

## The Hili Mail Dacoity: A Review in Historical Outline

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Tridib Chaudhuri, in the Introduction of the book *Freedom Struggle and Anushilan Samiti* states, 'In the five-decade long history of the anti-imperialist movement in India there never was a period when the revolutionaries failed to exercise a powerful impact upon the course of its development through their militant activities and their boldly conceived plans for mounting armed onslaughts against the seemingly unassailable might of the all powerful imperial government of Britain'<sup>1</sup>.

The revolutionaries had to go on with their activities, burrowing underground. The *Jugantar* and *Anushilan*, the two pivotal secret societies, had spread widely in Bengal. The headquarters of the *Anushilan Samiti* was situated at Dacca with a network of subordinate *samitis* or branches in the towns and villages of eastern and northern Bengal<sup>2</sup>. The revolutionary occurrences that commenced in different districts of North Bengal since 1908 reveal that the people of North Bengal mostly the student class were actively engaged in such operations as obviously designated by the British administration as crimes<sup>3</sup>. According to Charles Tegart, 'by the end of 1917 the conspiracies were under control'<sup>4</sup>. But in reality, the spirit of patriotism was still alive.

Reported references of whole-hearted participation in *Samiti*'s activities by the members of North Bengal have been made in Jadugopal Mukhopadhyay's memoir<sup>5</sup>.

The second phase of terrorist activities had started by 1930 but this time it was marked with slight wind of change which seemed to blow over terrorists in general<sup>6</sup>. The change was to be noticed in the occasional nullification of initiation vows and participation of women in the revolutionary network of the *Samiti*. From this time names of women activists are noticed in the report of the Intelligence Branch<sup>7</sup>. Tegart regards the advent of female terrorists as a sinister development at this stage and comments,

'In the Civil Disobedience Movement women took an active part in picketing and the step in India from non-violence to violence is a very short one'.<sup>8</sup>

Large number of women became involved in the revolutionary programmes at least as sources of logistic support if not yet as full comrades. But the most striking development was the involvement of a few Muslim members in the terrorist activities at this point of time.

It is remarked that the Muslims were systematically excluded from the *akhras*.<sup>8a</sup> But we have definite sources of information indicating a change in the views of some *Samiti* leaders. Reference may be made to an interview of Prankrishna Chakrabarti, the commander-in-chief of the 'Hili Mail Dacoity' where he makes an explicit statement, 'a few persons can not liberate the country. So our organization must be well-based, covering all communities. We must give up all feelings of communalism'.<sup>9</sup> This change in attitude of the *Samiti* people made the *Samiti* organizations much distinctive in nature in this corner of North Bengal and we find one Muslim gentleman, Abdul Kader Chowdhury, involved directly with the operation of the sensational Hili Mail Raid. Involvement of a Muslim revolutionary as a front ranking leader is a unique instance the parallel of which is rare in the history of terrorist activities in Bengal.

### **Strategic Importance of Hili as Target of Assault**

The town of Hili in the district of Bogra and under the jurisdiction of Panchbibi P.S. had some economic importance. There were 16 or 17 rice mills at that time at Hili. Besides the importance as a trading post, Hili Railway Station was the centre for distribution of mails. All the mails for the entire Balurghat Sub-division were handed over to Mail peons. The Darjeeling Mail Train towards Calcutta would arrive at Hili at 00.25 hours and from Calcutta northwards at 02.15 hours (Standard time).<sup>10</sup> The postal bags delivered by the Mail trains remained in the station unprotected until the distribution of the same in the next morning. The revolutionaries decided to make an assault upon the Hili Railway Station with a view to securing the valuable contents of the postal mail chest.

It came to be revealed that the dacoity was intended to be carried out for the purchase of arms and ammunitions and for subscribing towards the cost of the defence of Inter-provincial Conspiracy Case.

The society of the revolutionaries at Dinajpur was then known as the Anushilan Revolutionary party and its headquarter was at Calcutta (not at Dacca as in earlier phase). Profulla Narayan Sanyal was the District-in-Charge of Dinajpur district and Saroj or Ketu Basu was the Town-in-Charge of Dinajpur town.

