

Remembering Pritilata Waddedar : A Centenary Tribute

Ratna Roy Sanyal

The pages of Indian history are soaked with blood of countless patriots, Revolutionaries who happily dedicated their life for the cause of motherland. Along with men, women too have equally contributed in the freedom struggle, both in violent and non-violent ways. In the course of Revolutionary phase of our freedom struggle, the name of Pritilata Waddedar is worth mentioning, who at the early age of 21 showed exemplary courage and sacrifice – the first women Martyr of India's freedom struggle. She has become a legend in our history.

In writing this article I have felt some urge particularly because this year (2011) is the centenary year of the birth of the great Revolutionary. Remembering her sacrifice, her courage we should pay tribute to this illustrious daughter of Bengal and at the same time to inspire the new generations to love our motherland. Secondly, Pritilata's dedication was not only aimed at the cause of India's freedom; by embracing death she wanted to prove that women too are equal with men to serve the cause of motherland. Thirdly, this year I had the opportunity to visit Chattagram. I have visited the place (Pahartali European Club) where Pritilata lead the attack on the club and breathed her last. I feel nostalgic to pay tribute to this great Revolutionary.

If we look back to the history of our struggle for freedom and try to locate the women, it may be said that from the Swadeshi to the non-co-operation movement, the role of women were indirect, giving shelter to fugitive Revolutionaries or acting as couriers of messages and weapons¹. In the early phase of our national movement, the women had not equal rights with men, they were not allowed too.

Nascent efforts to draw women into the national movement had begun in the 1920's. In 1921 C.R. Das started the Nari Karma Mandir 'for training women for national service'² and Subhas Chandra Bose opened a political organization under the name of Mahila Rashtriya Sangha in Calcutta in 1928. In the same year, the name of the All Bengal young Men's Association was changed to all Bengal youth Association 'in order to make women eligible for membership'³. But it was Mahatma Gandhi who turned the trickle into a torrent. During Gandhian movement, the women for the first time came out from their shackles to public domain but that was purely non-violent in character. On 10 April, 1930 Gandhiji issued a call to the women of India to actively participate in the civil disobedience movement. The women could serve the nation by spinning, by picketing at foreign cloth and liquor shops and by sharing men into action⁴. There was a tremendous response to this call. Women in their thousands came out in the streets, braved police lathis and firing and filled the Jails. Thus the women for the first time got entry in the political platform of nationalism. So, during the thirties of the twentieth century we find a completely different role and participation of women in the violent Revolutionary movement. Women, this time, were not only in supportive roles; 'they were now actually shooting Pistol at the magistrates and Governors'⁵.

It was in this climate of mass militancy that the Chittagong raids took place under the leadership of Masterda (Surya Sen) and electrified the youths of Bengal. In 1932, Surya Sen designed an assault on the Pahartali European club, which bore the disreputable sign "Dogs and Indians are not allowed". On 23rd September, 1932 he assigned the leadership of a Seven members group to Pritilata to demonstrate their protest in the Club. Members of the team were instructed to take potassium cyanide with them so that in case they were trapped by the police they could consume, if caught.

The attack was victorious. A good number of English members of the club died in encounter. But Pritilata ordered the members to leave the place and in spite of her opportunity to escape, she consumed potassium cyanide and committed suicide. A piece of paper was recovered from the pocket of her shirt where it was written that "Women today have taken a firm Resolution that they will not remain in the background I earnestly hope that our sister would no longer nurse the feeling that they were weak ... with this hope in my heart, I am proceeding to day for self-immolation⁶. She thus gave the Clarion Call to the womanhood and their thinking for the emancipation.

Pritilata Waddedar was born on 13th May, 1911 in middle class kayastha family of Chattogram. She was the second Child of her parents. It was the time when the birth of a girl child was not welcomed in a family. Pritilata, who became immortal by her heroic action was not at all welcomed at her birth. Recalling the occasion, one of Priti's close relatives has written that 'everybody in the family expected for a male child, for, in future he would earn for the family, would take care of the aged Parents⁷.

