

UNIVERSITY OF MUMBAI
DEPARTMENT OF CIVICS AND POLITICS

SEMINAR ON
BHAGATH SINGH AND BEYOND: RETHINKING MILITANCY IN INDIAN
SOCIETY, CULTURE AND POLITICS
MARCH 28-29

**AHIMSA AND OTHER MYTHS
IN THE HISTORY OF
INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE**

ABSTRACT

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1. History, whether ancient or modern is not a disinterested exercise narrating the events of the past. The historian selects events which suite his or her perspective and interpret them in the light of the current concepts or the historians pre-dialections. So much so that one theoretician recently called history a “mythistory” (Joseph Mali, Chicago University). That is why we have colonialist histories, nationalist histories, class histories, folk histories, oral histories, feminist histories, green histories etc etc. The history of the freedom struggle in India is not an exception to this rule. One of the frequent assertions about India’s freedom struggle is that it was mainly a non

violent struggle devised and promoted by Mahatma Gandhi who is extolled as the Apostle of Ahimsa.

2. The first inaccuracy in this assessment arises from the fact that the long freedom struggle including the 1857-58 Rebellion denigrated as Sepoy Mutiny by the colonialists and assessed by the patriots as the First Indian War of Independence and the innumerable struggles which began from the very year 1757 with Robert Clive's victory at Plassey which laid the foundations of British Empire in India were ignored by the Mythhistorians of 'Ahimsa'. The armed resistance of defeated and disbanded local armies was boosted by the long and unimaginably self sacrificing fight put up by Wahabi Muslims, Hindu Sanyasis (as in Bankim Chandra's *Ananda Mutt*) and the tribals like the Santhals in Bengal, Mayurbanj in Orissa and Bhils in Central India continued even after the feudal chieftains surrendered. Veerapandya Kattabomman in Tamizhakam, Velu Thampy in Travancore, Pazhassi Raja in Malabar and Kittur Channamma in Karnataka also heroically fought the alien conquerors with the help of tribals, peasants and disbanded armies.

The martyrs of 1857 -58 like Jhansi Rani, Thanthiya Tope and Mangal Pandey are often mentioned in text books but equally heroic martyrs like Titumir of Wahabis and Birsa Munda of Northern India and many others find no such place of honour even in text books. The famous historical narrative of Dr. SK Chakravathy in his *Civil Disturbances*

in India before 1857 was an eye opener in the 1950's when it was published.

3. Though the First War of Independence was suppressed in blood and iron and the British crown took over the administration of the country from the hands of avaricious exploiters and corrupt robbers of the East India Company. A pall of despair and defeat covered the country and gave the impression that from then on 'Pax Britannica' had come to stay for good. But it was not long before the atmosphere took a new turn with famines ravaging the country from end to end and peasant struggles like Indigo struggle described graphically in *Neel Darpan* began to shake the authorities from their complaisance. Again the spectre of 1857-58 began to haunt the colonial oppressors and some intelligent and farsighted British beauraucrats like AO Hume tried to channel this unrest into peaceful path. That is how in 1885 AO Hume, a retired civilian conceived the idea of a constitutional organization named Indian National Congress for Indians to express their dissatisfaction and demand ameliorative steps. Certainly this strategy worked very well and in due course it was able to attract the service and participation of great patriots like Dada Bhai Naraiji, RC Dutt and others.

But along with such well meaning patriots who dreamed imperial patronage and self governance by installments there arose in many parts of country militant revolutionary groups who were condemned by the alien authorities as 'terrorists'. Vaudev Balwant Bhatke and a

number of other martyrs fell victim to the British hangmen by their militant resistance. Anusheelan party in West Bengal, the Gadhar Party warriors in Punjab and many such groups sprang all over India and took to bombs pistols and all such weapons they could lay hands upon. The Bengal division by Viceroy Lord Curzon in 1905 led to widespread unrest which gave new resurgence to the militant groups. In 1906 at Surat the congress itself split into the moderates and extremists. Gopala Krishana Gokhale, Feroz Sha Mehtha and others were the moderates while Bala Gangadhara Tilak of Maharashtra, Lala Lajpat Rai of Punjab and Bipin Chandra Pal of Bengal (Lal-Pal-Bal trio) were considered extremists. Though they did not immediately take up arms like Anusheelan and Gadhars they were by no means votaries of 'Ahimsa'.

