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Mrs. Sushila Ghosh – *The Author's Sister*

TO  
MY SISTER  
SUSHILA GHOSH  
WHO ALWAYS STOOD BY OUR SIDE  
DURING STORM AND STRESS  
WHO THROUGH HER INTENSE PAINS AND AGONIES  
SYMBOLISED IN MY LIFE  
THE SILENTLY SUFFERING WOMANHOOD  
OF OUR VAST MOTHERLAND





# IN ANDAMANS THE INDIAN BASTILLE

*By*

BEJOY KUMAR SINHA

FIRST EDITION, 1939

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## PREFACE

Fifteen years ago I was a student in a Cawnpore College. Like the average middle-class youth of our country I too, was not born with a silver spoon in the mouth. Poverty and suffering I had known from my childhood. Besides, being born in Cawnpore—the premier industrial town of the province—and brought up in this very city, I had many opportunities of seeing the squalor and misery that dogs the life of our toiling millions. Huddled together, I found workers' families living in dirty and dark huts that were not fit even for animals. Those days of my boyhood left an indelible impression upon me.

It was no wonder, therefore, that when I grew up and reached the higher classes of my school, I was unlike the average schoolboy. I found it impossible to keep myself confined within the strict limits of my immediate surroundings. I felt suffocated, cramped. My thoughts wandered. The grinding poverty of our teeming millions, their dark and dismal lives, haunted me in the midst of my daily school hours. It was in these days that by my persistent efforts I came in contact with revolutionaries and was initiated into their circles.

We were only two brothers and I did not know that my elder brother Mr. Raj Kumar Sinha had likewise joined the ranks of revolutionaries. He was a student at the Hindu University and was actively working from Benares as I learnt later. I was therefore a little surprised when one day my brother was arrested at Cawnpore on the eve of the 1925 session of the

Indian National Congress, and along with many others was charged to stand trial in the Kakori Conspiracy Case. Almost all the front rank members of revolutionary organisation in U. P. were arrested in the Kakori Case and it now fell on my shoulders and of a few of my comrades in other provinces to resuscitate the entire Northern-India organisation excluding Bengal.

I was a college student when my brother was arrested. My old father shocked by the arrest of my brother fell ill and died within a month. My brother was convicted a year later and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. The growing demands of the party work and the family distress now made it impossible for me to continue my studies. I bade good-bye to my university career and entered my new life. As a cover to my political line of work I took to journalism and for obvious reasons worked as the representative of *The Statesman*, *The Times of India*, *The Pioneer* and the Associated Press of India.

My old feelings had not left me. They had grown stronger. I felt that our whole country was a vast prison-house. But on what concrete lines to achieve liberation? That was the question uppermost in my mind these days, all the more because the new and tremendous organisational responsibility had been given to me. For some time I had been studying world history and politics. Books on different ideologies were my chief reading. I had started work in the local Congress and in the Mazdoor Sabha. From my studies and experience the conclusion emerged clearly that national emancipation could come only through a relentless life-and-death struggle. When I looked round, I found it absent. Our Indian National Congress was not then the dynamic revolutionary organisation that it is today. It had no deep



root in the masses, since it had no clear economic and political programme for their day-to-day partial struggles. A large section of our premier national organisation was caught in the net of barren constitutionalism. The fight carried from within the legislatures unlinked with extra-parliamentary struggles, had turned into tactics of sterile wordy warfare. Attempts were made to frame a national constitution. But the mass force essential to get any such constitution accepted, was not being mobilised. Gandhiji and his adherents had taken up a programme of amelioration of the peasantry and of social reforms. By its very character this programme could not evoke that militancy which was the prime necessity to initiate an uncompromising bold struggle against British Imperialism. Outside the National Congress the Indian proletariat was coming into its own. It had not yet grown into an independent political force, such as could exert tangible influence on the forms and methods of the broad national struggle. Peasant movement there was none. After Chaurichaura the leaderless peasantry had, in different parts of the country, clashed with the government and its allies. But it shared the same fate as the scattered peasant revolts of the world history. Ramaraju Rebellion in Andhra, Eka movement in U. P., Babbar Akalis' terror of the Punjab, Moplah Revolt in Malabar, Burmese peasant rising under Pongyis—were all marked for the heroism and determination displayed, but they all failed. There could be no other result when the whole movement lacked leadership, cohesion and ideology. Consequently the peasants were lying low. An inevitable reaction had set in.

I had been, as I have said earlier, working in the Congress and labour ranks also but in the prevailing atmosphere I could not feel satisfied. The conviction

had grown in me that it was not enough. A life-and-death struggle was needed, requisite forces were to be mobilised, preparations had to be made. But where to make the start? How to galvanise our countrymen? What should be our immediate method of struggle? How to infuse life in the hearts of our enslaved millions? How to acquire a broader mass basis for the extant revolutionary organisation? Such were some of the problems that confronted me. I was set thinking. My thoughts took more and more a practical turn. I set out planning for definite steps. But I knew I was not alone. There were hundreds of youngmen in the country who were thinking or moving on the same lines. It therefore did not take us long to meet on the platform of a common organisation—the Hindusthan Socialist Republican Association. We had been studying socialism and accepted socialistic ideas. Our movement however had not yet assumed a clear socialistic character. Grown from the exclusive ranks of the lower middle class and in the economic and political setting that I have described above, the ideas inspiring our movement were a curious admixture of different political ideologies. The virile and the idealistic nationalism of Mazzini with its emphasis on revolutionary youths, the insurrection of the Blanquist type, the 'going-to-the-people' movement coupled with terroristic actions of the Russian Social Revolutionary Party, the October Revolution and its guiding ideology—Bolshevism—the influence of all these movements could be definitely traced in our ideas. But the socialistic feature was most dominant and it was natural, for the logic of the country's maturing events was giving a definite turn in this direction. In addition to a secret wing of the movement, we realised the need of an open broad-based organisation to mobi-

lise radical youths for mass work on socialistic lines. The sequel was the birth of Naujawan Bharat Sabha which was to shoulder this task. Through our day-to-day work we were moving gropingly towards Socialism.

I was entrusted with the work of organising the secret wing in different parts of the country and in this connection I moved from province to province. Two years of intense activity of our members in different provinces landed some of us in the Lahore Prison to stand our trial in what was known as the Lahore Conspiracy Case of 1929, against Bhagat Singh and others. After the farce of a trial before three High Court Judges constituting a tribunal as per Lahore Conspiracy Case Ordinance, death sentences were pronounced on Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdeo, seven of us were given life imprisonments and two were sentenced to shorter terms. We had not participated in the Tribunal proceedings. There was no defence witness or defence lawyer. We had successfully refused to attend the Court, too, following assault on us by the police, and the European Judges persisting in defending it. The sentences shocked the whole country and evoked nation-wide protest. We however were not surprised, for we had seen enough of the methods of British Justice in similar trials in our country.

After my conviction I was moved from one jail to another in different provinces as a 'C' class prisoner. From Lahore to Multan, from Multan to Rajahmandry, and then to Andamans and back again to Punjab—I have been tossed from one prison to another all these years, till I have just been released from Lucknow District Jail, on medical grounds.

So after nine years of life of a prisoner, I am free once more, free to realize my dream of participating

again in the national struggle that has travelled a long way during the last decade. But it is not a pleasant experience to be released even on medical grounds and get the privilege of starting work anew when the opportunity is denied to those whom I have left behind. In the midst of my work, the idea haunts me that I am free but my hundreds of comrades are yet in chains. I recall vividly how in the cold icy cells of Andamans, under the worst repression and suffering, we used to meet in groups and discuss our hopes of the future—our line of work in the new, changed conditions. For hours we talked and grew animated. We built plans. Our dreams had no end. I now visualise at times the glowing faces of my comrades of those hours peering at me from behind the prison bars, looking with a longing at my good luck—in my realising the dream that was our common inspiration, our common solace.

Since my release I have been flooded with endless and varied questions regarding my comrades—the Andaman Prisoners. Why did they go on mass hunger-strike? Were they despaired? What is the full significance of their historic declaration to Gandhiji? What were the factors that brought this profound change in their ideas? Did long years of prison rigour too contribute their share to the change? In the event of their wholesale release where would they stand tomorrow in the country's struggle? Was Andamans a prisoner's Heaven or a Hell? Are the prisoners very restive today in not being released? There has been a stream of such questions from different quarters, from different individuals. Several papers have asked me to write about these aspects in their columns. At these queries I never felt annoyed. I welcomed them on the contrary, for I knew that it only indicated the due recognition by the country-

men of their revolutionary youth. Our people want to understand, to know the flower of their youth who languish behind prison bars today. The nation has demanded their release and it shall not rest till they are all set free—to take up their positions in the vanguard of the national revolutionary movement. On the eve of their release the endeavours to know them, understand them fully is timely and essential. It will facilitate the prompt harnessing of their tremendous revolutionary force to the developing of the national struggle. Wrong notions and unjustified bias about them would prove harmful and delay the necessary adjustment in our anti-imperialist camp.

In the face of the persistent queries, the idea occurred to me that I could best write a book to answer the large number of questions and thus do my little bit to dispel some of the prevailing misunderstandings, and give some positive and valuable information that is not known to the public. I have lost no time in working out my idea and found great solace in doing it—thus forging a living link with my incarcerated friends.

Written with this object as the main in view, this book has not been like the usual prison memoirs. It is too one-sided, dealing mainly with broad political aspects of the prisoners' life. The treatment again is throughout general, hardly bringing in the doings of particular individuals or groups. There is a human side of our life however, where frustration and ruthless subjection by a soulless prison machine is a story that is moving and profoundly tragic. One can hardly complain if within the prison walls, there exist no opportunities conducive to the flowering of individuality, for it is denied to one even outside under the present social system. But that is not all. Inside the imperialist prisons, deliberate methods are

adopted as part of the general penal system, that aim at dehumanising the inmates, killing their very soul by a slow but steady process. To signify this very character of the prisons, Dostoevsky named his work on Siberian prison recollections as 'Dead House', where men like Victor Hugo's Jean Valgean enter as live and virile personalities but come out later, after long years as dead and gone—mere physical seconds of their former selves. Books like 'White Cross to Red Flag', 'De Profundis' bring out the sad tale of a prison life in a striking manner. During my years of imprisonment, I have not infrequently observed this particular aspect of prison life. During my confinement in Indian Jails with ordinary prisoners in common yards, I have in two or three cases felt having witnessed a cold-blooded slow murder of individuals. Before my very eyes I had seen how fine specimens of sturdy and noble individuals succumbed to the pernicious prison system and transformed into unrecognisable brutal creatures. Tempted though I felt to include such tragic episodes in this book, I had ultimately to restrain myself and keep to the main line without deviations from the general story. Dostoevsky's loving dog in Siberian exile, Jawaharlalji's warm care for little animals in prison, are stories rich in their human appeal and lessons, but such narratives unfortunately cannot, I realised, be included in the short compass and limited scope of this book.

Since we entered jails in 1929 and lost dear Jotin Das in the historic Lahore Hunger Strike, the question of prison reforms has been before the public. Our popular Congress ministries, from the day they held the reins of government started tackling this question in right earnest. In the Soviet Union, prisons have been completely overhauled. Prisoners are treated with the warmest sympathy and care.

Successful experiments have been made to turn them into useful citizens. In thousands they are participating in their national Five Year Plans. They feel, they have also their duty, their obligations to society. With a zeal, that it seems hard to believe, they too have in thousands thrown themselves into the task of Socialist upbuilding. Prisoners also have their Stakhnovites and they are proud of them. In other parts of the world it would be wrong to expect any such fundamental change, for the prison system is but an essential part of the huge machinery of exploitation and it can only be radically changed after a revolution in the social order. Yet here too, public opinion has grown of late. Not only a Howard Society, but the wide public takes interest in questions of penology. The governments are yielding to the popular pressure and introducing reforms in their prisons on modern lines. Of course, these are democratic governments. Fascist administrations are also moving but in other directions. They are beating all records of severity and repression. The news of the concentration camps is meticulously suppressed. Yet it leaks out and the world is informed of the horror and cruelty of the fascist prisons and camps. The death of Carl von Ossietzky, the valiant and consistent fighter for world peace is a recent proof of how the fascists are treating their opponents in jails—worse than the galley slaves. Our British Imperialist government is steadily moving towards Fascism and its signs we discern in our little world too—the Andamans. How? I shall try to narrate that in the following pages. But our Congress ministries backed by the organised might of the masses are resisting the bureaucracy and changing the deplorable conditions of jails. At such times, wide discussions regarding jail conditions, especially by those who have been for years

behind prison bars would be much helpful. It would assist the people's ministers in taking the right direction. The limitations have handicapped me in discussing in details this aspect of the prison question, but the very narrative will help the readers to some extent, I believe, in detecting the dark spots, and glaring defects. I must however say it frankly here that what our honourable ministers have achieved till now, falls far short of our reasonable expectations. What is needed is a new approach, a fundamentally radical outlook on the whole prison problem. Without it mere minor improvements here and there, would not have much meaning. It would be wandering in a maze of details without reaching the basic root, and reconstructing the foundations.