Her father Jagabandhu Waddedar was a clerk in the District Magistrate's Office. From her School days, she was an intelligent student and Passed Matriculation Examination in First Division in the year 1927. She continued her study in Eden College, Dhaka and in 1929 Passed the intermediate Examination securing first place amongst the candidates from Dhaka Board. After two years she was graduated in Philosophy with distinction from Bethune College, Calcutta. Pritilata had involved herself in 'activities subversive to the state' since she was a student of Eden College. She became an associate of Sree Sangha in the Dipali Sangha led by Lila Nag. It is to be noted that under the leadership of Lila Nag, Dipali Sangha became a Revolutionary organization for the women. Regular training of the members were conducted in Physical fitness and made them aware of political movements and other current affairs. Not only that women members were encouraged to participate in any kind of work equally with men⁸. Dipali Sangha influenced the women to take equal share in the Revolutionary movement along with men and in this way' became a feeder organization for Revolutionary movement."⁹In Calcutta she was inspired by Chhatri Sangha led by Kalyani Das. After her graduation she returned to Chittagong and took up teaching as her profession. She became Headmistress of Nandankanan Aparna Charan English Medium Secondary School. During her association with Dipali Sangha and Chhatri Sangha, her interest in politics began to intensify day by day. Once she met Purmendu Dastidar who was a member of the Chittagong Revolutionary Party. Pritilata insisted Purnendu Dastidar to include her as a member of the Revolutionary Party. After a prolonged deliberation, Purnendu informed Surya Sen about Pritilata. Surya Sen was not against Womens' involvement in Revolutionary

activities. He believed that women could be associated with the Revolutionary activities particularly for some specific responsibilities¹⁰. (to send secret message, to give shelter to the Revolutionaries, to conceal proscribed books and provide other kind of help). Regarding women's' participation in direct Revolutionary action, he thought that in such actions which required fighting the British with fire-arms in hand, involving bloodshed, women had not participated on equal terms with men. But on hearing Pritilata's strong determination and mental preparation for taking part in direct Revolutionary work, Surya Sen decided to take Pritilata as a member of his party. He told Purnendu to convey the message to Priti but the matter should be strictly confidential between them. Thus Pritilata Waddedar got the Chance to be a member of the Chittagong Revolutionary Party¹¹.

A cursory look into the political situation in India during 1930's reveals the change in the policy of the leaders of our national movement. Already there was the change from prayers and petition to political agitation and cultural nationalism imbibed with the foundation of Hindu Mela.¹² The next phase was the rise of extremism and the Revolutionary movement. The Partition of Bengal (1905) and the Swadeshi movement gave stimuli to them. Their goal was the end of the British rule. The demand for 'Purna Swaraj' was already in the air. But the leaders at that time were not prepared to give a call for a mass movement. So, they began to follow the course of secret Revolutionary activities with the formation of various secret societies¹³.

It was the time when Surya Sen (1894-1934) emerged as a political leader in Chittagong and with leaders like Ambica Chakraborty, Anupam Sen, Nagen Sen, Ananta Singh, Nirmal Sen and others formed a Revolutionary organization, Chittagong Republican Army. Their mission was to free the country through a violent overthrow of British rule. On 18th April, 1930, Chittagong Armoury Raid took place under the leadership of Surya Sen and this incident was followed by a series of heroic actions like battle of Jalalabad where the young Revolutionary, age group 14 to 19, fought heroic battle against the well trained highly mechanized British arms. After three hours continuous struggle, the British had to retreat. Eleven Revolutionaries were killed in the encounter¹⁴. The next target of the Revolutionaries were the European quarters on the bank of the River Karnafuli. During this time the leadership was given to Manoranjan Sen, Rajat Sen, Debu Gupta, Swadesh Roy, Phani Nandi and Subodh Choudhury. In the battle at 'Kalarpole' four Revolutionaries became Martyr.¹⁵ All these developments made Pritilata impatient. She insisted the leaders of the Republican Party to assign her some serious responsibility. At last Surya Sen gave her instruction to meet Ramkrishna Biswas regularly who was awaiting death at Alipur Central Jail for Killing Tarini Mukherjee, the Rail Police Inspector of Chandpore. Pritilata, from that time, met Ramkrishna about forty times giving her identity as cousin of Ramkrishna. No one could suspect her as she was not related to Ramkrishna. It can be understood later that Surya Sen's instruction to Pritilata was guided by some motives. Her regular visit to Ramkrishna who was calmly waiting death in the condemned cell instilled in her a new spirit of Revolutionary action. Pritilata used to maintain diary. Every day in her diary she used to write, and after every visit, recorded her emotions and impressions. Shortly afterwards, Ramkrishna Biswas was hanged and that was a mental shock to Pritilata.¹⁶

