

Bagha Jatin : An Unsung Hero

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It is an irony of history that the supreme sacrifice made by Jatin Mukherjee or Bagha Jatin, as he is popularly known, is little known outside Bengal and Orissa, although there is no dearth of well documented historical record in this regard. Much before India achieved Independence in 1947, there was an attempt under the leadership of Jatin Mukherjee, M.N. Roy, et al, in 1915 during the First World War to attain Independence through armed insurrection in cooperation with Germany. Although, the initiative did not fructify, the efforts deserve to be recalled and given due importance in the pages of history. In fact, the incident can be considered as a precursor to the later attempt by Subash Chandra Bose in 1945 under the aegis of the Indian National Army (INA) during the Second World War with the help of Japan.

Born in 1879 in a village called Koya in Kushtia district of undivided Bengal (presently Bangladesh), Jatin Mukherjee joined the Central College in Calcutta in 1895 after completion of his school education. His bravery, valour and dare devil spirit can be gauged from the fact that in 1904, while he was working in the hill station Darjeeling in West Bengal, he killed a tiger which attacked one of his friends with the help of a dagger after struggling for over three hours. The incident earned him the epithet Bagha (Tiger) Jatin.

The ideas and ideals of religious nationalism of leaders like Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghosh had significant bearing on his mental disposition and his approach to the liberation of the motherland from the yoke of British colonialism. In fact, the seeds of his militant nationalism, to a great extent, can be attributed to the ideas of both Vivekananda and Shri Aurovindo, although both of them afterwards retreated to spiritual pursuit and became recluse. Nevertheless Aurovindo was believed to have described Jatin Mukherjee as his right-hand man. Sister Nivedita, the disciple of Vivekananda, had introduced Jatin Mukherjee to Vivekananda.

The ideas of *Bhagvat Geeta* and the writings of Bankim Chandra, Aurobindo Ghosh's *Bhavani Mandir* and Vivekananda's *Present India* ignited the fire of nationalism sweeping across the length and breadth of the country and particularly in Bengal. The clarion call of militant nationalism forged a bonding among the restless youth of the country who were disillusioned with the slow and piecemeal pace of progress towards independence and were losing faith in the efficacy of constitutional agitation in the form of protest and petition. The partition of Bengal in 1905 had also cast its impact on the revolutionary movement brewing in country and particularly in Bengal. The organization that galvanised the spirit of strident

nationalism was Jugantar and its icon was Jatin Mukherjee.

Although Jatin Mukherjee was a government employee working as a short-hand clerk in the office of the Financial Secretary to the Government of Bengal, he was actively involved in the revolutionary movement taking place in Bengal. Near about 1905, he organized Chhatra Bhandar. Although ostensibly it was established as Student's Co-operative Store Association, practically it was the revolutionaries of Bengal. He gathered around him a large group of young revolutionaries. M.N. Roy of cominten fame came to know him in the later part of 1906 and accepted him as his leader. Both worked together in tandem. What attracted Roy in Jatin Mukherjee was his indomitable sprit and dynamic leadership.

By early 1914, the country was seething with discontentment against British rule and what added fuel to the fire was the promise of moral and material support to the revolutionaries in India from revolutionaries fighting for the cause of independence from abroad such as Ghadr movement in Canada and the USA. This provided an impetus to the revolutionary activities taking place in India particularly in Bengal.

It was in this context that Jatin Mukherjee was involved and implicated in a number of murder and dacoity cases which were primarily aimed at raising funds required to launch the armed insurrection to end the British rule in India. Such activities of Jatin Mukherjee and his associates are mentioned in the Sedition Committee Report or Rowlatt Report of 1918 which the British Government in India had constituted to investigate and report on the nature and extent of the criminal conspiracies connected with revolutionary movement in India.

In this connection, the Garden Reach dacoity committed on 12th February 1915 is worth mentioning. The Report mentions that the dacoity was committed under the direction of notable leaders like Jatin Mukherjee and Bepin Ganguli. It was carefully planned so as to intercept the servant of Bird & Co., carrying a weekly sum of Rs.20,000 from the Chartered Bank in Calcutta to Bird & Co's mill at Garden Reach, a little way down the Hoogly."³

The Garden Reach incident was followed by yet another such incident at Beliaghata in Calcutta where an attempt was made under the direction of Jatin Mukherjee to extort from the cashier of the rice merchant Rs.20,000 in cash and currency notes. The Report further mentions that "two days later occurred the murder of Nirod Haldar in Pathuriaghata Street. There was ample evidence of a convincing nature that he was murdered because he unexpectedly came into a room where Jatin Mukherjee with others was seated and recognized Jatin and addressed him by name." The Report makes a mention of yet another such incident. It mentions that "four days later in Cornwallis street in Calcutta, inspector Suresh Chandra Mukherjee, while on duty with an orderly supervising arrangements in connection with a ceremony at Calcutta University at which the Viceroy was to attend, noticed an absconding anarchist in the street and approached to arrest him, when he was fired at by the anarchist and four others. The inspector was killed and orderly wounded. There is very good reason for believing that the murder of this officer was planned by Jatin Mukherjee."⁴