4. It is in this background that the First World War (1914-1918) broke out and the British claimed that they were fighting for democracy against the German Kaiser. It is at this time that Mahatma Gandhi returned from his Satyagraha experiments in South Africa for the equal treatment of Indians and the white rulers entered Indian politics. Though he was also famous as a great votary of Ahimsa by that time he did not have any compunction to work as a recruiting agent for the British side expecting them to grant freedom and democracy once they won the war. Of course he was disappointed by the outcome. The Rowlett act of 1918, the harthal against it and the great massacre of Jalianwalabagh in 1919 are all well known historical events. In 1920

he assumed the leadership of the congress and declared non-co operation and Satyagraha till the 'satanic regime' accepted defeat and departed. But to the great bewilderment and chagrin of the people as a whole and most of the congress leaders, Gandhi withdrew the struggle on the excuse that a few villagers in Chouri Choura in Bihar (1922) attacked a police station in response to their atrocities. Besides a large number of congress men batches and batches of young men and women all over the country group themselves for armed resistance to the colonial power. Bombs cracked, rail lines were dismantled, telephone wires were cut and extremely notorious officers were targeted. Among these organizations Bhagath Singh's Hindustan Republican Army was the most noteworthy. There were other groups in Bengal, Maharashtra and other places. One of the most thrilling episodes of these struggles was the Chitttagong Armory Raid in 1931 by Surya Sen, Kalpana Dutt, Preethi Wadhadhar and others. Another of course was Bhagat Singh bombing of the central assembly hall. As parallel stream communists, socialists and trade unionists were exhorting people to organize themselves in strength and challenge the British regime by both peaceful and not so peaceful methods. The Kanpur Conspiracy case of 1924 and Meerut Conspiracy case of 1929 were landmarks in the history of organized left working class resistance who were not considered addicts of Ahimsa hypocrisy.

Mahatma Gandhi having withdrawn the Salt Satyagraha with an ignominious Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1932 did not consider the capital

punishment declared against Bhagath Sing, RajGuru and Sukhdev as a case in which he should intervene. Gandhi's refusal even to issue a statement to condemn the capital punishment was a peculiar attitude which even his devoted acolytes could not swallow. In this it is interesting if not intriguing contrast that in 1942 Gandhi did not consider it compromising his conscience in demanding the acquittal of KPR Gopalan who was awarded capital punishment in Morazha and Mattannur peasant struggle cases.

5. The most astounding case of Mahatma Gandhi's peculiar interpretations of Ahimsa was his attitude to 1942 Quit India Struggle. Though the Quit India resolution was passed at Govaliar Tank Maidan (Mumbai) AICC session on August 9th 1942 no arrangement or plan was made for the actual conduct of the struggle. The Communist Party of India was correct in their assessment that the resolution was only a ploy and the real intention was to bargain for freedom as envisaged in the Quit India resolution. The arrest and incarceration of the top leaders led to spontaneous upsurge of protests and clashes all over the country. The movement was taken over completely by the congress socialist under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayanan, Aruna Asaf Ali, Nana Patil and others. Clashes, attacks on police stations and government establishments, disruptions of communication took place on a large scale and leaders functioned from underground hideouts. No need to say it was not in accordance with Gandhi's concept of Ahimsa. Gandhi who condemned Bhagath Singh for his throwing of bombs and

withdrew the non cooperation movement in 1922 on the plea of Chauri Choura incidents did not care to condemn the Quit India struggle for violence. So this apparent hypocrisy of ahimsa seems strange.

Gandhi thought class struggles not only peasant struggles and strikes himsa, but even land reform through legislation too was considered use of force. He wanted to convert land lords and capitalists with persuasion and ahimsa which of course never worked as we experienced in Vinoba Bhawe's Bhoodan Movement. So it is clear that Gandhi's ahimsa was a political tactics of bourgeois nationalism which wanted to share power with the British and to discourage the class struggle of the toiling sections of the people.

6. The anti imperialist and anti feudal upsurge of the people after the Second World War like the Telengana , Thebhaga, Punnapra Vayalar, Warli, Kakadweep and RIN Naval mutiny have all contributed a great deal to the culmination of freedom movement. Nethaji Subhash Chandra Bose organized the British Indian soldiers captured by Japan and formed the Indian National Army with thrilling slogans of Chalo Dilli and Jai Hind from Singapore. Nobody can deny the new thrust that INA gave to the freedom struggle. How can the Mythistorians of Indian Freedom movement deny the role of INA and shout from house stops about the non violent character of Indian Freedom Struggle?