The operation was carried on the night of 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1933. In the command of the action was Prankrishna Chakrabarti with Hrishikesh Bhattacharji as second-in-command. The other members of the action party were: Satyabrata Chakrabortti, Saroj Kumar Basu, Haripada Basu, Profulla Narayan Sanyal, Kalipada Sarkar, Abdul Kader Chowdhury, Kiron Chandra De, Ramkrishna Sarkar, Asoke Ranjan Ghosh, Sasadhar Sarkar, Lalu Pande, Bijay Krishna Chakrabarti and Anil. Kiron and Abdul Kader did not take part directly in the operation. The distribution of responsibilities among the members of the action party was as follows:

Sasadhar and Asoke were deputed to open the mail chest and cut open the mail bags and remove there from the registered and insured covers, parcels and other articles, Profulla and Kalipada were attached to them as extra men.

Bijoy, Lalu and Anil were deputed to enter the station rooms to break open all the boxes and to take possession of the railway cash. Saroj and Satyabrata were deputed to act as gunners. To assist them as 'lightmen' Haripada was attached to Satyabrata and Ramkrishna to Saroj.

The uniforms worn by the gunners consisted of short trousers and shirts with short sleeves. All the others were supplied with Khaki shirts. According to the police record Kalicharan Mahali, the Mail Chest peon tried his best to save the public property. But he received bullets from the raider's guns which ultimately led him to succumb to death at Calcutta where he had been transferred for treatment.

The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* flashed the news in some details<sup>12</sup>. The *Dinajpur Patrika*, a local news paper, also circulated in news. According to the police record the total booty in cash and property amounted to Rs. 4624/- . The party, after the operation had been over, was split up into three groups, one consisting of Lalu, Bijoy, Ramkrishna and Sasadhar; another of Kalipada and Anil and the third of Prankrishna, Satyabrata, Saroj, Prafulla, Haripada, Hrishikesh and Asoke.

This third group proceeded to Birampur ferry *ghat* and crossing the river Atreyi before the sunrise of the next day morning, they passed Chintaman cutchery on their way to Samjia (now in South Dinajpur). Ramsinghasan Singh, a constable, under the guise of a dealer in jute was following the party. Ramsinghasan rapidly arrived at Samjia and went to the cutchery of Babu Kshitish Chandra Roy, the local Zaminder. With the help of the Zamindar, Ramsinghasan chalked out a plan to entrap the whole group by announcing that a group of seven dacoits was approaching with guns. Prankrishna's party arrived at Kutubpur where they met a cart man. But the cart man beforehand was apprised of the party and also instructed to go direct down on to the sands on the bank of the river so that they could not escape. The boats of the ferry were sent to the opposite bank of the river. The Zamindar Khitish Chandra collected a large number of villagers in the cutchery. When the boats came across, the seven persons of the party were about to board, but instantaneously they were encircled. Fighting ensued but ultimately they all were captured and brought to the cutchery and handed over to police custody. They were all suffering from heavy injuries. All these happened at the sunset of 29<sup>th</sup> Oct, 1933. Manmatha Kumar Roy, a pleader of Bulurghat Bar (later the famous dramatist), went from Balurghat with the police officers. He went there as a correspondent of Associated Press<sup>13</sup>. The accused were sent to Dinajpur town in the police custody.

A special Tribunal court was formed at Dinajpur. The president of the commission was Mr. E.S. Simpson, the president, the other two members being Mr. Bipin Behari Mukherji and Moulavi Emdad Ali. Charge sheet was submitted against the 13 arrested persons and also 2 absconders.

On 27 February, 1934, the special tribunal convicted and sentenced the accused persons, who were as follows<sup>14</sup>.

