the impression that their whole life was devoted to one single cause, one single purpose. What drew me towards Sardesai was not merely his ideas but also the man himself.

Like other members of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association I had accepted Socialism as the final goal several years ago and for a time worked in the Trade Union movement at Cawnpore before my arrest in the Lahore Conspiracy Case. The militancy of the workers during strikes had struck me but what I had seen of their leaders like Mr. Hariharnath Shastri and Gopinath left me unimpressed. They certainly could not be considered revolutionists by any stretch of imagination, and a movement of which they were the leaders seemed to me not a revolutionary movement but merely the counterpart of the Congress movement in the working class.

In Sardesai I met a man after my own heart. The discussions we had were neither detailed nor thorough —

it was not possible to have such discussions in the midst of the hectic days of a Congress Session — but they made a deep impression on me.

What I had already begun to realise was further strengthened. A handful of young men could not make revolution nor even rouse the country. Revolutionary uprising which alone could smash foreign rule needed patient and systematic work among the people, organising them on militant lines on the basis of their own demands and leading them step by step and through a series of partial struggles towards the final struggle for the capture of power.

The working class because of the key positions it occupied — in railways, docks, vital factories — had to play a leading role in this struggle. It would be a profound mistake to judge the working class from the character of those who seemed to occupy leading positions in the Trade Union movement for the time being. What the workers were capable of they had revealed during the boycott of the Simon Commission and in numerous political and economic battles. And one of the most important tasks of the day was to free the workers from reformist influence, instil in them revolutionary consciousness, make them realise the role they had to play in freeing the country.

Joining the Party

Returning from Karachi I started working in the Mazdoor Sabha of Cawnpore and reading whatever books I could get. For a few months I was in touch with Roy — I knew nothing about the difference between Royism and Communism and looked upon Roy as a Communist — but afterwards broke with him as the real character of Royism became evident to me.

In 1931 I was arrested again on trumped up charges and during the year and a half in prison I devoted myself to studies. By a strange coincidence Sardesai who had come to Cawnpore was arrested and kept in the same barrack with me for some weeks. Discussions with

him finally clarified my ideas and I came out of jail a confirmed Communist in 1933.

Twelve years have passed since then, twelve years which have seen mighty changes in our land and in the world as a whole. The Party that I joined in 1933 has grown from a tiny group to its present stature, an organisation with its units in every part of the country, entrenched in the working class and peasantry, a political force. Repression has failed to smash it, slander has failed to check its growth. In its ranks I have found men and women, many of them simple workers and peasants, fired with the same passionate love for the country and the same burning hatred for imperialism that characterised Bhagat Singh and the finest of my comrades in the terrorist movement, and the same selfless devotion to the cause — men and women whom one can be proud to claim as comrades, with whom it is a joy and an honour to work.

Meeting My Old Comrades

Many a time during these years I wondered what my old comrades of the Lahore Case were doing in the Andamans, what ordeals they were undergoing, how their minds were working. Scanty reports that appeared in the press from time to time showed that they had maintained fully the fighting traditions of Azad and Bhagat Singh, never yielding, always holding high the honour of political prisoners. Floggings and beating-ups had not cowed them and it had been one of them, Mahabir Singh of the Lahore Conspiracy Case, who at the cost of his life had won human rights for all political prisoners in the Andamans. I was eager to contact them, but there was no way. Even the letters I wrote never reached them.

In 1938 news reached us that almost all of them had come over to Communism and that it had been they, my old comrades, who had played the leading part in organising the Communist Consolidation in the Andamans. Unbounded was my joy and pride. The first Socialist

ideas that had entered our ranks years ago had now borne fruit.

After my arrest in 1940 I met Jaidev, Shiv and Gaya Prasad in Lucknow District Jail. They were now mature convinced Communists, studying hard, looking forward to the day when they would be out and would be able to make their contribution to the movement. Their spirits were as high as ever, their confidence unshaken though they knew that years of imprisonment still lay before them.

We talked of old times. I heard from them the stirring history of their struggles in the Andamans, they from me of the growth of the Communist movement. After a few weeks I was transferred to another jail. That was the last I saw of them. I managed to see Kishori for a few minutes in Lahore jail afterwards.

Intensely devoted to the Party and to the cause it represents they have kept themselves in touch with events outside and wherever they have gone they have made a deep impression on their fellow prisoners, explaining the Communist policy as the one policy that can lead to freedom. Not once has their faith been shaken. When the Japs threatened India, knowing that there were little chances of their release and fully conscious of the fate in store for them if the fascist threat materialised they called upon the people to fight to the last drop of their blood for the defence of our motherland. Worthy disciples of Azad and comrades-in-arms of Bhagat Singh, they carry forward the finest traditions of the terrorist movement and remain what they have always been — ardent revolutionists who know not what fear is, men who dare to speak out what they know to be the truth even against popular prejudice and blindness.

“A Party of Traitors”

To what extent that prejudice and blindness has gone and who are the elements whom it has emboldened was revealed to me when I was in Lahore a few days ago. From speeches on the Congress platform demanding re-

lease of political prisoners, the names of Kishori, Jaidev, Shiv and Gaya Prasad are often significantly omitted though all of them are prisoners of the Punjab Government and each has served over 16 years and a half in prison. No wonder Hansraj Vohra, a man who to save his skin turned approver in our case and deposed against Bhagat Singh and Kishori, said to a comrade of ours whom he met recently: "You Communists betrayed the August Movement and helped the Government." This from an arch-traitor who if he had any sense of shame would have drowned himself long ago is a revealing commentary on the existing state of affairs in our land.

And when a national leader of Pandit Nehru's eminence repeats the same charge the faces of these comrades who have spent the best part of their young lives in prison rise before my eyes. Of Gaya Prasad who is dying of T. B., of Shiv Varma who when down with pneumonia and groaning with pain during the hunger strike refused not merely medicine but even a sleeping dose, of Jaidev who was flogged for upholding the honour of political prisoners, of Kishori from whom after months of bestial torture in the Lahore Fort, the police failed to wring out a word.

Are these the men who would be devoted to a cause which is the cause of traitors? Are these the men who would be loyal members of a party of traitors?

Let Panditji ponder over the question.