A greater portion of the book deals with the two Andaman hunger-strikes and I hope the readers would appreciate it. The last mass hunger-strike made the Andamans for a time a first class political issue. In the remotest villages of the country people became conscious that in the distant islands beyond the ocean, hundreds of their best youths were pining away, were being dragged inch by inch towards a slow but sure death. The whole Nation arose and in one thundering voice demanded their repatriation and release. The hunger-strike was a record unsurpassed in world history. In the first hunger-strike we lost three of our beloved comrades—Mahabir, Mohit and Mohan. Of this strike meagre news reached our anxious countrymen. After the deaths, the government in a short communique informed the public of their sudden end. That was all that the nation could learn of its three valiant fighters, of its martyrs. During the second hunger-strike too, all the attempts to inform the people of our resolve, of our objects, were baffled. We had addressed lengthy communications



to our Congress ministers. They were withheld by the fiat of the India Government. The new constitution had been inaugurated and our popular ministers had just taken office. That a communication to them from the prisoners of their province too, could be withheld, showed us glaringly how a trained bureaucracy was to thwart the measures of our ministers. Of the record of Andamans these two hunger-strikes are the best chapters—our unique achievement. It is why I have tried my best to provide a clear insight into them, by treating them in all their aspects. What inspired us to go on hunger-strike? What was the technique followed when we had started it? Why were there no deaths in the last strike? Why did we hold out for so long even in the face of repeated messages from the country urging suspension? How we discussed and reached its termination? All these questions I have dealt at length and it will I am sure, remove some of the misunderstandings that I have found persisting in the public mind.

I have called the Andamans the Indian Bastille. But all historical parallels have their limitations, their qualifications. The Bastille of France fell, before the mighty onslaught of the masses that shook the whole of Feudal Europe from one corner to the other. From that day onwards the fall of the Bastille was immortalised in the revolutionary history of the world. Four years back in 1934 when the two hundred families of France conspired against the whole nation and manœuvred to usher in a fascist regime, the millions of workers and peasants gathered again on the streets of Paris in a solid phalanx. It was the 14th of July. They celebrated the storming of the Bastille. The betrayers hurriedly cowered back and entered their dens. The masses had recognised their Louis of the twentieth century. They forged the powerful

Popular Front to defeat their enemies and take up tasks yet unfulfilled. Masses recalled that the Bastille fell under the resounding revolutionary cries of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity, but these had yet to be achieved in a 'Free, Happy and Strong France'. Another struggle they have to wage, and they have their revolutionary tradition.

Such history has not been made in our country yet. Our Andamans is the Bastille of the pre-revolutionary era. Fighting against Feudal Imperialist structure the boldest of the country's sons have been for the past two decades thrown into dungeons in that distant island. These soldiers of the National Revolution had seen the feudal regime tottering. They had witnessed in Delhi the cruel magnificence of the court of a modern Louis. The Viceregal Palace towered high amidst the surrounding huts of a famished and dying people. Salaried high officials held enormous wealth while the peasants were breaking down under burdens of taxes and debts. Was not history repeating itself? Were not elements of decaying feudal France resurrected on Indian soil? So they questioned. Sitting on the floor of dark prison cells they recalled history. They remembered that Bastille had a past that had paved way for a glorious future.

That Andamans was our Bastille was not forgotten by our Jacobins of 1914-18. When the Berlin Committee of Indian Revolutionaries headed by Lala Hardayal, Raja Mahendra Pratap, Dr. Bhupendra Dutt and others negotiated with the Kaiser and planned a national insurrection in India with German assistance, the Andamans was assigned a definite place in the scheme of action. It was decided to take ships from the Far East to storm the island and set all prisoners free. As is well known, the whole plan of this Blanquist insurrection failed—as had been the

fate of the simultaneous Sinnfein attempts in Ireland. The government got scent of the proposed raid on Andamans and hurriedly made necessary arrangements for the island's defence. A number of British boats patrolled the adjacent sea day and night.

The fortress of Peter and Paul in Czarist Russia confined within its walls hundreds of Russian revolutionaries—the front rank fighters. It stood as a grim symbol of the bulwark of European reaction. It is known that prisoners who once entered the fortress walls, seldom came out alive. They slowly sunk in their prison graves. It is a wonder that from Andamans the nation has been fortunate to get back so many of its valiant sons alive. The degree of Andamans repression in the Great War days was in no way less than what we read of the Russian fortress. Extreme courage and fortitude were needed to resist the authorities all through the years and yet keep alive. Not a few were lost in this heroic struggle. Several comrades died and there were others who lost their control on nerves and turned insane. We have no book amongst us like 'Sixteen years in Siberia' by Leo Deutsch graphically describing the horrors of prison life and the unflinching struggle of the political prisoners. I know the present book cannot go far in this direction except indicating the necessity of such a volume. I would therefore be so glad if any one of our old guards takes up this task and preserves for the nation a chapter that forms the proud and heroic tale of our early fighters.

Prisons have been aptly called the university for the politicals. Forcibly detached from the zone of active struggle, in studies alone a prisoner finds the greatest comfort and utility of his daily jail life. He reads to know, to understand, to equip himself better for the future work. His daily studies give a meaning

to his jail life, a steady purpose. He feels that all links are not snapped. Diving in his books on world history, economics, philosophy, his country's past and the present, he forges a live contact with his outside world of struggle. He warms up, almost forgets his prison surroundings and their limitations. If the prisoners are fortunately concentrated in one jail, their studies, provided they get the necessary facilities, widen in scope with mutual assistance and cooperation. A university atmosphere is created. But what is more important in concentration camps is the tremendous lot of thinking and discussion that ensues amongst the prisoners. Away from the heat of the struggle, from the day-to-day rough-and-tumble of political life, the prisoners grow philosophic. They develop a critical attitude. The past is surveyed in all its aspects. The forms of struggle, the tactics adopted, the organisational structure—all get due attention. For days and months these are discussed and out of this wholesome activity of general stock-taking crystallise some definite conclusions as guides for future action and for future struggle. There is another bright feature of concentration jails. They serve as a training camp. The less advanced and the amateur revolutionaries are steeled in contact with tried and experienced workers. Theoretical training they receive in abundance and at times, it becomes possible even to have some lessons in the art of practical work, in case the concentration is of hundreds of prisoners in the same jail with free access to each other. In writing of all these possibilities of jail life, I have in my mind, of course, not the fascist prisons but the jails of such countries where a show of democracy is still being preserved.

Interesting are some details of such activities that we learn of Russian and Spanish prisons. At the

close of the last Nineties Lenin had been sent to Siberian exile. It was the formative period of the Russian Social Democratic movement. Conflicting and harmful trends were creeping in. These were being openly preached to gain converts. One such theory that was advanced later became known as 'Credo'. This theory reached Lenin in exile. He at once jumped up and assembling his fellow exiles numbering over a score, discussed it and drafted a crushing joint reply refuting the pernicious doctrine. He condemned it as a theory of Economism—an attempt to keep the labour movement confined within economic limits, with political leadership of the liberal bourgeoisie secure over it. In Siberian exile, class and group discussions were held wherever the revolutionaries got opportunities. Several books too were written throwing light on the problems facing the immediate struggle. To refute the social Revolutionary Party's contention that Russian conditions were unique and that capitalism was not growing and could be skipped, Lenin wrote the famous book 'Development of Capitalism in Russia.' The pages of the volume gave crushing replies to petty bourgeois subjective theorists. From Stalin's biography again we learn that he was a keen debator in jail and his participation in discussions and studies always made them lively and helpful. He was a voracious reader and was ever ready to assist his comrades in chalking out their line of studies and giving them the necessary guidance.

In recent Spanish history when the Asturias rising of 1934, despite the heroic struggle of miners, was suppressed by the reactionary forces, thousands of revolutionary soldiers were thrown into prisons. Most of them were rank-and-file workers. They had an iron will and unflinching determination to resume the struggle. They set themselves to prepare for the

future. With the assistance of advanced comrades, they started a vigorous and systematic study of national problems. Lectures were organised on the strategy and tactics of their struggle. Spanish and World history were critically surveyed. Day after day the workers' vision widened. From raw workers they were getting transformed into sound political leaders of the future battle. When with the victory of the Popular Front, these thousands of steeled soldiers were liberated, they immediately rushed to the vanguard of the struggle; and when Franco rebelled, they were found taking a lead in the front-line trenches and also in the rear in the national mobilisation. To resist the rebels the whole Spanish people rose and in this gigantic task, the liberated prisoners successfully applied their acquired knowledge and set the masses in motion. Due to the special aptitude and training that they had received, they were spread all over the country. They supplied a leadership that the enthusiastic but untrained masses mostly needed in their new revolutionary tasks. Spanish history has been noted for repeated and determined revolts of the starving peasantry, but equally as well for the repeated failures, due to the lack of coordination and inefficient leadership. Anarchism had been powerful in this land of small-scale production and it had been a great factor in jeopardising the movement's success. With this background, the swelling of the ranks of the leadership by freed prisoners can be appraised at its real value.

In our country, we know the imprisonment of 1930-34 years proved a blessing in disguise for our national movement. The origin of the Congress Socialist Party has to be traced to some of our active and able comrades who were imprisoned during this period. They were leading workers in Congress

ranks for years. In the very early days of the movement they were removed to prison. Before their very eyes masses had wonderfully responded to the Congress call. But as the days advanced mass enthusiasm waned. Gandhiji dramatically introduced Harijan uplift—a purely social reform programme as a major activity for Congressmen. An attitude of compromise was manifest. The movement had objectively failed in spite of its glorious beginnings. A section of the Congress sought relief in a drift towards constitutionalism. The average rank-and-file Congressman who had fought so valiantly stood perplexed. He sensed the need of a bold revolutionary leadership, and a new technique of struggle. But these were not forthcoming. There was another section of Congressmen—front-line workers, who were in jails; they were our future socialists. They saw the defeat and began critically thinking over it. Discussions were started, and views were exchanged. The past was surveyed especially since the 1921 campaign. As a result certain definite views crystallised. In the process of sincere self-criticism some truths were discovered. It was found that the Congress had failed to mobilise the masses as a disciplined and organised force, as its method of struggle and objective were not clear. No economic and political programme had been formulated in order to voice the immediate demands of the exploited masses. Day-to-day partial mass struggles had not been organised, as the only effective method of consistently drawing in the masses in the broader anti-imperialist political struggle. From such realisations of our comrades precipitated the idea of forming the Congress Socialist Party.

The Andamans was no exception. Its history records the same tale. From the year 1933 the government concentrated in the cellular jail, Port Blair,

picked youths from all over the country, who had all participated in the nation's struggle against British Imperialism. Youngmen were transferred from jails of many provinces—Assam, Punjab, U. P., Bengal, Madras and Bihar. As was natural the Bengal contingent was the biggest, forming the overwhelming majority, for it was only there that the revolutionary youth movement had reached the proportions of the Irish Sinnfein Struggle.

The Dublin rising had its second in the Chittagong Armoury Raid. It was a remarkable coincidence that Sir John Anderson, the organiser of the Black and Tan regime, was at the head of the Bengal Administration during these years of tumult.