1. Prankrishna Chakrabortti – sentenced to death.
2. Saroj Kumar Basu – sentenced to death.
3. Saryabrata Chakrabortti – sentenced to death.
4. Hrishikesh Bhattacharji – sentenced to death.
5. Prafulla Narayan Sanyal - sentenced to life transportation.
6. Haripada Basu – sentenced to 10 years' R.I. (Rigorous Imprisonment)
7. Kalipada Sarkar – sentenced to 10 years. R.I.
8. Kiron Chandra De – sentenced to transportation for life.
9. Abdul Kadir Chaudhuri - sentenced to transportation for life.
10. Ram Krishna Mandal - sentenced to 10 years. R.I.
11. Asoke, Sasadhar and Lalu pleaded guilty and got R.I. for comparatively shorter tenure of 5 years each.

The Tribunal allowed them only seven days for filing appeal to the Honourable High Court. The High Court reduced the sentences and exempted the four convicts from capital punishment<sup>15</sup>.

The Special Bench was formed consisting of three judges of the High court to hear the appeal of the convicts. The judges were Manmatha N. Mukherjee (Honourable Chief Justice, H.C.), Justice Patterson, H.C. and Justice Surendra N. Guha, H.C. After a thorough examination of the whole case proceedings of each individual accused the Bench gave the following verdict<sup>16</sup>:

Satyabrata - R.I. for 10 years (Rigorous Imprisonment) and transportation.

Saroj – R.I. for 10 years and transportation.

Hrishikesh – R.I. and Transportation for life.

Prankrishna – R.I. and Transportation for life.

Haripada – R.I. for 7 years and transportation.

Prafulla – R.I. for 10 years transportation.

Abdul Kader – R.I. for 7 years and transportation.

Kiron – R.I. for 5 years and transportation.

Kalipada – Acquitted.

A petition was filed before the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council for permission to appeal against the judgment of the Honourable High Court, on behalf of the Government, but it was refused on 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1935 (File 1290-33)<sup>17</sup>. In the closing part of 1934, all the convicts except the four against whom the petition was pending before the Privy Council were transferred to Andaman. The remaining four also were transported after the refusal by the Judicial Committee, to the island by the ‘Maharaja’ vessel<sup>18</sup>.

Besides the main accused terrorists as mentioned above, many people were arrested under the BCLA (Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act) as there was no proof of direct link with the raid<sup>19</sup>. They were : Amiya Krishna Bhattacharya, Satya Ranjan Raichaudhuri, Barada Bhusan Chakraborty, Rabindra Chandra Mitra (Falguni), Sushil Kr. Acharji, Gour Mohan Pal and Bidyut Kr. Ray. Bijoy Krishna Chakrabarti, an absconder, was arrested in June, 1934 and was convicted and sentenced to 10 year R.I. Subodh Datta Chaudhuri, another absconder, was arrested in February 1935 and was identified as Anil who took active part in the operation. One Charubabu identified as Kshirode Banerji and a Jugantar absconder wanted in the Chittagong Armoury Raid case had connection with Hili and Balurghat. He was arrested in 1935 and was sentenced to 6 year R.I.

As defence counsels Jogindra Chandra Chakrabarti and Nishith Nath Kundu, the two renowned Advocates of Dinajpur, played very commendable role<sup>20</sup>. Both of them were well known congress leaders. The other lawyers were<sup>21</sup>. J.C. Dutta, D.C. Bhattacharji, K.K. Saraswati, N.C. Dasgupta, D.D. Kundu, S.K. Sen, S.C. Guha Khasnabis, S.C. Roy, A.C. Banerji, S.K. Sen, R.C. Mukherji, and Mr. T.P. Das (Bar-at-law). It is told by Mehrab Ali that the Barrister who stood in favour of the arrested boys

was Prabhat Mukhopadhyay<sup>22</sup>. But in the list given in the judgment no where is mentioned the name of P. Mukhopadhyay.

### Social Base of the Anushilan Group in the Locality

Like every organization, the *Anushilan Samiti* also often suffered from internal crisis. In the earlier phase it is found that at some stage in the second decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Anushilan boys unknown to the society moved from village to village and town to town being hounded out by the police. They had to carry on activities in extreme secrecy. Slowly the *Samiti* youths came to understand the utility of maintaining social link and started to work as school teachers, doctors and other professionals under the guise of which they could consolidate their organization and make a social base.