It was against this backdrop that the outbreak of First World War in 1914, provided fuel to the fire of militant nationalism in the country. The Indian Revolutionaries in exile looked towards Germany as the land of hope. M.N. Roy

wrote in his celebrated memoir that by the end of the year the news reached that Indian Revolutionary Committee in Berlin had obtained from the German Government the promise of arms and money required to declare the war of independence. Clandestine conferences led to the formation of the General Staff of the coming revolution, with Jatin Mukherjee as the Commander-in-Chief. The job of finding money for initial expenditure was entrusted to Jatin Mukherjee.

Roy left India in April, 1915 and proceeded to Batavia (Djarkarta) in Indonesia where he adopted the name C.A. Martin. What happened in Batavia is mentioned in detail in the Sedition Committee Report. According to the Report, on his arrival in Batavia 'Roy' was introduced by the German Consul to Theodor Halfferich, who stated that a cargo of arms and ammunitions was on its way to Karachi to assist the Indians in the revolution. Roy then urged that the ship should be diverted to Bengal. This was eventually agreed to after reference to the German Consul-General in Shanghai. Roy then returned to make arrangements to receive the cargo of the Maverick, as the ship was called, at Rai Mangal on the Sunderbans. The cargo was said to have consisted of 30,000 rifles with 400 rounds of ammunitions each and 2 lakhs of rupees.

Roy returned to India in the middle of June to execute the plan. The mastermind behind the plan were Jatin Mukherjee, Jadugopal Mukherjee, Bholanath Chatterjee, Atul Chandra Ghosh and Roy himself. According to the Sedition Committee Report, revolutionaries decided to divide the arms into three parts, to be sent respectively to Hatia, for the Eastern Bengal district to be worked by the member of Barisal Party, Calcutta and Balasore in Orissa. It was planned to hold up the three main railways into

Bengal by blowing up the principal bridges. Jatin Mukherjee was to deal with the Madras Railway from Balasore.

In the meantime, the work of taking delivery of the cargo of the Maverick was apparently arranged by Jadu Gopal Mukherjee who was in touch with a Zamindar in the vicinity of Rai Mangal who had promised to provide men, lighters etc. for the unloading of the vessel.

James Campbell Ker, who was one of the senior officers of the British Indian Government and who worked as Personal Assistant to the Director of Criminal Intelligence from 1907 to 1913 in his significant book Political Trouble in India, 1007-1917, mentions about the way it was envisaged to transport arms to India from Germany. Ker mentions, that the most remarkable was the voyage of the S.S. Maverick, which was intended to bring arms from the West Coast of Mexico to Java to be carried to India later on.

Jatin Mukherjee in the meanwhile anticipating the arrival of the arms and ammunitions and in order to avoid being caught by the police, especially after the Garden Reach dacoity, had left for Balasore, not very far from Calcutta, in the company of a few select followers some time in April, 1915 before Roy left for Batavia. There Jatin Mukherjee and his loyal followers sheltered themselves in a place called Kaptipada some 22 miles from Balasore under the then Mayurbhanj State in Orissa adjoining Balasore. Earlier at Balasore, Saileswar Bose, an associate of Jatin Mukherjee had set up in April 1915 a business called the "Universal Emporium which ostensibly consisted of the repair of bicycles and the sale of gramophones and records.

Roy returned to India in June and probably arrived at Negapatam on 14 of June and next day

he reached Madras. On the same day, he sent a telegram to Jadu Gopal Mukherjee in Calcutta. The telegram mentioned, "arrived here, starting tonight for Balasore, expect to meet some one there."¹¹ The sending of the telegram and the nexus between Hary & Sons of Calcutta and the Universal Emporium at Balasore led to enquiry at Balasore by the British police. The enquiry in turn led to the search of Universal Emporium and its mysterious doings at Balasore. After interrogating Saileswar Bose it was found that he had visited Kaptitada on different occasions. This was a curious place for a Bengali of his class to go to without any apparent object, and accordingly on 6th September 1915, the District Magistrate of Balasore, accompanied by several police officers engaged in the enquiry, went to Kaptipada and learnt that several Bengalis were living in a house in the jungle about a mile and half away. Next morning, after necessary sanction had been obtained from the Sub-Divisional Officer of Udala, they searched the house and found that the Bengalis had left. The search party, however, could find some interesting documents, among which were a map of the Sundarbans and a cutting from a Penang paper about the Maverick, and it was clear that they had firearms in their possession as a tree in the compound showed marks of bullets.⁹

The British administration and the police cordoned off the area so as to prevent the escape of Jatin Mukherjee and his associates.