The youths who were assembled had come from different parts of the country. Their level of political knowledge, their traditions, forms of struggle, and ideas were not all similar. As has been mentioned the movements in the Punjab and some allied Northern India provinces were gropingly moving towards socialism while on the other hand Bengal activities were of an intense character paralleled somewhat by the phase of Russian Social Revolutionary Movement of the eighties of the last century. An organic contact between these youth movements at different stages could not be effected outside. Its most active members who survived, however, happened to meet inside. Their confinement in the islands during the years 1933 to 1937 was a period in our country's history that recorded gigantic revolutionary changes. A definite orientation had come in our premier national organisation—the Indian National Congress. The Congress was reaching the masses, was fast growing into the Anti-Imperialist Front of all the revolutionary forces. An All-India Peasants organisation had come into being. The breach in the working class



forces was being healed. Indian struggle was moving forward as part of a world revolutionary struggle against Fascism, against Imperialism. The news of these important events had been carried over the ocean and delivered to us within our high prison walls. It reached us at a time when we had already started discussing amongst ourselves the past of our movement. We were realising that our methods had to be changed, that we had to wage our struggle with Imperialism with new weapons and a new technique. We felt that the sacrifices of the revolutionaries during the last three decades had undoubtedly infused life into the hearts of our countrymen but the price paid was too dear and often energies were frittered away that could be harnessed far better in other effective ways of struggle. In this sincere and searching analysis of our own movement, while we were reaching remarkably clear conclusions regarding the negative aspects, we found it a difficult task to obtain the same clarity on a positive plane, on the question of what to do next and how? It was therefore of great help to us, to learn of the country's developments and appraise their significance. We had started systematic studies of world history, politics, economics, and in the light of knowledge gained, we attempted to interpret the march of our national events. So frequently we missed the mark. Gross under-estimations or again wide over-estimations were not rare. It had to be, for we were away from the battle-front, hundreds of miles away, only with little bits of news reaching us from time to time. Through all this process of reading and thinking we were arriving at definite views about the future line of our work. Without this preliminary and radical change, it would not have been possible for us to promptly send to Gandhiji and through him to the nation, our declaration with

such signal unanimity.

But it would be wrong to imagine that this change was wrought smoothly in a straight line. The dissolution of old ties and allegiances, the snapping of links born in years of life-and-death struggle—this process in the lives of hundreds of youngmen, could not be but a disturbing and at times a painful story. Such is always the history of the birth of the new from the womb of the old. The inevitable birth pangs are always there to be recognised by interested observers. In our larger sphere of world society, we are witnessing to-day this same painful process—the emergence of a socialist society from the decaying world capitalism.

The story of this transition in our Andaman life is only next in importance to the hunger-strike struggles, and perhaps in one respect of greater significance than these strikes too, if we take in view the future role of middle class youth in the country's anti-imperialist struggle. Day-to-day this transition was moulded and shaped mostly by our studies. I have therefore endeavoured to describe in this narrative details of our intellectual activities—studies, discussions etc., tracing them through all their varied stages. It will, I am sure, give an interesting insight into the working of our mind and indicate to the reader the future line of work of most of my comrades who are behind bars to-day but are sure to be free to-morrow. It will be seen that the march of events in the country had its clear imprint on our lives in the distant prisons.

The reader may enquire as to why the government concentrated us all in one prison? Was it not conscious of the risks that it faced? We ourselves had sometimes thought over the matter but the reason was not far to seek. The government was faced with a dilemma. It had to make its choice between the

devil and the deep sea. While we were in the country scattered in a large number of jails, the government discovered that the nation did not forget its youths languishing behind the bars. Warm and active contacts were always made between us and our countrymen outside, even in the jails of remotest places. This was an eyesore to the government. It could not tolerate the expression of the least sympathy and warmth for us. The government wanted us to be isolated completely from our people and thought it would achieve its object by deporting us to the distant islands, far, far away from the sight of our countrymen. It knew that there were dangers in concentration too, but it considered them a lesser evil. That the government was conscious of the possibilities of a concentration jail is amply proved from the method that it had pursued in dividing the detenues in different camp jails. Comrades whom it considered incorrigible old guards, were carefully selected and all sent to the remote Deoli Camp in Ajmer. The rest who were held to be comparatively young in age and experience were distributed in the two camp jails of Hijli and Berhampur. That a government faces such uncomfortable situations is no rare phenomenon to-day. In the wider domain of world politics the threatened Imperialist and Fascist governments have daily to steer their course through a series of dangers. History is against them but they will not go down without a last desperate effort. The prospect of futility does not deter them but only makes them panicky and wild, in an endeavour to gain the last lease for their lives.

Fantastic are some of the notions prevailing about revolutionary youths amongst a section of our countrymen. I recall a funny incident in this connection. In the year 1931 when I reached Rajahmandri Central

prison in Andhra, I was placed in the midst of hundreds of my comrades of the Civil Disobedience Campaign. To meet me the first day, there was a regular stampede but many of those who met me were visibly disappointed. The reason I was told when I grew familiar with them. I was informed that their expectations were not fulfilled. They had thought that as a northern India revolutionary, a colleague of Bhagat Singh and Azad, I would be a flaming youth of an austere face with red hot eyes; that I would be sullen and silent, would fly at a tangent at the least provocation from the authorities. In short they expected a revolutionary to be an uncommon creature—an object of adoration and respect but inspiring positive fear and awe. I know such ideas are fast being removed when many of the prisoners who have been released have already become well-known workers in the open field of our struggle. Yet there are misunderstandings, wrong estimations and impressions. Revolutionaries do not want to be awe-inspiring figures. They wish to be recognised as common soldiers in our common struggle for social and political emancipation. It becomes all the more imperative when the released prisoners have in their hundreds to take their stand shoulder to shoulder with their struggling people. I would feel satisfied if this book goes even a little way forward to facilitate this task. In all these pages my main object has been to bring my imprisoned comrades nearer to their fighting countrymen. Jawaharlalji in his autobiography mentions an incident of two young boys who met him on the eve of his departure from Calcutta and states how sorry he felt that such fine and precious material was not unoften lost to the nation. The ardour, devotion and will for the country's cause that the two youths displayed were not an isolated feature. It was sympto-

matic of the thousands of revolutionary middle class youths. Let us not sigh again that the country failed to realise their tremendous potentialities. It is high time for the nation to recognise in its youth the pioneer and a section of the vanguard of the national revolution. It becomes further incumbent on it to know it fully and reach it with a correct approach. Thus only can be made easy and possible the play of revolutionary youths' historical role in the anti-imperialist movement with least unnecessary friction and delay.

This book has been written in great haste in about a fortnight in the midst of the absorbing work that I have been privileged to take up after a long period of nine years. The inevitable effect is apparent all through the book. I however felt that delay would take away much of the value and object of the book. I therefore crave the pardon of the reader and hope he will overlook the defects, which are only too glaring.

BEJOY KUMAR SINHA

SINHA BHAWAN, CAWNPORE

*January 31, 1939*



## CHAPTER I

### EXILE

It was winter 1932 in the Rajahmandri Central Jail of the Madras province. I had just finished my usual walk one cold October morning, when the daily 'Hindu' copy came; and scanning its columns I found, prominently featured on the main sheet, the news that the Secretary of State had sanctioned the deportation of one hundred 'terrorist' prisoners to Andamans. The news did not surprise me for I was expecting the Government to take some such decision. It had been appearing in the press for some time past that the government was contemplating the concentration of all 'terrorist' prisoners in some remote place beyond India, with the obvious object of depriving them of their countrymen's sympathy and contact. Some old military barracks in Aden were mentioned in this connection. In my imagination I had been picturing the life that awaited the prisoners. Would not the large number of Indian settlers in Aden baffle the Government's move? But all my speculations were set at rest. Andamans had now been selected. I had, however, never thought of it, for the Government of India had, following the Cardew Committee's recommendations a decade ago, definitely decided the closure of Andamans for political prisoners.

But I was wrong for I should not have forgotten that these were days when the entire nation was fighting British Imperialism, and in desperation the govern-

ment had resorted to methods of naked force and repression. The whole country was being ruled by the fiat of H. E. The Viceroy. It was a regime of ordinances and there was no room, nor time for the government to show the least regard for public opinion.

The reaction that the Andaman news had on me was exhilarating. It seemed, however, so strange to my prison friends. They were many, Rajahmandri being a concentration jail for all classes of C. D. prisoners. They came running to me, offering their warm sympathies. They were so sad and depressed. One of the Andhra comrades who had grown very intimate with me broke down in a flood of tears. With many of them a deep affection had grown during all those prison days. That we had been workers of two different spheres and methods, had not stood in the way. We had felt the tie that bound us all in the face of the common foe.

My friends were puzzled at my joy which I could hardly repress. It could not be otherwise for I had no chance to tell them how I longed for the association of my intimate comrades, all through the days that I had been separated from them and moved from prison to prison. In the life of a revolutionary almost all relations of what we usually call personal life are broken by the very nature and demands of work. But in the place of normal personal ties, another grows up—the bond of comradeship between colleagues who work for years together, sharing the same hopes and aspirations, marching through common suffering and privations. The pleasure of fighting for a cause is immense in the life of a revolutionary, but it is transformed into supreme bliss when this privilege is afforded to him in intimate companionship with his comrades-in-arms. He alone knows what rare joy is achieved in facing death together with trusting and



brave friends. In such a life many fall fighting but their memory remains ever green to inspire their surviving comrades to march ahead.

- I had been convicted towards the close of 1930. During the undertrial period and just after, I had lost several of my esteemed comrades. Sirdar, Rajaguru, Azad, Jotin, Bhagwati Charan, were all gone. The few of us who remained behind drew close and sought solace in our strengthened bonds, in our dwindled numbers. How we craved that after our conviction the government might impose all hardships on us, but grant us the one privilege of remaining together in jail. But such were not the intentions of the authorities. Their attitude was amply clear from the beginning, by their putting us in 'C' class and rushing through the executions. The Punjab Government for about a month kept us confined in one common cellular block of the Lahore Central Jail. But we were not together. In our cells we were locked up day and night for no other offence but being declared by the government as 'Dangerous Prisoners'. We remained silent for some time and later protested by a hunger-strike. Sirdar, Sukhdeo and Raj Guru were also in the same jail in the condemned prisoners' ward. The news of our strike reached them. Immediately they joined us. The Government was perturbed at the latest development. Within a few days it climbed down and assured us of a settlement. The strike was terminated. Only a few days after, we were suddenly, one night, transferred to Multan Central Jail. The government, however, did not like to keep us in the Punjab, or in any other Northern India province. It, therefore, transferred seven of us to Madras Presidency Jails. The I. G. of Prisons, of the Punjab, Col. Barker had come in close contact with us during the undertrial period and had always

been taking a keen personal interest in us. We were, therefore, sent to the new province with definite instructions that we should be segregated and kept in different jails. As a consequence, I was taken to Rajahmandri Central Jail in Andhra, along with my case-mate Sheo Verma. My other comrades were divided in batches of two and sent to other central jails excepting Kamal Nath Tiwari who was kept all alone in Cannanore Central Jail on the Malabar Coast. For several months we were the only two political prisoners in our jail and had to fight several times against deliberate provocations from the authorities. On the one hand the jail officials were adamant, and we too, on the other hand, were determined to get the privileges of a political prisoner. The trial had to take the usual form of a hunger-strike for a protracted period. In the end, the authorities yielded. We were allowed the daily 'Hindu' and other cultural facilities. Our diet was improved upon and some other physical amenities were granted. Then came 1932—the resumption of the Civil Disobedience Campaign. Hundreds of Congress workers of Andhra became our associates. I was happy, daily forming new acquaintances, overwhelmed by the warmth and cordiality of my new companions.

But in the midst of the cheerful company I was ever feeling that this valued association would last only for a short duration. My new friends were all short-term prisoners and would part in the near future. I was, therefore, hoping against hope to get a chance of meeting my case-mates with whom I had parted company in the Punjab. So when the news about Andamans appeared in the press, I grew jubilant and realised that I would now get this opportunity. I was besides myself with joy, for not only was I going to pass my future days in company with my

colleagues of the past but also amidst the unique association of hundreds of revolutionary youths assembled from all parts of the country.

That we as Lahore Conspiracy Case Prisoners would be selected for the list of one hundred prisoners to be sent to Andamans, I had not the least doubt. The Madras Government had grown literally tired of us. With us there had been constant trouble in jails all over the presidency. Hunger-strikes there had been a number of times; some of us had been flogged by orders of the local government, others were exempted on medical grounds. All this stirred the public opinion of the presidency and evoked wide sympathy. The government, watching this development, felt uneasy and the more so as it felt that it had invited unnecessary trouble on its own head by agreeing to keep us in its prisons. On the floor of the Madras Council the Law Member declared that in future they were not going to accept any more Northern India prisoners who invariably proved so troublesome and 'undermined the discipline' of the whole jail. In view of these facts our getting the chance of deportation was a certainty.