Beside, the revolutionaries gradually began to implement the policy of utilizing the Congress platform for the progress of their plan. The resolution of Congress on *Purna Swaraj*, adopted at the Lahore Session in 1929, gave a fresh incentive to the revolutionary activities in India in general and Bengal in particular.<sup>22a</sup> Thus by and by the militant politics came to make a deep root in the political as well as social life in the country. The Chittagong Armoury Raid on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1930 practically created a great sensation through out the country. The public sympathy which the heroic sacrifice of the revolutionaries aroused became an instance before the revolutionary youths of the country. Thus it is felt that the revolutionaries who designed the plan of the Hili Mail Raid had in their mind that until and unless, there was a social base, any kind of revolutionary scheme would not be materialized.

Pran Krishna Chakraborty in his interview with H.D. Sharma gave a vivid description of how much the *Anushilan* members were serious in the task of preparing a social base of the *Samiti* in the locality of Hili and in its surroundings. He made a clear confession that there was psychological distance between the Hindu activists and the Muslims. Still he could realize the importance of Muslim co-operation and contacted some Muslim people with a view to broadening their base among the Muslims. Abdul Kader Chowdhury who played a very important role in the commission of the Hili Mail

Raid, became member of the *Anushilan Samiti*<sup>23</sup>. He was a medical practitioner. That the *Samiti* had tried to develop their contact at the grass root level is evident from a reference to one Rahimuddin of Antasimul village within Tapan P.S. in Dinajpur<sup>24</sup> district. He was a poor elephant rider. He, under the inspiration of Dr. D.N. Banerjee, acted as custodian of arms of the Anushilan revolutionaries. Dr. D. N. Banerjee was an *Anushilan* leader, working at Manahali village under Tapan P.S. The revolutionary members of the *Samiti* made occasional visits to the village of Birampur in order to develop good contact with the villagers. It is clearly stated in the judgement that Hrishikesh, Prankrishna, Profulla, Saroj, Satyabrata, Kiron, Sasadhar and Anil used to visit frequently the families of the pals. Often the young boys stayed there and used to take meal in their house. They had also contact with another house — the family of the Sahas at Birampur. Of the two bases which were selected for undertaking the operation, one was Birampur and the other was Panchbibi to the South of Hili. At Panchabibi, a house was rented by Abdul Kader Chowdhury. Prankrishna stated in his interview that they all assembled at the residence of Abdul Kader Chowdhury and from there they moved towards the station and did the action. As Chowdhury developed dysentery on that particular day, he could not take active part. But he was all along with the planning of the action. In spite of inherent weakness and ultimate disaster, the Hili Mail Dacoity was a very important case in the revolutionary history of India. Prankrishna who was the leader of this action likes to designate the case as important next to the Chittagong Armoury Raid Case<sup>25</sup>.

Nevertheless, it seems that the revolutionary boys could not develop reliable net work of social connections and their action plan was not well-thought out. A sensational incident like an assault on a railway station naturally induced the government and its loyal officials to take all possible steps for the capture of the attackers. In fact, with minimum effort a constable like Ramsinghasan could arrest them with the help of a local Zarnindar and some common village people. The Zamindar could easily make the villagers convinced that the party approaching was of the dacoits. Consequently on

their arrival the crowd assaulted them mercilessly. The heroes of the action had to surrender helplessly beset by an angry mob. This happening points to the inherent weakness of *Samiti*'s organization. The youths, no doubt, were great patriots but emotion; in this case, it seems, won pragmatism.

The special Tribunal court did not fail to make mention of the 'magnificent' service rendered to the crown by Ramsinghasan, Kshitish Chandra Roy and other loyal officers.<sup>26</sup> The Committee of the British Indian Association took a resolution appreciating the loyal and gallant services rendered to the crown and to the public by Kshitish Chandra Roy, the Zamindar of Samjia<sup>27</sup>. Thus it appears that the revolutionary members of the Anushilan Samiti were not much prepared to accomplish such a large scale operation against the British Imperial Government at that point of time. But their patriotic fervour could never be damped.

