

Book Review-2

Palash Mondal, *Biplabi Jatiyatabad Theke Ganatantrik Samajbade Uttaran: Banglar Biplabi Gosthi Srisangha (1922-1970)*, in Bengali, Progressive Publishers, 2019, p. 432, Rs. 350

This is the doctoral thesis of Palash Mondal, an enthusiastic researcher who had chosen as the topic of his research the journey of Srisangha, a revolutionary group believing in acts of 'terrorism' as a method to fight against British imperialism to free India.

The author claims to have followed the empirical method in conducting his research. He has based his work mainly on primary sources like archival materials official/governmental files, documents and records, private papers of the organisation and the party, of different councils, reports and news published in both English and Vernacular newspapers, articles and reports in magazines and journals, and also on personal interviews. An examination of the list of references and notes and bibliography reveals the extensive literature survey which the author has painstakingly undertaken to make an unbiased and fair evaluation of Srisangha against the contemporary Socio-political backdrop. Professor Mondal's research centres around the foundation, and evolution of Srisangha, its relationship with other such contemporary militant revolutionary and political groups, its marginalisation and eventually its collapse. He has discussed the thought and ideas of Anil Roy and Lila Roy the central figures of the organisation along with the strategies and how they were executed. The period of Dr. Mondal's research stretches from 1922 to 1970. The choice of dates is deliberate because these years are significant in the history of Srisangha. 1922 was the year of its foundation while 1970 was the year in which Lila Roy an activist of revolutionary terrorism, widow of Anil Roy and the guiding spirit of Srisangha passed away in Kolkata.

The layout of the book is well-planned. In the beginning, the author introduces the readers to the main issues covered in each chapter of the book. He summarizes the main points for the benefit of his readers. In the preface, Dr. Mondal states the purpose of his research by mentioning that he has focused on three main issues - the ideal and programme of Srisangha, the existence of a third trend of political ideology in post-independent Bengal which not only opposed the ideology of the Communist Party which had under its leadership built up people's movement but also that of the Congress, and finally the ideas and activities of Lila Roy (Nag) within a broader framework of feminist historiography.

This endeavour of Mondal deserves appreciation because by selecting to

work on Sri Sangha, he has challenged the dominant mainstream nationalist narrative in which the roles and contributions of the brave militant revolutionaries in India's struggle for freedom have been always pushed beyond the margins and reduced to insignificant, unorganised sporadic acts of terrorism with no long-term impact. From this paradigm, *Biplabi Jatiyatabad theke Ganatantrantik Samajbade Uttaran, Banglar Biplabi Gosthi Srisangha 1922- 1970* is an extraordinary historical document of a less discussed phase of India's struggle for freedom. In recent years more in-depth research on this phase of militant nationalism, so far rejected in mainstream nationalist historiography now reveal that the 'acts of terrorism' were not isolated violent incidents, they were shaped by deep-rooted ideals based on moral values and spiritualism. The philosophy of 'terrorism' attracted thousands of young, romantic and idealist men and women of Bengal. So, the significance of this phase cannot be discarded as an insignificant chapter of the struggle for India's freedom because "The independence of India has been achieved as much by constitutional agitation and non-violence on-co-operation as by militant nationalism."

There are various opinions about the foundation of Srisangha. Dr. Mondal has elaborated on almost all of them in his book. According to one opinion in the year 1905 in the area of Tantibazar, Dhaka, Hemchandra Ghosh of Anushilan Samity founded a social welfare organisation Mukti Sangha over time this organisation got transformed into the revolutionary group of Srisangha. By 1922 under the leadership of Anil Roy Srisangha evolved into a "very well-knit and disciplined organisation" which drew in more strength in 1928 when Deepali Sangha, founded by Lila Nag (Roy) merged with Srisangha. This made the organisation more broad-based and widened its range of activities. Inspired by Lila Nag, a large number of women joined this revolutionary group. They played an active role in procuring and distributing arms.

Gradually Srisangha established its branches across an extensive part of Eastern India- Manikgunj, Narayangunj, Munsigunj, Mymensingh, Sylhet, Agartala, Medinipur, Bankura, Howrah, 24 Parganas, Kolkata, in Bengal as well as Bihar and Assam.

In 1928 a split occurred within this political group on the issue of leadership. As a consequence, a new revolutionary group Bengal Volunteers was created. It is difficult to define the relationship between the two groups. The two groups were closely linked and had a quite complicated relationship, so much so that at times even the police were baffled and could not make out clearly which member belonged to which group. A Report on Administration of Bengal of 1934-35 described Bengal Volunteers or B. V. Party as, ".....(a) dangerous group of terrorists known as the Bengal Volunteer Group of SriSangha(which) has been responsible for many outrages."

However, from the mid- 30s of the 20th Century onwards like other revolutionary groups Srisangha too abandoned its path of armed revolution. It joined mainstream politics following the line of people's politics or popular

politics in Bengal. It entered into the fold of political activities under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Later, when again Forward Bloc became divided into two factions, one known as Marxist while the other as Subhasbadi, the Srisangha leadership sided with the Subhasbadi faction.