An unforeseen event occurred now, that delayed our deportation and to this day it is difficult for me to say whether it was not a blessing in disguise. For it brought me and my friends in live contact through struggle, with Andhra youth and the wider Andhra public. I treasure the memory of those days and find that it is equally fresh in the minds of the large number of Andhra friends who are active to-day in the thick of their mass movement.

We had been joined recently by our comrade Jaideo Kapoor who had been transferred from Raviellore Central Jail. It so happened one day that when we were going on our usual rounds in the jail

barracks, a new member of the prison staff not recognising us behaved most rudely and, on our protesting, endeavoured to retaliate by man-handling us. We were never prepared in jail life to tolerate such liberties of the jail officers. As the best course, we resisted and severely assaulted the officer. On a report made to the local government the Governor-in-Council ordered us to be flogged and be further punished by the deprivation of all privileges. Kapoor was actually flogged and Varma and myself, found too weak to stand the stripes, were exempted on medical grounds. Besides, we were informed by our jail superintendent that he would have to deny us henceforth the rights and facilities that we had so far enjoyed.

It now became a question of prestige for us to re-establish our rights as political prisoners. We accordingly claimed it in course of a representation to the government and failing to obtain any reply declared a hunger-strike. Within a month of the strike our condition became serious and simultaneously the public opinion outside grew organised and insistent in our favour. The Madras government was in a mood to yield but failing to persuade the Punjab government to come down, it intimated us telegraphically that privileges could be given to us only on medical grounds. We refused to accept the offer and thereupon the local government first endeavoured to send us back to our Punjab jails. As physically we were too weak to bear the strain of this long journey, their efforts failed. The increasing volume of sympathy of the Andhra public was engaging the serious attention of the government. To lessen it the authorities regarded it as essential to check the leaking of news about our physical condition, and with this end in view we were separated and con-

fined in three different jails.

I was brought to Vizagapatam Central Prison as the only casual prisoner in a jail of 'habituals'. It did in fact entail complete segregation in my case. But the strike continued. It was after two months of the strike that in January 1933 I was entrained one day under supervision of an expert doctor and learnt that we were all on our way to the Andamans. From Berhampore Varma also was being transferred by the same train. Our mail train had reached half-way towards Madras, when to our utter dismay, we were withheld and sent back to our respective jails, apparently under cabled instructions from the Chief Commissioner of the Andamans. The Port Blair authorities, we learnt later, feared that our reaching Andamans while on hunger-strike would only hasten the strike there that was already being discussed and planned.

I was much disappointed by this turn of events. For I came to know that by the boat that was to carry us, all my case-mates, excepting we three, were deported. I was so near to meeting them after a long period, and now? They had gone so far away. The strike continued. It had virtually become a trial of strength and endurance. There was now no more any material prospect in view, for it was clear that we would follow our comrades to the Andamans as soon as our struggle terminated and we became physically fit for the voyage. In response to the repeated appeals of the Congress leaders and our other friends we finally called off the strike. It had continued for full five months and ten days, and to get rid of us as early as possible, the authorities now gave us daily very rich and nutritious diet, as also stimulating medicines. Within two months we were somehow declared fit and in June 1933, I was one day carried in ambulance to

the Railway station and put in the mail train for Madras. In the same train my other comrades Kapoor and Varma joined me from their respective places.

Just a few days before our departure we had learnt of Mahabir's death in Andamans. Our source of information was the same as of the general public in the country—the few lines of a communique issued from Delhi. A day or two before we started, there was again another communique. This time it conveyed the news of the martyrdom of Mohit and Mohan—two other hunger-strikers. So the strike had been launched in Devil's Island and sooner than expected.

The government was sending us to exile but we felt as if we were starting on pilgrimage to a field of battle. We had discussed and decided that as soon as we reached the Port Blair Jail we would be by the side of our fighting comrades. It would be an unique privilege to begin our new chapter of Andaman life with this grim struggle.

Our transfer news had leaked somehow and an enterprising Andhra comrade outside, managed to communicate it telegraphically to all important way-side stations. As a consequence there were such touching scenes that I have not forgotten even to this day. Our mail train was running in night hours. It was raining heavily. Yet on all important railway stations came scores of Andhra friends—both known and unknown, to give us a farewell. It was an unique send-off. We were escorted by armed guards who had orders not to allow anybody to approach our compartment even. Our friends heavily drenched in rains stood on the platforms, looking towards us and bidding us adieu. We were in a very weak state of health and they knew that as a matter of course we would be joining the Andaman strike as soon as we reached the islands. This made their hearts

heavy, for most of them felt certain that we would perish in the strike like other three comrades. On the platforms several of them stood silent, moved, with tears rolling down their faces. Three of my intimate friends who had been recently released from our jail as civil disobedience prisoners, boarded the train, to get an opportunity of exchanging a few parting words with us. Shadowed by the C. I. D. police they failed in their attempt and ultimately had to take the risk of jumping from the running train and make good their escape.

Our train reached Madras a day before the ship was due to leave. We were consequently taken to the Madras Penitentiary and detained there. The next day we started for the jetty.

Elaborate police arrangements had been made when we were taken to the port. A huge black giant awaited us—the *Maharajah*, the government-chartered boat that was to carry us to our destination. Before we boarded it we raised our usual slogans, 'Long Live Revolution,' 'Victory to Workers', 'Down, Down with Imperialism'. Our voices rang out and floated in the air till we were marched to the dark cellars at the bottom of the ship and were locked up. There was also a large number of ordinary prisoners who were going to the islands but they were kept separated from us in different blocks—all huddled together like so many cattle. They were noisy, busy in trying to make a little room for their mattress, blanket, and the iron plates. In contrast, in our own block we were completely silent. Nobody was in a mood to talk. There was a rush of thoughts dominated by the ideas of the Andaman hunger-strike that was continuing as a determined struggle. We remembered Mahabir, Mohan and Mohit—the three departed comrades. We thought of how we would reach the

remote islands and be privileged to join our fighting comrades. How would our friends greet us? By the time our boat takes us to the destination will some more strikers fall in the battle? A chain of such ideas filled our minds. We were engrossed in our thinking when the engines roared and the ship sailed on its voyage. There was a big hole-like opening for ventilation in our block. We all gathered near it and looked out. We were still inside the port—the ship was moving slowly headed by pilots. For the first time all our thoughts vanished and we were in the grip of one single dominating idea—that we were in exile, that we were bidding adieu to our dear Motherland. Longingly we looked towards the shores that were fast growing dim. The ship by this time had reached outside the Port and entered the open sea. We still were looking behind. In the distance were the high clock-tower and some other huge buildings. We fixed our gaze at them till they faded away from our sight. Nothing was visible now excepting a little boat with a solitary fisherman's figure sitting on it, being tossed about on the waves. For us he symbolised at the moment our struggling toiling countrymen. Would we ever be back again to be in their midst? We did not know.

This departure from our land was very painful, and later it seemed somewhat curious to us, for we had thought that sentiments of pure nationalism had no hold on us. On enquiry from my other comrades at Andamans I learnt that their parting too was no less painful. With glistening tears many of them had taken their last view of the Indian shores. One of the prisoners had solemnly picked up a little dust from the port-grounds and treasured it in a phial for months afterwards in the jail. It was the dust of his dear Motherland, so he had felt, which it would



not be his privilege to kiss for years ahead. Another batch from Bengal while being deported cried out spontaneously in deep sad voice "Ma!! Viday" (Mother, Adieu). Hardly had the waves carried the parting message of the exiled sons when once more they cried out—this time in a more resonant voice—"Bande Mataram." They remembered it was the same cry with which the nation had struggled for the last three decades, with which so many revolutionaries in the prime of their lives had given their last salutations to their countrymen and kissed the gallows.

I have mentioned these emotional reactions to show that in spite of our beginning to see through the complex issues of the national struggle—the division of our countrymen into two antagonistic camps of the minority of vested interests and the majority of the oppressed people—we were still moved so deeply by feelings of pure nationalism—the thought that our mother was chained by alien rulers and that she called out for help and resistance.

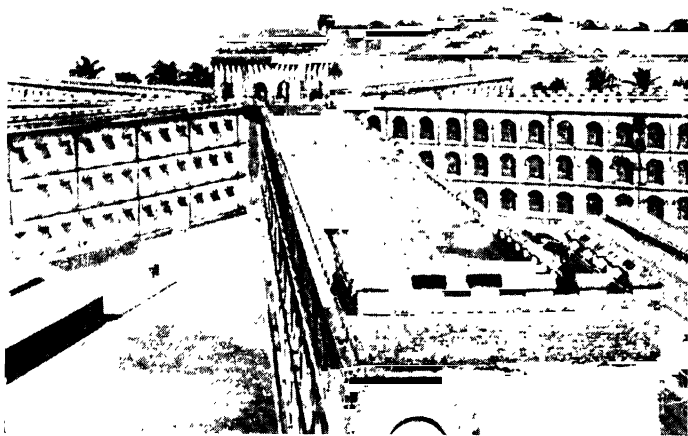
It took three and a half days for the ship to reach Andamans. There were no events or incidents for us. We were lying in our block—everyone of us suffering from sea-sickness. It was our first sea-voyage. The Police that escorted us were mostly people of the Punjab. Some of them stood guard over us day and night. When they learnt that we were political prisoners and further that we were colleagues of late Sirdar Bhagat Singh they overwhelmed us with the warmth of their good wishes and care. They did not know—poor ordinary constables—how to express their deep sympathy. One of them, an old bearded fellow would come and say, "Don't be disturbed, Allah will soon get you liberated." Another would come and smuggle in

some part of his ship rations—a little sugar and tea. A third on duty would take someone of us out, and on the plea of bathing would allow us to move about for some time in the fresh air outside our dark dungeons. All these little comforts and cares lavished on us by our people, we so gratefully acknowledged in our hearts. We were imagining the historic revolts on ships, our brave Garhwalis of Peshawar, National Militia—all jumbled up in a picture of recollections of the past linked up with the visions of the future.

At night sleep was not possible. The prisoners blocks were big iron cages just of the type in which at times animals are carried on railway wagons. These were round the boilers of the ship—quite dark even during the day time. Dim lights were burning there the whole time. The atmosphere was suffocating. It was a real blessing for us to stand turn by turn during night hours at the ventilation hole and look out. There reigned stillness broken only by the dull roar of the engines and the splash of the waves. The spray of sea-water used sometimes to reach our faces. We would stand for hours together breathing in the freshness of the vast open sea and often forget our prisoner-selves in the engrossing thoughts. Looking back we would find all prisoners dozing or half-asleep and in the corridor the placid figure of the slowly moving sentry with his rifle. The scene was horrid, strangely reminiscent of the galley slaves of centuries ago, over whose crushing toil and misery was raised the glory that was Greece.

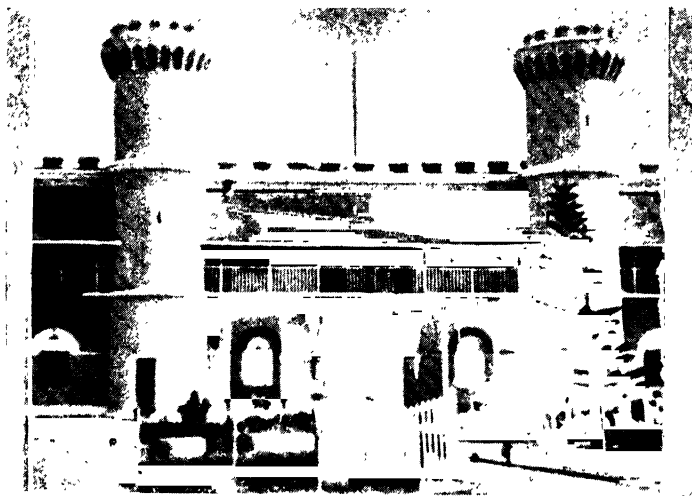
Our Medical Officer on ship, finding that we were all feeling indisposed, ordered our escort to take us on the deck daily for sometime. We were accordingly hand-cuffed and marched to a corner of the deck every morning and evening. The free passengers stared at us and dared not talk for fear of





**The Cellular Jail Port Blair**

‘We sighted a huge building exactly similar to medieval castles.’ (p. 37).