They sailed for Andaman with same courage and spirit. They again started protest by taking part in the hunger strike there in the cellular jail against the authority in 1937 but that is a separate chapter of history.

### Brief Life Sketch of Some of the Revolutionaries

**Prankrishna Chakrabartti:** Prankrishna, son of Smt. Giribala Devi and Janakinath Chakrabortti was born in 1910 in the village named Rudrakar under the P.S. Palong in the district of Faridpur (now in Bangladesh)<sup>28</sup>. He was educated at Rudrakar High School. Prankrishna came into contact with Brahmachari Sitanath De in his boyhood and he himself acknowledges that Sitanath De was his first preceptor<sup>29</sup>. Slowly he came into contact with the leaders like Niranjan Ghosal, Asutosh Chatterjee and others. When he was a boy of class VI/VII in the school, he began to organize club, library or student organization in order to get more and more boys into close contact for the fulfillment of Anushilan aims — i.e. the liberation of the country. After completion of Matriculation he took admission in the Dacca Mitford Medical School. But when he was a student of 3<sup>rd</sup> year, he had to give up his studies to avoid arrest by the police.

Once when he went to Jalpaiguri for organizing revolutionary works, he was caught at the railway station with arms. While being shifted from Jalpaiguri jail to Calcutta Presidency Jail after having been sentenced for 7 years' imprisonment, he escaped from a running train near Hili station. It happened in 1932<sup>30</sup>. He went underground. He had a good link with Anushilan members of Balurghat and the organization of Prabhat Chakrabortti of Faridpur.

He was rearrested on the bank of the river Atreyi at Samjiaghat on 29<sup>th</sup> Oct, 1933, afternoon, the day following the commission of the Hili Mail Dacoity under his leadership. It is already known that he was transported to Andaman. He took part in hunger strike in 1937. He was released at last on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1946.

After independence as a believer of Marxist philosophy he initially associated himself with the R.S.P. but later he joined the CPI and ultimately became a member of the CPI (M) after the division of the Communist Party<sup>31</sup>. He was the father figure in the refugee Rehabilitation Movement. He became the Chairman of the UCRC in 1978<sup>32</sup>. He died on 21<sup>st</sup> October, 2002. He left his wife and three daughters at his death.

**Hrishikesh Bhattacharji:** Hrishikesh Bhattacharji was born in 1915 at Barabandar in the town of Dinajpur. His father was Rameshchandra Bhattacharya, a local Zamindar<sup>33</sup>. He took his school education in the Girijanath High School and later was admitted to the Rajshahi College in I.Sc. course. He became involved with the revolutionary activities of the Anushilan Party<sup>34</sup>.

Hrishikesh was the second-in-command in the operation of the Hili Mail Dacoity and remained in the Cellular Jail from 1935 to 1946 and was released on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 1946. He took part in the Hunger Strike there. He was inspired in Communist ideology and took part in the Tebhaga movement in 1946-1947<sup>35</sup>. From 1959-1967, he was the Secretary of the CPI, West Dinajpur District Committee and a member of the State Committee<sup>36</sup>. He died on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1967 due to a motor accident. He was a bachelor<sup>37</sup>.

**Saroj Kumar Basu:** Saroj Kumar Basu was born at Balubari Village in the district of Dinajpur. His father Anandamohan Basu was a legal practitioner. But Saroj lost both his father and mother (Kadambini Devi) at the age of 3 or 4 within a short interval.<sup>38</sup> Consequently he had to take shelter in his material uncle's house in Raiganj. His primary education was completed in the Gopal Bandhab Primary School of the locality. He passed the Matriculation Examination in First Division from the Raiganj Coronation High School. Then he took admission in K.N. College, Berhampore, Murshidabad District, under the instruction of the Anushilan Samiti<sup>39</sup>. It is to be mentioned here that Saroj Kumar came to be involved with the revolutionary works of the Secret society when he was a student of class VII in the school. He got his inspiration from Bibhuti Guha and Barada Bhusan Chakraborty<sup>40</sup>. He took part in the hunger strike in the cellular jail for 37 days in 1937. Again he fasted for 36 days in the Alipur jail after his repatriation, in 1938 from the island.