Members of Srisangha fought against the proposal of Partition of India but in August 1947 when Indian independence came with partition the headquarter of Srisangha fell in East Bengal which was a part of Pakistan. The partition of Bengal therefore no doubt weakened the organisational basis of Srisangha. Its leadership was forced to migrate to West Bengal. To retain political existence and identity in a new situation, leaders of the group joined either the Socialist Congress Party, the Kisan MajdurPraja Party or the Subhasbadi Forward Bloc. This amalgamation led to the foundation of a new political party, the Praja Samajtantri Party.

Srisangha members participated in almost every single popular movement in Bengal during the 50s and 60s of the last Centuries. Unfortunately, however, because of "internal party feuds, rivalry among sub-groups within the parties, organisational weakness and a rapid decline in the number of party members, gradually Srisangha became marginalised". After the 1962 election, the Praja Samajtantri Party eventually lost its importance.

Chapter eight of Dr. Mondal's book holds an elaborate discussion on the philosophical journey of Srisangha, and its evolution from a party believing in revolutionary nationalism to a party believing in democratic socialism. An article by Anil Roy in the Phalgun 1347(B.S) issue of Jayashree(1940) explained his understanding of socialism, pointing out the differences between socialism and communism(P.324). According to Anil Roy, the control of the factors of production (economic system) for the benefit of the community was the basic idea of socialism and Socialism was the only path to real freedom for mankind. He rejected Marx's concept of historical materialism on the ground that economic or material factor is not the only factor which brings about social transformation/revolution but, there are "plural forces" which play equally important roles in social transformation/revolution. In short, Roy rejected the 'economic determinism' of Marx. It is interesting to note that even Karl Marx himself in the last years of his life deviated from the rigid application of economic determinism and adopted a more multi-linker approach to revolution. Anil Roy worked to establish Socialism as an autonomous revolutionary doctrine of social change different from either Communism or Marxism. His idea of Socialism presented an alternative to the Marxian doctrine of Socialism or Communism. Roy did not accept the Marxist vision of an ideal society or his philosophy of an ideal life as final or to be the ultimate because his deep understanding of history and his sharp analytical skill created in his mind a conviction that in the world of human civilisation, there cannot be any permanent ideology. With time, circumstances change, situations change and so do human perceptions. Ideologies which appear to be relevant today turn out to be irrelevant in the future. Jayashree Prakashan. Kolkata. The standpoint of Anil Roy discussed above is from his short

biographical sketch by Pathachari.

The political philosophy of Anil Roy is best elaborated in an essay *What Netaji Stands For* (1948) and in an English booklet. Netaji visualised a state founded on democratic principles emerging from the ideal of socialism and Nationalism. Anil Roy saw in this political philosophy of Subhas Bose the reflection of his political ideology. This was the turning point for Srisangha. Under Roy's leadership thereafter from a nationalist revolutionary group Srisangha evolved into a mainstream democratic socialist party. This was how through a difficult journey along a rough path of ups and downs Srisangha evolved as a political symbol of a universal flag bearer of protest against social oppression. Though not successful in the field of practical politics of the time Srisangha left behind a lofty ideal of political philosophy. This is Dr. Palash Mondal's valued observation on the subject of his research, the result of his in-depth probe into the subject of his study.

Activities of Srisangha were not only confined to the arena of politics but went beyond it. Srisangha greatly contributed to the spread of women's education and the development of a sense of dignity as well as social consciousness in women. This commitment to working for the well-being of women and promoting other social welfare measures had been an integral part of Dipali Sangha's programme which was continued without interruption all through by Lila Roy even after Deepali Sangha was merged with Srisangha.

The book of Dr. Mondal contains an elaboration on Lila Roy's contribution to this field. Dr. Mondal has particularly addressed the thoughts of Lila Roy on the enlightenment and emancipation of women, together with ways of empowering them and the different programmes which she implemented to achieve them. The objective of Deepali Sangha changed between 1923- 1939. The struggle of Deepali sangha for the freedom of women shifted to the struggle for freedom of the motherland. Lila Roy laid the foundation of Jatiya Mahila Sanhati in 1946. It upheld the ideas of Deepali Sangha and followed its course of action. Like Deepali Sangha, the objectives of Jatiya Mahila Sanhati were service to the people and the promotion of social welfare measures. Lila Roy demanded legal and other rights for women.

The contribution of Deepali Sangha and Srisangha in the cultural field of Bengal was immense. The mouthpiece of Srisangha was its magazine *Jayashree*. The range of topics in the articles published in *Jayashree* was varied and diverse. The magazine managed and edited by a woman served as a platform where women voiced their opinions and shared their experiences. *Jayashree* was a progressive literary magazine. Its aim was "relentless promotion of the well-being of the entire humankind".

I would like to conclude the review by congratulating the author, the young researcher and the professor once again for exposing the readers to a comparatively less-known chapter in the history of India's struggle for freedom and by adding the following comments. First, as Dr. Mondal has so painstakingly researched Lila Roy and her contributions to the cause of

women, an attempt by him to fit her into the broader framework of the history of the women's movement in India particularly in Bengal would have been, in my opinion, a fitting tribute to a great personality like her. Lila Roy's role and contribution have remained much neglected.

Second, one of the issues which Dr. Mondal has discussed is Srisangha's relationship with other contemporary political parties. In this context, I would point out that during this time thoughts of M.N. Roy had a strong influence on many politically oriented young people of Bengal and surprisingly most of them were connected to either the B.V. party or the Subhasbadi wing of the Forward Bloc. I hope that the book would be appreciated in the academic world.

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