**The Jail Gate**

‘At the very jail gate we asked our European jailor to take us to our hunger-striking comrades.’ (p. 38).

the Police. The little children with their sparkling eyes would look at us with curiosity. How they reminded us of our little brothers and sisters whom we had left behind in our homes. They were growing with years but to us their memory was always of their childhood—of their smiles, their naughty pranks, their prattle. None of us had ever before been on a sea voyage. The sight therefore was so pleasing. In contrast to our limited cramped prison lives there was the view of the endless stretch of water, the rhythm of the waves, the white silvery clouds on the distant horizon. We requested our escort to give us a chance to see the sunrise but it could not be arranged.

On the fourth day we sighted land. Our ship was winding its course through small islets green with their covering of cocoanut trees. The landscape was beautiful. We all gathered at the peephole to gaze at the scenery. Soon the ship reached the Aberdeen Islands where the Cellular Jail for politicals was situated. The *Maharajah* anchored about a mile from the islands. We sighted a huge building exactly similar to medieval castles. We were told it was the jail for us. I instantly remembered England's manorial castles that had imprisoned many who were for the march of history against the decaying, parasitic feudalism. Capitalism triumphed but only to bolster up the monstrous feudalism in another region—the Indian soil.

We were getting impatient to be taken inside the jail to meet our comrades. My casemates were there—all excepting Mahabir. From Bengal and Bihar batches had already arrived. There were several amongst them who were my co-workers, with whom I had worked together against heavy odds. We had parted company five years ago, were tried and convicted as chance would have it, in sepa-

rate cases. There were others with whom we had no personal acquaintance but it did not matter, for we were all soldiers who had fought for the common cause and were now fortunately assembled in the enemy's fortress.

Our waiting seemed so long, when at last in a ferry boat we were taken to the small jetty of the island and driven in a motor lorry to the cellular jail. We gave our usual cries but there was no one except the authorities to hear them. The police had cleared the route of all other people. It feared disaffection in these remote islands too. For during the Civil Disobedience Campaign of 1930 the Congress message had reached this distant region also. There had been a demonstration by some people, the National Flag was hoisted, shouts of Gandhiji-ki-Jai had been raised. Promptly the Chief Commissioner—the uncrowned king of the settlement—had taken steps to suppress the movement. Several persons were arrested and thrown in jail.

At the very jail gate we asked the European jailor to take us to our hunger-striking comrades. He politely declined and instead arranged for our accommodation in the yard where the non-hunger-strikers were confined. We were placed in association with about twenty-five comrades. From them I learnt that several of them were to join the struggle within a few days and that four or five friends had been forced to stay out in view of their protracted illness.

We had decided to join the strike immediately and be by the side of our suffering comrades. But our friends in the yard dissuaded us and advised us to declare the strike only after having a talk with Colonel Barker, Inspector-General of Prisons, Punjab, who had been deputed by the Government of India

to report on the strike situation. He had arrived by the same boat as ourselves. We had not to wait for long, as Mr. Barker visited our yard the very first day. We discussed with him the demands of the hunger-strikers and the immediate possibilities. Without committing himself he talked freely with us all along. He knew us from Punjab ; for he had served as the Medical Officer-in-Charge of our three hunger-strikes during the Lahore Conspiracy Case under-trial period. Strangely enough, at the close of the talk the Colonel left orders with the local authorities for locking me up separately from all the prisoners in a different yard.

I had a mind to refuse such confinement but when I learnt that I would be placed in yard No. 4 adjacent to yard No. 5 where the majority of the hunger-strikers had their cells, I at once agreed. I was told that I would thereby get the coveted chance of communicating with the strikers.

The same afternoon I was shifted to the new yard. Within half an hour I received a slip with a few lines on it scribbled in pencil. It was from my intimate comrade Kamalnath Tewari. He had sent me his warm greetings and asked me to write him immediately about the details of the agitation that he had expected to have developed in the country. The communication from my friend thrilled me. He was one of my best comrades. In our common party life outside, in Bihar, Bengal and Nepal we had lived and worked together amidst heavy odds and had ultimately been arrested, both of us in the Lahore Conspiracy Case. After I had received the note, how I craved to meet him and my other comrades. But where was the possibility ? Comrades Kamalnath and Batukeshwar Dutta, were locked up in yard No. 7 away from all other people. They had

been held by the authorities as the prime movers behind the strike and consequently had been completely segregated. The rest of the hunger-strikers were in yard No. 5.

I had to be satisfied with the opportunity that I had received and I made the best of it. The same day that I was taken to my new yard, I managed to communicate with the hunger-strikers who were in yard No. 5. I informed them of the agitation that had started in the country and of the volume of growing protests. I told them how in a short and delayed, white-washing communique the government had at last reported the deaths of the three comrades. I also described how we had found a wave of sullen indignation all over the country, when we were leaving it. A Representative Andaman Committee had been formed and it was moving actively. Swami Gyananand had taken a bold initiative in the matter. These details had a very cheering effect on our friends. They felt so encouraged at the thought that henceforth the struggle would continue with the active sympathy and support of their people, that its developments were being anxiously watched and followed by their countrymen thousands of miles away from them.

I now intimated to them of our resolve of joining the strike immediately. They consulted amongst themselves and asked us to wait for a few days to await the final development of Col. Barker's visit. All along I was simultaneously in touch with my comrades in yard No. 7. In our mutual consultations we were readily helped by the ordinary prisoners, who carried messages, notes etc. They were full of sympathy for us and did not hesitate to face risks of punishments when helping us. The Pathan feeding gang had to do its work under coercion. One of the



Pathans was so sympathetic that after a few days he refused the gang work and himself resorted to hunger-strike in our support. The authorities declared him a case of mental aberration and on this plea repatriated him to the country.

After his stay of few days in the settlement Col. Barker returned to India, presumably to submit his report promptly to the Central Government. In the meantime the condition of four or five comrades had become critical. Wires were clicking. Telegraphic reports were being daily sent to Simla. Then one day all of a sudden came the Deputy Commissioner, with S.M.O.\* and many other high officials, and gave order for the strikers to be carried to the Central Tower. They were taken there on stretchers one after another, barring those few whose condition made it impossible to undergo the strain. The authorities then assured them that all their grievances would be removed and they would get necessary physical and cultural amenities. The details were also told. In the same breath, however, the officers said that nothing would be done as long as the hunger-strike continued. While they were virtually surrendering, they wanted to have a show of victory. The comrades had consultations amongst themselves and next with their hospital friends. That evening the strike was called off. To be doubly assured authorities made them drink milk, each one of them, in the presence of the officers. The hunger-strike was over. After full fifty-five days of struggle our comrades had emerged victorious.

It was late in the evening when the strike terminated. In my cell I passed that night restlessly awaiting the dawn; for I knew that the next day I was sure to meet my comrades. Meeting! After

\*Senior Medical Officer.

such tremendous suffering and struggle, after such a long time ! The very thought of it put me in raptures. But I was disappointed. There were some restrictions enforced now on the hunger-strikers on medical grounds. I had, therefore, to wait for a few days before I could be in their midst.

At last the day so keenly awaited came and our jailor escorted us to yard No. 5. Our comrades had all assembled at the yard gate and as soon as we entered through it, there was a great rush. To warm handshakes and embraces there seemed no ending. I went through it all as if I was in a dream. When I grew calm after the lapse of some time, I drew aside my friend Kamalnath and began hearing from him the full story of the hunger-strike. The struggle had just ended and as the circumstances were, we could not join it. It afforded me immense pleasure, therefore, to learn all the details of the heroic fight that had been waged. For full two days I listened to the narrative from my friend and it is from this information in the main that the next chapter of 'Resistance' has been written.

## CHAPTER II

### RESISTANCE

Comrades Kamalnath, Batukeshwar Dutta, Mahabir Singh, Kundanlal and Dr. Gaya Prasad—all prisoners of the Lahore Conspiracy Case were brought down to the Madras Penitentiary from the different jails of the province and deported to Andamans in January 1933. On reaching Port Blair, the first few days they passed quite unmindful of the jail routine and its special local rigours. From morning till evening they were moving in the midst of their comrades. There seemed no end to making happy acquaintances and exchanging news. Of several of the comrades, they had learnt before. There was Haripado Bhattacharjee, yet in his teens, who had escaped gallows for his being too young when arrested for Ahsanullah murder. He was taken to his village home and in his presence his old father was tied to a bamboo post in a corner of the courtyard. The cottage, their home, was then set on fire. As a result of indiscriminate assaults, Haripado's condition had become precarious. He had almost lost one of his eyes. They met Bimal Das Gupta of the Villers Shooting Case. It is well known how in his case the defence produced evidence of the merciless assault that had caused grave injuries all over his body. The stories of the different comrades were not much dissimilar in this respect. Many had permanent marks of brutal assaults. There was only one difference that while cases of some had come prominently

before the public eye, the details of others were little known. But such has been the record of all revolutionary struggles in the history. Thousands have fought and perished, unwept, unhonoured, and unsung. It is hard to describe how happy and privileged they felt in the company of these comrades who were till yesterday known and unknown warriors for them. Today they have become dear loving companions. There was however no opportunity of meeting the comrades who had been placed by the government in 'B' class and accommodated in a yard separated from them. As has been said earlier they were all in 'C' class and had consequently been accommodated in a yard reserved for 'C' class prisoners. Little did they know at that time that they would soon meet most of the Division II comrades in the unique and happy association of a life-and-death struggle—the First Hunger-Strike.

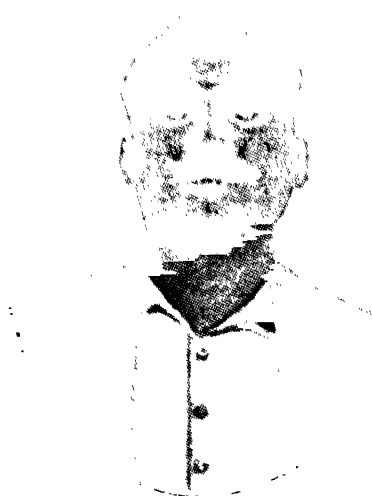
After the flush of their meetings was over with the lapse of a few days, they began to settle down and learn first-hand of the life that awaited them in their new Port Blair Jail. When they were deported by the government they expected the worst conditions and a most vindictive treatment. And they found they were right. The conditions were almost the same as in the Great War days when in those very dark cells were caged hundreds of our revolutionary comrades—the sturdy Sikhs—members of the Ghadar Party, and the flower of Bengal youth. From these members of our old guards, none could expect a submission to governmental tyranny, for they were people who had conceived and prepared for a national insurrection in those days when the majority of our national leaders thought traditionally in terms of compromise and concessions. They were the pioneers of our national revolutionary struggle.

But they had failed. Many of them mounted the gallows. Of the rest a large number had been arrested and marched to prison. But they had entered the jail walls armed with the dash and daring that defied all force, that challenged all oppression. It was a futile attempt on the part of the jail authorities to terrorise them by their extreme repression. It only afforded the prisoners an opportunity to carry on with redoubled force the struggle that they had waged outside. Heroically they fought as long as they were confined in the Andamans. From defensive tactics of their early prison days, they later advanced to an offensive. All jail rules were broken. They declared themselves to be free to observe only such practices in their daily life as they considered compatible with their dignity and self-respect. The authorities were blinded by the brute force that they possessed. There were floggings and frequent assaults on the prisoners. But our comrades did not flinch. They were not votaries of non-violence and so whenever they got chances they too beat the high officials. But such opportunities were rare, as the officers moved inside the jail premises always under the protection of heavy guards. Hunger-strikes were resorted to and continued for months. In course of one such protracted strike, comrade Ramrakha laid down his life. Some prisoners were kept locked up inside their dark cells for months together and their condition had become precarious. Several Bengali youths turned insane. The story of these years of increasing governmental repression and the valiant struggles waged by our comrades did not reach the country, and our people got their glimpses only from the pages of the memoirs written years later by some of the released prisoners.

So my friends had this glorious tradition established by their Andaman predecessors. They had to uphold it. The government had completed its side of the picture and it was for them to fill up the other side. It did not take them long to follow the footsteps of comrade Ramrakha and others.