The District Magistrates of Balasore received information on 9th September that the revolutionaries had been located and had shot one villager dead and wounded another. The Magistrate with a Sergeant of the Proof Department (presently the missile testing centre of DRDO) and a party of armed police went to the spot in motor cars and found that the

revolutionaries had escaped to a small island of jungle in the middle a paddy field. With occasional skirmishes, the revolutionaries, running through thorny jungles and marshy lands, tired and exhausted for days, at last took up position on 9 September 1915 behind an improvised trench in a bush at Chashakhand in Balasore. The police party surrounded them. An unequal battle of 75 minutes between the five revolutionaries with Mauser pistols and an overwhelming number of police and army men with rifles ended with unrecorded number of casualties on the both sides. One of the revolutionaries named Chittapriya Roy Choudhury succumbed to injury. Manoranjan Sen Gupta and Niren Das Gupta, two other accomplices of Jatin Mukherjee, were captured after their ammunitions ran out. Jatin Mukherjee and Jatish Pal were seriously wounded. Manoranjan and Niren were executed and Jatin was transported to the government hospital at Barabati in Balasore for life where he also died. During the trial, the prosecuting British Official advised the Defence lawyer to read a manuscript by Jatin Mukherjee and remarked: "were this man living, he might lead the world."¹⁰

Referring to the martyrdom of Jatin Mukherjee, what M.N. Roy, his comrade in arm, wrote in 1949 merits mention. Roy wrote, "the time has changed; the man who earned fame as a great conspirator against the imperialist state and extraordinarily bold terrorist, is now to be memorialized as a great man in the history of modern India. His birthday is celebrated, and biographies written. But since his time, the political stage of India has been crowded with people claiming niches in history, if not places of honour in the pantheon of the great. Judged by his actual feats, minus the legends woven around them, Jatinda's name may be crowded out of the list of the national heroes...". Mentioning about his heroic

fight at Balasore, Roy wrote, "there is no doubt that the story of Balasore Jungle can be dramatized, and done by a master artist, it may attain the grandeur of an epic poem...". He wrote further, "by way of expressing admiration and respect, the imperialist policeman who had the party to surround Jatinda's hiding place, said', 'He was the first Indian to die fighting, arm in hand'.

Highlighting the importance of the fight, the renowned author Hirendranath Mukherjee writes, "the Balasore battle where Jatin, with select comrades, laid down his life, remains a luminous land mark in India's struggle for freedom from British imperialist subjugations."² Yet another distinguished person Ajoy Chandra Benerjee emphasizing the vision and gut determination of Jatin Mukherjee writes, "he represented the zenith of militant nationalism culminating in the concept of a revolutionary war of international dimensions... At a time when conventional Indian nationalism could not even contemplate India's independence Jatin was a believer in total freedom... While earlier militants had not given much thought to the utilization of the international situation. Jatin's vision transcended the frontiers of India. He sought to utilise the situation caused by the first world war. With Germany's help he intended to place the British in India in trouble."¹³

Footnotes

1. The name of Jatin Mukherjee is variously written and spelt. While the Sedition Committee Report, 1918 mentions his name as Jatin, some write his

name as Jatindranath while others write Jyotindra. In the article his name is uniformly mentioned as Jatin Mukherjee for convenience.

2. V.B. Karnik, M.N. Roy Political Biography, Nay Jagriti Samaj, Bombay, 1978, p.9
3. Sedition Committee Report, 1918, Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta, 1918, p.70
4. Ibid
5. M.N. Roy's Memoirs, Allied Publishers Private Limited, Bombay, 1964, p.3
6. Sedition Committee Report, op cit, pp.121, 122
7. James Campbell Ker, Political Trouble in India, 1907-1917, Orient Publishers, 1973, pp 272-273
8. Sedition Committee Report, op cit, p.123-124
9. Ker op cit, p.278, 79
10. Bhupendra Kumar Daft, in Dictionary of National Biography, Editor S.P. Sen Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta 1979, pp.83-165.
11. M.N. Roy, Men I Met Lalvani Publishing House, Debra Dun, 1968, p.3-4
12. Prithwindra Mukherjee, Undying Courage: The story of Bagha Jatin (foreward), Academic Publishers, Calcutta, 1992, p.VIII
13. Ibid, p. XIII-XIV

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