After the death of Ramkrishna, charged with emotions, Pritilata did not want to spare any time. She wants to appear in direct Revolutionary action. The patriotic feeling she was nurturing from her childhood now wants to prove it through direct action. The sacrifice and life histories of Kshudiram, Kanailal, Bagha Jatin and others inspired an urge for doing something for her motherland. The inspirational role of Lakshmi bai, Rani of Jhansi against the British was a role model to Pritilata. The Philosophy of life which she has witnessed in Ramkrishna (Jiban Mrityue Payer Bhritta Chitta Bhabana hin) made her restless.¹⁷

With this mission she met Surya Sen in June 1932, in a village shelter at Dhalghat. Surya Sen, at that time took shelter in the house of Savitri Devi in Dhalghat village. Nirmal Sen and Apurba Sen were also with him. That was the first meeting of Pritilata with Surya Sen. After thorough discussion and observing Pritilata's indomitable spirit and courage, Surya Sen assigned the responsibility and leadership to Priti to launch an attack on the Englishmen in Chittagong.¹⁸

Accordingly Pritilata had to leave the Dalghat Shelter on the next day. On that very day (13th June) at early night there was an encounter with a military force led by Captain Cameron. Captain Cameron was killed by the shots of Nirmal Sen, but Nirmal Sen was also shot dead by a Gorkha Soldier. Pritilata and Surya Sen any how escaped the police cordon but their other colleague Apurba fell dead on the way by enemy's bullet.

After Dhalghat incident Pritilata returned home. She was so calm and quiet that her parent could never suspect of their daughters' involvement in political activities: Pritilata, during this time was apprehending of police suspect because she had left her clothes at Dhalghat Shelter. What she apprehended became true. Police came to her house suspecting her involvement in Dhalghat incident. From Dhalghat they recovered one photograph and hand writing of Pritilata. Police carried a search in Priti's house but nothing indiscriminating was found. Priti was interned in her house. During this period, staying at home Priti's life became meaningless for her. This confinement was intolerable to her. It was the moment when she got instruction from Surya Sen to leave home and work underground. Accordingly Pritilata absconded from her house on 5th July, 1932.

During the three months of her absconding life Pritilata prepared herself for Revolutionary work. The British authorities declared a reward of Rs. 500/- for her arrest. This time she was trained to handle revolvers, Pistols and bombs. At last her long waiting dream, the most important day came on 24th September, 1932. Surya Sen entrusted Pritilata with the leadership to raid the Pahartali European Club along with seven other young Revolutionaries. The other members were Pannalal Sen, Shanti Chakraborty, Prafulla Das, Bireswar Roy, Mahendra Chowdhury, Sushil Dey and Kalikinkar Dey. It may be mentioned here that the original plan of the Chittagong Revolutionaries were attack not on individual Europeans but on European Club where they were to be found in large numbers. Thus by attacking the Europeans assembled in a gathering, the Revolutionaries wanted to take revenge of the brutal massacre perpetrated by the British Government on the innocent people at jalianwallabag in April, 1919.

Under the leadership of Pritilata all the Revolutionaries assembled near the Club on 24th September, 1932 at 10 pm. Pritilata was dressed as a soldier and the others were

dressed as coachmen resembling the coachman of the club's members. All of them were armed with bombs, revolvers and a number of Rifles and shot guns. It is known from the account of P. Dastidar that during their attack on the Club, the revolutionaries got help from a 'Muslim baboorchi of the Club who was very much aggrieved at the rude and rough behaviour and the insulting treatment of the Europeans who used to come to the club. The Revolutionaries got detailed information about the club i.e. number of doors and windows of the room, way of entrance to and exit from the club number of police and soldiers employed to guard the gates of the club etc. It was also decided that from the Kitchen window of the club he would signal the revolutionaries by showing torch light. According to his signal, the revolutionaries entered the club and started their action at 10pm.²³ They attacked the club in a planned way with bomb and started firing with Revolvers standing at the doors and windows of the building. There was pandemonium amongst the Europeans inside the club. They got terribly panicky. They had also nothing to do as all the exits were blocked by the Revolutionaries. According to official Report about two hundred were wounded in the encounter and one lady was shot dead. Pritilata ordered her companions to stop and leave the place. Suddenly she got a bullet shot in her breast and fell down. She at one decided to die instead of being caught by the police. She handed over her revolver to one of her companion and asked them to leave the place immediately and she took potassium cyanide and breathed her last.²⁴