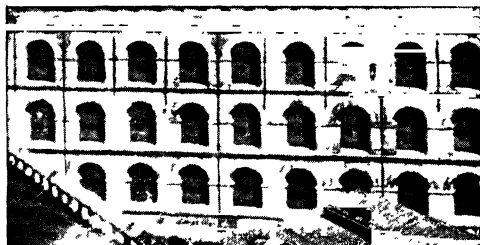
The sufferings and privations that were forced on them had no limits. Their number was about a hundred and as has been said earlier they were accommodated in two different yards as Division Two and Division Three prisoners. The jail as its name signified was composed entirely of cellular blocks. The huge brick building was old and dilapidated, with crevices in its walls everywhere. In all the yards the roofs leaked whenever it rained. The cells were dark and dingy, with extremely rough, uncemented damp floors. The cells on the ground-floor were the worst. Even in day time it remained dark. Passing their days in these insanitary and unlighted cells, many of the comrades had fallen victims to recurring Malaria. The 'C' class comrades lying on their wooden boards on the cold floor of their cells were exposed to mosquito bites all through their sleepless nights. These tropical islands were reputed for their heavy annual mortality from malaria. During the long hours of the night the 'C' class prisoners felt extremely restless.

Despite repeated requests lanterns were not allowed. These were considered articles of luxury. Dozing on their boards the prisoners often woke up startled, as there were numerous scorpions and other insects inside the damp crevices and these frequently crawled out in the dark, and sometimes bit the prisoners. At such times the only help could be afforded by the corridor warder who used to be on duty with



**Thakur Mahabir Singh** .

He valiantly embraced death in the course of the  
hunger-strike.



**Yard No. 2**

In a similar Yard three hunger-strikers fell fighting.





a lantern. But these people took their cue from the ways and methods of their superiors. They had understood that the political prisoners were to be maltreated in all possible manners. Therefore they would sit comfortably in some corner of the long corridor without responding to their calls. The Chief Warder was an old employee. He had been one of the warders who had carried out the vindictive policy of the Great War days towards our old comrades. He had consequently gained popularity amongst the officers and was now a titled servant of the British Government—a Rai Saheb.

To this type of accommodation was added the climate of the islands. It was of an enervating and depressing nature. For nine months in the year it rained in these parts of the tropics. For weeks together the sun would not be visible. Cold winds and constant drizzling would make the weather cheerless. Our comrades would be sitting in a corner of their gloomy cells. It became so dark sometimes that they were deprived of their only privilege and recreation—the chance to devote their time to studies. The atmosphere was also humid and it produced an adverse effect on their nerves that were already strained.

In small islands surrounded by the sea, it is usually a problem to supply sufficient fresh drinking water to the inhabitants. But they were prisoners sent to exile. The government had not cared to think of such trifles—the elementary needs of human life. The water supply was scanty and irregular. In two yards there were only two water taps which were opened for a few hours in the day. From these taps they had to get water for their kitchen, drinking, bathing and washing purposes. But how could they? As a sequel they had to suffer daily.

Some of them went without bath, and their wretched meals too could not be served at regular hours. Even the little supply, that they eventually had, was not properly filtered and as a consequence, dysentery, constipation and thread-worms were becoming general complaints.

The less said about the medical department, the better. It could aptly be described as being conspicuous for having no arrangements. Some of the subordinates on whom fell the task of attending to their needs were humorously called by them 'Ghorah Daktar' ('Horse doctors') for the way in which they applied their art of healing on them. These licensed medical-degree holders had, it seemed, enormous faith in some medicines—almost as if they were Talismans. Before the prisoners had even spoken of their trouble, out came their marked talisman bottles from a wooden carrier. The active prisoner-compounder poured out promptly in a small metal cup some coloured liquid and our friends were asked to gulp it in. The doctors did not think it necessary to hear them and diagnose the trouble. Not unoften had they abused the doctors for their callous treatment but things did not improve. Most of them therefore had resigned themselves to their developing diseases and stopped bringing it to the notice of the medical people.

The attitude of the doctors did not appear to be something new, for during confinement in different jails it had been found that the jail doctors, barring a few, were a type in themselves, that is almost a disgrace to their noble and humanitarian profession. Instead of considering themselves fortunate in getting a chance to serve the suffering and forsaken humanity inside prison walls, they felt themselves as part of the ordinary jail administrative machinery whose policy

it was to inflict all possible hardships on the helpless prisoners, already oppressed under the stringent jail rules. In our jail life several times we had discussed and pointed out to some doctors this deplorable aspect of their conduct, but we always met with a cold indifference. They replied that they had no alternative but to acquiesce in the prison regime.

My friends could never forget the type of meals that they had to swallow these days. The 'C' class prisoners in the morning were given a cup of rice 'Lapsi' i.e., coarse rice boiled in water. Even sufficient salt was not added to it. This delicious morning drink they had to forego on most of the days, as in it were found floating white dead worms, the very sight of which killed the little appetite that they had. At noon they were served with rice and chapatis with curry and Dal. But all these dishes need description for a correct appraisal. The islands had a very poor soil. There was little growth of good vegetables that were reserved for the use of a few dozen officers of the Settlement. For prisoners' rations vegetables meant greens—that too inedible leaves, with a lot of thick tasteless stalks. The so-called Dal was just like rain water from a muddy pool, no trace of grams was to be found in it. Rice and chapatis were of the worst quality. There was the choice of taking both half and half—or any one thing exclusively. But it was difficult to make a choice. Flour, rice, vegetables, spices—all things big and small, were brought to the islands from India at long intervals, by the government-chartered ship. It was then stored in the godowns. By the time it reached the jail, most of the things were full of worms. Atta, rice and Dal—all three main items of the diet—were of a quality that could be given for human consumption only at the risk of spreading disease. The chapatis

made of flour abounding in worms tasted bitter. From rice that was boiled would pop up the long thread-like dead bodies of worms. The very sight would be nauseating. Our comrades had therefore ceased looking at their meals when taking them. Yet they did not escape the sight of some of them every day. Such comrades would leave their meals in the middle and go away hungry. Those who continued eating understood the sudden departure of their friends but never questioned. They were all young men of petty bourgeois intelligentsia with their own notions of respectability. A convention had grown up that they should be silent on such occasions. It hurt their susceptibility to be complaining to each other for such petty things of their lives. But how long could they starve? Such things could not be endured all along. They were all getting ready to fight, and fight to the end. The evening meals were again of the same quality as of the noontime—a cup of Dal, a little green and chapatis.

In Indian jails of the different provinces, wherever they were confined, they had never been given any hard jail task. But now they were all in Andamans and the authorities had been pleased to detect special talent in them for 'Ban-making' i.e., coir-work. They were allotted this task and with its non-fulfilment they were being threatened with punishments.

A political prisoner values above all the cultural facilities that he has in his daily life. In the midst of extreme physical hardships he can carry on if only he is provided with reading and writing facilities and gets periodically the news of the world outside. The government by its experience knew full well of this aspect of their lives, and it had therefore taken all precautions to put obstacles in this sphere. Having been deported hurriedly from jails in the country my

friends had been able to take with them only a limited number of books. They had thought that as usual they would be replenishing their stock of books by regular purchases. But in Andamans they were not allowed any more to have deposit money in the jail office and use it for purchase of books and magazines. When they asked the jail authorities, to supply them with books themselves, they met with a flat refusal. They suffered most from deprivation of newspapers. In India everywhere 'B' class prisoners were getting papers at government cost. But in Andamans they were given none. Deported to a place, hundreds of miles away from their country they were literally dying for a little news of the progress of their national movement but there were no rumours even to cross the high jail walls.

In this scheme of things, it was foolish to expect any facilities for recreation like games, etc. They were never allowed even to move out of their respective yards. Near the Central Tower where one end of all the yards converged, there was a little opening. Lest they should have even a glimpse of anything outside their yard, this place was covered with high corrugated tin sheets. Within their yard they had to remain all along. Prisoners of Division II and Division III were not allowed to meet each other. In the evening they wished to do a little walking within their own yard. But there was no opportunity. The lock-up was over long before the sun set. In some Indian jails prisoners used to have 'a mile or two of walking' inside their pucca cells but this practice too could not be resumed in dark cells when the fear of treading on a scorpion or some other crawling creature always haunted them.

Since they had reached Port Blair their letters also had been stopped. They mysteriously disappeared on

the way or were lost in the local office. Some parcels that were sent for them shared the same fate. They were never even informed of them. Later they learnt that the contents had been thrown away or conveniently disposed of.

These were some of the features of the daily life in which our comrades were placed, but to cap it all was the attitude of the authorities. It was vindictive and callous to the extreme and the political prisoners too did not expect it to be otherwise. But what hurt them was their vulgar manners and singular lack of courtesy. The officers would in their treatment with them even depart from established norms of a gentleman's conduct. The arrogant and haughty officers were of course paid back in their own coins but our comrades certainly preferred to enjoy fighting them hard in a sportsman's spirit. These were however vain wishes. The officers were there always seeking opportunities to heap indignities and humiliations on the prisoners.

Under such conditions of life a sullen atmosphere prevailed when the batch from Madras reached Andamans. A fight would have been precipitated long ago but for the restraining of younger elements by their more experienced and elder comrades. The latter argued that there was no public opinion in the locality to support them. News would hardly leak out to reach in time their countrymen beyond the ocean. In view of these facts the struggle would be of a sustained and stubborn character. No hasty action was therefore advisable. In cooler moments all our comrades recognised this situation but under extreme provocation it often seemed that some comrades would lose their patience. It was with great difficulty that they could be calmed and their sporadic outbursts avoided.

This state of affairs could not last long. All the comrades sensed the necessity of a planned fight but were not definite as to the form and method of the struggle. The treatment that was meted out to them, particularly to the Division III prisoners was intolerable.

With the arrival of the new Madras batch the discussions took definite shape. In Indian jails comrades Kamal, Dutt and their other casemates had to go on hunger-strikes repeatedly and for long periods. The Lahore Hunger-strike in the privileged company of their late comrade Jotin had proved so effective to rouse public opinion and to force partial surrender of the unwilling government. So now they readily started discussing the launching of a hunger-strike. For several days general discussions were held. Views were exchanged as to what would be the demands, how best they could conduct the strike, at what stage the calling off could be considered, what would be the nature of an honourable settlement. Keen interest was evinced by everyone, for it was realised that under the peculiar Andaman conditions, the strike would last long and victory could be assured only after the death of several of them. They were soldiers planning an attack and their talks were most lively. Comrades who were usually of a silent type also came forward with their suggestions and actively participated in the formulation of the plan. It was a problem, however, how to establish regular communication with the Division II comrades and have necessary consultations with them. A way was finally found out through sick comrades. They were confined in the jail hospital and there both Division II and Division III people were together. Almost everyday some comrades were discharged to return to their yard, while fresh patients were admitted.

The ailing friends became the messengers.

In course of the discussions there were some interesting political speculations. A view was advanced that there would be a settlement very soon between the Congress and the Government, and then the question of political prisoners would stand on a different plane. The fight was therefore to be postponed. They must wait and see. Most of them, however, did not share these illusions and felt that it was now or never. They had just been brought to the islands. The Government had taken the offensive. Either they were to go down before it and lead humiliating lives for years with no cultural and physical amenities, or they were to accept the challenge and fight, till they had their rights and privileges established.

When the fight was eventually decided a small committee was formed to go through the preliminaries. A written representation was sent to the Government narrating the grievances and enumerating the demands. They waited for some time but there was no reply. Instead, the jail superintendent gave them, apparently under instructions from the Chief Commissioner, some vague assurances. They had enough experience to correctly understand these moves of the authorities. From their side they promptly gave now an ultimatum of a month.

The political prisoners were all now so happy, counting days to launch their resistance. They would greet each other with a smile so significant and full of meaning. Was not their period of suspense over? They were now free to move forward.

On the fixed day, thirty-three of them started the hunger-strike. It was May 1933. There were some more comrades who wanted to join on the very first day but they were advised to wait and come in later. The struggle had begun. The officers were running



to and fro, looking perplexed at the concerted attack. The first thing that they did was to get all the strikers locked up in the first and second floors of yard No. 5. Three of them had the bad luck to be separated from the rest. Comrades Kamal, Dutta and Shukla were taken to a different yard and locked up in cells, one in each wing. A fourth comrade was brought in a few days later. Their four cells were so widely apart that they could not even shout out to each other. They felt so bitterly the deprivation of association from their other comrades but there was no way out. The higher officials considered them to be at the root of the trouble and were therefore especially attentive and 'kind' to them. For two whole months they had to pass their days in dark cells, with only bits of news of the strike developments filtering in from time to time. The lock-up for all the strikers was for day and night, all through the protracted period of the struggle. The same was the punishment meted out to the large number of comrades who had declared 'work-strike' and were accommodated in the ground-floor of yard No. 3. Over and above, heavy fetters were imposed on them. In their cells the strikers had little that could be called their kit. That too was now seized and carried away by the jail people, after a thorough search. The jail blanket, a wooden plank, their jangia and kurta were all that were left with them. The Division II prisoners who were amongst them were instantly declassified and locked up as others. It was so welcome to them. Their classification had been a distinction forced on them, which they had ever felt.