After the release from long imprisonment, he initially associated himself with the Railway workers' Union which was guided by the Communist Party. After the division of the Communist Party, he ceased to participate in any direct political activities<sup>41</sup>.

He married Gitadevi at the age of 31. He joined a Primary School at Dhamardangi in Itahar in 1965 and led a life of a recluse till the day of his final departure on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2005. A firm believer in the ideology of Armed Revolution, he never deviated from his spirit till he breathed his last<sup>42</sup>.

**Satyabrata Chakravarti:** Satyabrata was born in 1916 at Dinajpur town (now in Bangladesh). His father Kalikumar Chakravarti was a service holder<sup>43</sup>. He at the age of twelve came in contact of the Anushilan Party. From different sources it is evident that there was an air of revolutionary political culture in his family environment. Barada Bhusan, his wife Ashalata, Kulada Prasad all were linked with revolutionary political activities in Dinajpur<sup>44</sup>. Satyabrata got his school education at the Zilla School of Dinajpur<sup>45</sup>. He was a student of I.A. in Rajshahi College. He was wanted in the Luke Shooting case (1932) but evaded arrest for about a year<sup>46</sup>. After transportation, he took

part in the hunger strike in the cellular jail in 1937, and was repatriated in 1938. He participated in another hunger strike in 1939. He took active part in peasant movements in 1946 and 1947.

**Abdul Kader Chowdhury:** Abdul Kader Khan was born in 1901 at Samshiba village under Khethlal P.S. in the District of Bogra<sup>47</sup>. By Profession he was a medical practitioner. He took his medical education from a Dacca Medical School. His father's name was Moulavi Abdul Latif Chowdhury. He joined the Non-cooperation Movement of 1921 and the Civil-Disobedience Movement of 1930-31 and suffered prison terms in both the cases<sup>48</sup>. He was one of the principal convicts of the Hili Mail Dacoity Case. In the judgment of the Special Tribunal, it is clearly mentioned 'there cannot be the slightest doubt that we are convinced that he was not only a party to it but he filled a prominent role, furnishing a base of operations and acting in concert with Prankrishna'. He was sentenced to transportation for life and the Honourable High Court reduced it to seven years' prison term and was deported to Andaman where he joined the hunger strike for 37 days. After release he devoted himself in organizing people's movement in Bogura. Mansurul Aziz published one article on the basis of an interview with Abdul Kader Chowdhury in the '*Shaili Patrika* (16<sup>th</sup> June, 1995) published from Dacca<sup>49</sup>. He was then at the age of 95. No more information is known about his last days.

**Kiron Chandra De:** Kiron Chandra De was born in Coochbehar in 1908<sup>50</sup>. His father Nabadwip Chandra De was Naib in the Coochbehar State. He read in the Jenkins High School upto class VIII. Later his father, under the royal order, came to Dinajpur as the King of Coochbehar had estate in the locality of Dinajpur and settled in Birampur. But sudden death of Nabadwip Chandra compelled Kiron to discontinue his formal education<sup>51</sup>.

Under the inspiration of his teacher, Kiron Chandra became involved with *Anushilan Samiti*'s activities. He played a very important role in the commission of the Hili Mail Dacoity. The Special Tribunal court in its judgment had to comment that people of his type are often more dangerous to society than criminal themselves. Such

a comment was made because of Kiron De's dauntless co-operation in each and every step of the operation of the Hili Mail Raid plan. He was punished with transportation for life which later was reduced to 5 year imprisonment and transportation. He also took part in the hunger strike in the island. After his release he began to organize communist movement at Birampur. Later he had to shift to India where he also associated himself with the political activities of the Communist Party<sup>52</sup>. He died in 1993 at Balurghat<sup>53</sup>.

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