Thus was ended the brief but colourful Revolutionary life of Pritilata Waddedar. By sacrificing her life she proved that determinate courageous character of Indian women who did not lag behind men even in the battle field. She was a very good organizer also. Before Pritilata, there were other women in the Revolutionary movement who also showed their indomitable courage and patriotic feeling. Mention may be made of Shanti and Suniti of comilla who shoot the Magistrate of their district on 14th December 1931 Bina Das of Calcutta who attempted to shoot the Governor of Bengal at the convocation of Calcutta University 6th Feb, 1932 and others. They got life imprisonment. But Pritilata did not give any opportunity to the enemy and committed suicide to prove that women have the power and the right to take decision of her. (Narir Apan Bhagya Joy Karibar Adhikar Abong Kshamata – Dui-i Ache).

References:

1. Bharati Ray, 1995, 'The Freedom Movement and feminist consciousness in Bengal 1905-1929" in Bharati Ray ed. From the Seams of History Essays on Indian Women – pp, 174-218. Delhi, OUP.
2. Subas Chandra Bose, The Indian Struggle, Netaji Collected Works – Vol.2.
3. Manini Chatterjee, 2010, Do and Die, the Chittagong uprising -1930-34, p-304.
4. Madhu, Kishwar, 1985, Gandhi on Women, EPW, 5th October 20(40):1691-1702.
5. Geraldine Forbes, 1998, Women in Modern India – Vol. 4.2 CUP.
6. Kalpana Joshi, 1984 Challenge: A Saga of India's Struggle for freedom. Uma Mukhopadhyaya/Haridas Mukopadhya, 2004 – Bangalir Siksha, Samskriti O Swadesh Chetna. Article Surya Sen O Indian Republican Armer Chattagram Biplab' in Bengali –

- pp 155-172. Op. cit. Revolutionary Activities in Post war India – 1919-193 in Amitava Mukherjee ed. Militant Nationalism in India – 1995, pp -391-428. Institute of Historical Studies, Kolkata.
7. K. Dasgupta, 1954, Rakter Akshare, nabham, Calcutta.
 8. Geraldine Forbes, Women Revolutionaries of Bengal, p-4.
 9. Tirtha Mandal, 1991 Women Revolutionaries of Bengal 1905-1939, p67.
 10. Ibid. p.90.
 11. A detailed account of Pritilata's recruitment in the Chittagong Revolutionary Army – is in the writings of Purnendu Dastidar (Birkanya Pritilata, Bangla Bazar, Dacca – 1977 B.S.). The present author has taken the source from Tirtha mandal, Op.cit.
 12. Chittabrata Palit, 2011, Masterda Surya Sen Smarak Baktrita, Department of History, Chittagong University.
 13. Amiya Kr. Samanta ed. 1995, Terorism in Bengal, Vol-1-vi.
 14. K. Dutt, 1945, Chittagong Armoury Raiders: Reminiscences, People Publishing House, p-4.
 15. Tirtha mandal, Op.cit. p.91.
 16. K. Datta, Op.cit. p-4, K. Dasgupta, Rakter Akshare, Nabhana, Cal-1954. Tirtha mandal, Op.cit. p.91.
 17. K. Dasgupta, Op.cit., p.126.
 18. S. Chaudhurani, 1975 Jibaner Jharapata, Cal-1975, pp-67-69. Manini Chatterjee, Op.cit. '-227.
 19. K. Dutta, Op.cit., pp-6-7, Tirtha Mandl, Op.cit. p. 92.
 20. ibid. p.7. S.K. Dasgupta, Op.cit. p.127. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 1932, September, 26.
 21. K. Dutta, Op.cit., p-7-8. K. Das Gupta, Op.cit. p-128.
 22. B.K. Rakshit Roy, Bharate Sashastra Biplab, p-406. Calcutta – 1377 B.S.
 23. A detailed account of the attack on the Pahartali Club is given by P. Dastidar in his account 'Biplaber Pathe'. And also in B.K. Rakshit Roy's Bharate Sashastra Biplab'. Tirtha Mondal, Op.cit., p.94.
 24. B.K. Rakshit Roy, Op.cit. p.408.