The settlement doctors were completely unnerved. They had no previous experience of hunger-strike and were at their wits' end. But the senior medical officer, an European gentleman, moved about

with an air of indifference and nonchalance. He wanted to 'teach a lesson', so the political prisoners were told. Forced feeding in Indian jails usually begins late, when the hunger-striker becomes weak and is physically disabled to offer stiff resistance. Following the death of Jotin, the Inspectors-General of Prisons of the different provinces had held a conference and had laid down this definite rule. But the medical authorities at Port Blair were perhaps not aware of it. They started feeding on the sixth day. Several doctors divided themselves in batches in the early morning and followed by their respective gangs of Pathan prisoners, entered the cells one after another and began their work.

Two doctors and a gang entered the cell of comrade Mahabir Singh. He was a typical Thakur of U. P.—one of our stoutest friends. His broad chest tall figure, flowing beard that he had grown of late, all reminded one of the brave Rajputs—the heroes whose annals fill the pages of Todd's 'Rajasthan'. He was a born soldier and was recognised as such at the very first sight. Of his physical achievements he had made a record in his outside party life with us.

The doctors found it a difficult task to get Mahabir overpowered. For long he struggled with the Pathans till by sheer exhaustion he fell down on the ground. The doctors thought that it could be easy now to force feeding on him. They did not know Mahabir. It was his eighth or ninth hunger-strike. He knew all the arts of baffling medical people and refuse feeding. Only an expert hand could tackle him. But the doctors were complete novices in the matter. They started the feeding process in a crude manner. When the tube was inserted, Mahabir resisted vigorously and coughed hard. The tube was thus transferred into the wind-

pipe from the gullet. Pouring of milk began downright and it went straight into the lungs. Only a hunger--striker knows what superhuman courage and endurance is necessary to keep silent at such times and invite sure death. But had they not decided that some of them must die and pave the way for victory? Our Mahabir also was a party to this resolve and he led the way. The feeding had hardly been finished when his pulse was fast dropping and he had lost consciousness. His lungs had been filled with milk. The doctors had not realised the full gravity of the situation but they sensed danger and immediately removed Mahabir to hospital on a stretcher. When he was being removed, the comrades who were in the adjacent cells got alarmed and cried out to their neighbours. They all shouted for the doctors to learn the exact condition of Mahabir. But none replied. Only the solitary warder on duty came and said, "Babu, ap log ka bhai bimar ho gaya hai." But it was enough. As by intuition they felt that Mahabir was leaving them. Would they not get an opportunity of giving a last revolutionary farewell to their departing comrade? Years ago in Lahore when Jotin died in hunger-strike, we had this privilege granted. Jotin had breathed his last in our arms, amidst his comrades with whom he had pledged together 'Victory or Death.' No relatives were near him—but we were there, his brothers, his comrades-in-arms, to bid him adieu. We were allowed to carry the bier too, to the jail gate where stood over a lakh of our people, silent and bareheaded to pay their homage.

But our callous Andaman authorities had their standards. They did not know of chivalry in a fight. Political prisoners were not even told that Mahabir was expiring. That whole day everyone passed rest-

less hours. By evening it was believed that Mahabir had gone. He had followed Ramrakha. The comrades on work-strike had grown terribly excited. When they were gathered for meals they refused to be locked up until jail officers came and gave them full authoritative reports of Mahabir's end. The authorities were in a dilemma. They sensed the defiant mood of these comrades and feared great trouble. It was not that the prisoners were unaware of this aspect. They had discussed it. They expected there might be shooting—a second Hijli—and they were prepared for it. The authorities threatened, and with the use of least possible force by their hundreds of warders, they forced a lock-up. There were scuffles, assaults. Some of our comrades were injured.

The strikers used to raise slogans daily at 8 o'clock. That night it was memorable. Long before the scheduled time they were standing—one and all, even the weakest of them—at the doors of their cells. Complete silence reigned. Just as the jail gong sounded eight, up went their voices—loud and resonant—'Inquilab Zindabad.' The echo had not yet died. The air was rent again—'Inquilab Zindabad.' In front was stretched the vast expanse of blue water. In the distance were visible the shining lights of the Island King's palace—the Chief Commissioner's bungalow. For the third time they roared 'Inquilab Zindabad.' Then all was again silent. They felt thrilled. They had given their revolutionary salutations to their departed comrade.

The nation has hoisted the flag of revolt. Fighting under the banner many of their comrades had fallen in the past. To-day Mahabir also had perished. Many more will die to-morrow, till our goal is reached. On that day the nation will remember its martyrs. The flag shall be flying high. Our victorious people will

rend the air with their thundering cries, 'Inquilab Zindabad.' Such are our revolutionary struggles, their beginning and end. There was no end to such thoughts with which they lay awake during that long night.

To this day it is not known definitely what happened to Mahabir in the hospital and how he was treated during the last moments of his life. When the strike had terminated we heard a report that his dead body was tied to heavy stones and sunk in the sea in dark hours of the morning. No wreaths were laid, no funeral orations delivered, the dead body that the nation would have treasured and worshipped went down in the ocean to be the food of sharks. I recalled how Mahabir's intimate comrade, Sirdar Bhagat Singh too, had, some years ago, received at Government's hands, such honour and treatment after his death. The coincidence was not strange.

The struggle now became more grim. After Mahabir's death everyday the strikers had additions to their ranks. New comrades joined the hunger-strike. The number went up from day to day till it reached over fifty.

During one of these early days came a telegram from Santiniketan from Dr. Tagore imploring them to abandon hunger-strike. But how could it be possible? The Government was as adamant as ever; while they had already lost one of them. They were not thinking now of any compromise or settlement. The question primarily had become one of upholding the prestige of Indian Revolutionaries; and they had staked their lives on it. They, therefore, felt touched by the expression of solicitude but were unable to respond to the appeal and discontinue the strike. A proper reply was drafted and sent but they did not know whether it reached the destination.

Days now dragged on. The officers would come to them and would relate cock-and-bull stories, some to intimidate them, others to persuade them to give up the strike. It was all futile and only afforded them some amusement. From cell to cell they passed on these stories and made fun of their inventors.

The S.M.O. was now moved in his complacency. Outwardly he maintained his previous 'don't care' attitude but at the bottom he had grown nervous. He knew that he would be held responsible for giving the strikers the opportunity of courting death and thus causing widespread agitation in the country. He had now given detailed instructions to his subordinates, and personally supervised the feeding everyday. Serious cases he would see himself, and their number was growing. The number of the daily forced feeds had now been increased to three, and in some cases, to four. Some of the strikers were waked up in the middle of the night and had to undergo the torture of forced feeding at the hands of the doctor and his Pathan gang.

In view of the Government's attitude, as manifested by their local agents, our comrades realised that one death was not sufficient. Some more would have to follow. Most of them were trying and eventually two of them, their young comrades—Mohit and Mohan resisted successfully. The Mahabir episode was repeated. Milk was poured in their lungs. But the doctors got scent in time, and stopped feeding. Only a little milk could get in. But that was enough. The news went round that two more comrades were leaving them. Everyone of them on getting the report pledged solemnly that matters would not rest there. More dead bodies shall float in the ocean. The Government shall have to bend on its knees.

Mohit and Mohan were removed to hospital. With the help of repeated injections and oxygen they were kept alive for a few days. But had they not determined their path? Their iron will triumphed. Death, glorious death slowly covered their lives and took them away from the midst of their comrades. They had gone to the realm of martyrs, leaving the rest to carry on the battle. One remembered history. Was it not in such spirits that the Greeks fought, two thousand years ago, in their narrow pass and thundered, "They shall not pass."?

Unlike Mahabir, Mohit and Mohan were both short-term prisoners. They had only short periods left of their sentences. But they were youngmen from Bengal and we know how in recent history Bengalee youth had heroically braved death with philosophic calm that earned admiration and tribute even from some of their implacable foes. History was written with their life-blood, as an inspiring and glorious record of our revolutionary struggle.

In their normal jail life Mohit and Mohan both were marked for their jovial and at the same time serious temperament. To this day their numerous friends remember vividly their smiles—so innocent and childlike, and the sweet voice of Mohit in which he entertained people with his Hindustani Ghazals.

A month had now passed and the strikers were quite in the dark about the developments in the country. They did not know even whether their news was reaching their people. The authorities had now, however, a clear change of attitude. They felt that things had gone too far, and a settlement was expedient. The Government of India, the prisoners learnt, had demanded explanation from the Chief Commissioner regarding the cause of three deaths within a single month.

Then one day, they were told that Col. Barker, the I. G. of Prisons of the Punjab, deputed by the Govt. of India, was arriving to visit them. For the Lahore case prisoners he was an old acquaintance, considered by the Government to have grown into a hunger-strike expert through his experiences of three group strikes in the Lahore jail. On his arrival he was closeted for long with the higher officers and, as was learnt later, had drawn up on this occasion the terms of a settlement. But when he saw the strikers, he bore a rigid adamant attitude, to hide his real purpose. To yard No. 7, where four comrades were locked up, he went and greeting them with an ironic smile, remarked, "So you have started your old game." Instantly they retorted, "As long as the treatment would be based on inhuman principles, within the jail walls there shall be no peace." He kept silent and turned back. That day he ordered drinking water to be stopped. For twenty-four hours none of the hunger-strikers were given a single drop of water. Some of them were lying already in precarious condition and there were others who had blood-pressure trouble. At the close of the period two or three of them were removed to hospital in an unconscious state. The S. M. O. who was formally responsible for them, it was reported, asserted himself and got the order hastily rescinded. Colonel Barker got convinced that nothing would deter the strikers and that the only way to terminate the strike was to offer honourable terms.

The colonel as I have said earlier lost no time in conveying his impressions to the India Government which now abandoned its adamant attitude and yielded to the prisoners.

The hunger-strikers had triumphed in their cause. But at what cost? This was the question uppermost



in my mind when my friend Kamalnath finished relating this gripping narrative of their struggle. That night when I retired to bed I was still thinking. Had we been losers in the bargain? Three of our lives had been given up to secure victory. But my comrades knew it before and had entered the fight with this clear prospect before them. Then where was the room for doubt or hesitation? My thoughts would not have travelled in this direction, had I not remembered the arguments and views of a considerable section of my countrymen that radically differed from us. These people were mostly active fighters of our national ranks. Their opinion rightly had a claim to our serious consideration and respect. On my mind's floor I was, therefore, engaged in a debate with them, refuting their arguments. They said that such fights should be avoided, that our lives were precious and should be preserved for the outside struggle. They also advised us not to be desperate or restive. But this whole approach was wrong and based on wrong premises.

The broad struggle that is waged outside in the country cannot be severed from the struggle that we carried on behind the prison walls from time to time because the two are indissolubly linked together. Fundamentally, the same British Imperialism ruled in both places, and it had to be equally resisted, if we meant to be consistent anti-Imperialist fighters. Whenever the prison struggles assume a broad form they clearly assist and advance the country's battle. Who can argue that the strike of Jotin and others at Lahore, and later the mass hunger-strike in the Andamans and other jails did not form distinct parts of the national struggle? The talk of preservation of lives had no meaning if we examine the question more closely. Life is preserved not with a spirit of cling-

ing to it, but to offer it to the service of our cause. We were but units of the millions of our fighting forces. Only through our active uncompromising struggle and sacrifices we could best advance our cause. It is but inevitable that on the march thousands shall perish, that the millions may live and triumph. By no logic it can be proved that in the specific situation of the Andaman strike we had erred because we did not calculate. Mahabir, Mohit and Mohan—the valiant trio had a clear vision. They did not fight for a bed-sheet or a pair of dhotis or any like material object. They had stood for a principle—the principle of never yielding to Government's repression, and had vindicated it with their lives. By their deaths they have inspired and galvanised thousands of their suffering countrymen to march forward to heroic and determined action. They never threw their lives away. They offered it at the highest price. In Freedom's Battle there is no place for the cool calculations of a bania. The revolutionary soldiers have their own measure. Without knowing it and realising it, it is impossible to judge properly the supreme actions of their lives. Before us we have the glorious spectacle of Republican Spain of to-day, where hundreds of famous leaders, writers, statesmen are falling in the trenches side by side with the illiterate but gallant peasants. Many people say that the former had done a wrong. They should have lived to serve the cause better. But Ralph Fox and others who have fallen thought otherwise. Then, were they wrong?

To say that Mahabir and his comrades were goaded to action through desperation is the most unfair view of their struggle. Desperation could lead to sudden organised assaults, or to endeavours for escape, but never to the slow march—inch by inch—towards certain death. With such arguments I went

to sleep late that night and woke up next morning to find most of my comrades in yard No. 5 already gathered in their respective wings, learning from each other experiences of the past days and discussing the developments. We were also eagerly awaiting our breakfast. It was our first common meal after victory, and we were jubilant.

## CHAPTER III

### THE MORROW

The morrow of a victory is always so pleasant. Besides, we were in jail with enough leisure to make merry and enjoy the fruits of the triumphant struggle. After the termination of the strike, the four comrades had been brought back to yard No. 5 from their segregation yard. The movements of all the erstwhile strikers were still restricted, not on penal grounds this time but for medical reasons. They were in a very weak state of health and the doctors confined them even during day time, to their respective wings. They had taken precautions regarding the diet and were giving them only liquid diet and some slices of bread. Our strike comrades, however, wanted to taste articles seasoned with salt and spices, and they found out a way. From the upper floor they would drop a small rope and pull up with its help a chapati and a little curry. There would be a rush and lo ! In the twinkling of an eye everything disappeared. A single chapati would be shared among a dozen or more of them. There remained many who did not get their share. They waited and looked for another opportunity. The device was followed again. The restrictions from the side of the doctors could continue only for a few days.

Amidst laughter and merriment we were passing our time. Those of us who were younger and rather mischievous hatched some plan everyday and selected fresh victims from amongst us, as the objects of

their pranks. The punishments given to our comrades during the strike—the declassification [of Division II comrades] and deprivation of books etc., were still continuing. Formal order for their withdrawal had not yet come. They were expected any day from the Chief Commissioner's office. We also were not in a hurry. We were, on the other hand, in a holiday mood, enjoying our days in all possible ways. We were breathing a comparatively free atmosphere in jail after years, many of us for the first time since our conviction. I have described how we, from Madras, had come after protracted struggles in different jails of the Presidency. Our Bihar comrades had a similar story to tell. Lathi charges and assaults had fallen too often to their lot. The overwhelming majority of us consisted of Bengalees and the greater part of it had come from Midnapore jail. Midnapore during the 1931 campaign had gained a notoriety for governmental repression. The local jail offered no exception. There were constant clashes between the political prisoners and the authorities. Punishments were inflicted on a mass scale. Before the period of one expired, another punishment was ordered. This produced an effect just contrary to what the jail officers desired. The resistance of our comrades was maintained and grew in intensity. As a result, the conflict continued for as long as the political prisoners were confined in this jail. Bar-fetters, standing handcuffs, penal diet and solitary confinement—all sorts of punishment were imposed, not always in succession but often simultaneously. To Andamans, we all had been brought, that things may go still worse for us. But we had seen through the game and foiled the government's plans.

After some time the orders came. There was a long list of facilities now granted to us. The govern-

ment were smarting under the sense of a defeat. And to maintain a show of prestige they had ordered most of the privileges to be given, not as a concession to political prisoners but as reforms in the general treatment of all. To us this step was very welcome, for the hunger-strike thus inadvertently brought about betterment in the lot of ordinary prisoners also, whose grievances otherwise the officers would never have heard or redressed.

Those of us who were in 'C' class were henceforth to be provided with bedsheets, mosquito-nets, pillows and pillow cases, bathing towels and wooden bedsteads. We could also at our own cost purchase shorts and vests. As for diet, the quality of rice, flour and vegetable was improved. Provision was also made to vary dal daily and issue potatoes and onions as extra vegetables. Fish also was to be supplied whenever available, on alternate days. Kitchens were left in our hands for proper arrangement and supervision. We were allowed to purchase some food articles barring luxuries. The rest of the privileges were for all of us, irrespective of Division II or III. Maintaining the classification of the Indian jails, a new class for us was formed here. A term was coined for us—P.I., i.e., permanently incarcerated prisoners. We were so called because unlike ordinary Andaman prisoners, we were to be confined permanently within the cellular jail walls. For the ordinary convicts, the practice was three months confinement, after the expiry of which period they were taken out, to live and work on the settlement.

For our recreation, arrangements were made both for indoor and outdoor games. Carrom board, chess, playing cards and ping-pong were provided. For outdoor exercise we were given football and volleyball. Parallel and horizontal bars were fixed up for physical

exercise.

What made our life most intolerable previously was the complete absence of any scope for an intellectual and cultural development. Of the new facilities that we obtained, we valued most those pertaining to this sphere. We had now the right to subscribe magazines, both Indian and foreign, that were on the government's prescribed list. We could also receive books in parcels from our friends and relatives, and also purchase them from our money deposited at the jail gate. The government were to provide us with furniture for a prison library and reading room. Periodically books were also to be purchased by them. Lights were now being supplied in all the cells till ten in the night. At government expense the weekly overseas, *Statesman*, *The Times Illustrated Weekly*, the Bengali weeklies—*Sanjibani* and *Bangabasi*, as also the Hindi edition of the latter were to be supplied.

All punishments were withdrawn. Our Division II comrades went back to their yard, but henceforth we were not deprived of their association. Under new regulations we could freely meet them as inter-yard communication was allowed. Our previous lock-up time had made any recreation in the evening hours impossible. Now the time was altered to 8 p. m.

Above all, the attitude of the jail officers had undergone a radical change. In their dealing with us, we now did not find any lack of courtesy. We had no more to face indignities in our daily life. And it was no mean achievement. Thousands of our people have been in the prisons in recent years and they know how soulless has been the whole administrative machinery. It had no regard for any human aspect of the prisoners' lives. On the other hand all the

rules and regulations were so framed as to force on them humiliation from morning till evening. It has been our common experience that the greatest suffering caused has been mental and not physical ; for, a political prisoner can endure extreme material hardships cheerfully without a murmur, but to be forced to live under humiliating circumstances even with the best of privileges, proves so acutely distressing to him. When we hear that in some remote prison one of our comrades has staked his life demanding something that appears so light and trivial to the common eye, we must probe deeper and see things in the background. His demand is a mere superficial feature, his fight in reality is a revolt against the whole system that suffocates and chokes him to a living death. He stands up and fights for the principle of human worth and dignity. In my long years of jail life, whenever I had been forced to fight the authorities I have been often summoned by the jail superintendents and sometimes the Inspector-General who questioned me. Hearing me they have always, without exception, said something like, 'Oh ! you people are too touchy. In jails you must be thick-skinned.' At such an observation I was not surprised. For, how could they—the members of the bureaucracy, read the minds of those who had struggled and suffered for their country's freedom?—a freedom that was to assure for every citizen a free, happy and prosperous life. An advanced political worker does not limit his views to the narrow vision of mere material hardships of his countrymen, but he is also concerned with the colossal human frustration in the spiritual sphere. How can then one expect him, who appreciates life at its real worth, to submit meekly to an order of things that denies him all these values ? In my college days Abbott's 'Life of Napo-



leon' had been one of my favourite books. In it I had read of the last days of Napoleon in St. Helena, when he was no more the redoubtable king of Revolutionary France but only an humbled prisoner of European reaction. In my prison days I never forgot one of the stories that I had read there. Napoleon—the hero of a hundred battles of Europe, was feeling life too dull in his lonely island. He wished for horse riding to get some relief and distraction. After long correspondence the permission was received. Napoleon was so happy. But when that evening he went round on his horse-back, he found himself escorted and spied by mounted guards. Such were the orders. Napoleon returned at once and entered his solitary room. That night his anguish had no end. He felt his self-respect trampled ruthlessly. As a protest Napoleon took a resolve. He never went out again for horse-riding. There are several such incidents which Abbot portrays with his powerful pen, to show how Napoleon who had once defied the might of the whole European autocracy, now found himself helpless, and slowly went down before his enemy's assaults. No physical blow could go deeper. His very soul was pierced. It may be said to us—the prisoners coming from the ordinary ranks of society—that it is no use recalling the stories from the life of one who was once the crowned ruler of the destinies of millions of people. But why? How can one deny us the right of claiming equality with the greatest of the great as did Tolstoy's common soldier of 'War and Peace' lying wounded in the battle field and gazing at the vast starlit sky.

In short, our life now had been made tolerable. We could exist physically and mentally. Since trouble was brewing from January last no fresh batch of prisoners had come from the country. Now that

things were settled, government resumed its practice of deporting more of our comrades. One day from our second floor, we witnessed a large contingent of mounted and ordinary police outside the jail, patrolling both sides of the road leading to the jetty. It was a welcome sign for us. We knew that more of our comrades were coming. We instantly prepared to give them a reception. A large number of comrades came from Bengal that day. Many had been deported as a result of their own persistent efforts. They had preferred exile in association with us than enjoying privileges in Indian jails. They had come prepared to meet the hard repressive conditions of pre-strike days. They had no information of the latest developments. We, therefore, sprang a pleasant surprise on them when we played a football match in their honour that evening. The ground was in their quarantine yard and they watched the game from the first and second floors where they were confined. This group was later followed by many more batches, till at the last stage our number had swelled up to three hundred.

Before the strike days, there was constant tension in the atmosphere. We were preparing for the fight and consequently the circumstances were not conducive to our free mixing with each other. Besides, with Division II prisoners, we had not even a chance of communication. We had come from Bihar, U.P., Bengal, Madras and Assam—from different stages of the movement, with diverse experiences. We now set about making acquaintance with each other and narrating our stories. We would divide ourselves and sit in small groups. For hours the narratives were told and heard. There was enough material—the Chittagong Armoury Raid, the wellknown Midnapore actions, attempts on Villiers and Watson, the Saunders

murder, the Assembly Bomb case, the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, The Bengal Students' Movement, the activities of our Bihar and Assam comrades in most unfavourable situations ; all these topics had interesting history. In knowing them we were unconsciously beginning to acquire a comprehensive view of our immediate past. It helped us to such an extent in subsequent days in our task of self-criticism and correct appraisal of our movement.

The strike had ended in July and one of the facilities that we had obtained was the opportunity of celebrating Durga Pujah—the most important annual festival of Bengal. Barring a few of us, we were not people to be moved to spiritual fervour over the worship of a god or goddess. Not that we all were turned atheists, after a profound study of the materialist and the idealist philosophies. In our outside life, in the midst of the rough-and-tumble of daily work, we had no leisure for such abstract studies. But we had been affected by the prevailing spirit of Renaissance in our country. We did not take things for granted. We had the Nihilist in us who did not bow down before things only because they had a tradition behind. Besides, this outlook was engendered in us by the very nature of our work. In the midst of the modern world conditions where there is chaos and tumult all round, where a regime that has outlived its historic usefulness is fast decaying and disintegrating, human lives very often offer a sad tragic spectacle seldom interspersed by any streak of joy. Many who feel confused and depressed run to religion to get a solace in their anguish. Ideas of heavens or slogans like 'Thy will be done' are alluring to them. But there are others who see on the horizon the dawn of a new era. They work and fight for its advent. The very logic of their life-work makes

them bold and self-confident. They do not run to a church or a temple to seek peace or strength. In our exploited country, the people were in abject misery. But they were not docile. The national struggle had begun and we too, in our own way had participated in it. In the forward march we had not found the reverence for religion helpful in the awakening of greater and greater numbers of our countrymen ; it tended to encourage on the contrary, a spirit of acquiescence and a fatalistic outlook. Then how could we, who believed in defiance, in organised fight, help becoming indifferent and often averse to rituals and the like that passed in the name of religion? But religious festivals in their practical aspect are valued usually by the mass of poor people not for their professed spiritual content but in reality, for their affording opportunities to add a little colour and charm to their daily humdrum lives. The few festival days of the year were prescribed by the handful few of the upper classes, only to make somewhat tolerable the life of the common man. Without this hypothesis, it is hard to explain the association with the ceremonies, of large scale entertainments, music, dance, decoration, and feasts etc.

We were not poor in the ordinary sense of the term, but within jail walls our poverty was obvious in that, we had no chance for several years to have gaiety in our lives. Durga Pujah had approached and we therefore, readily seized the opportunity as an occasion for having a grand festival, rich in its round of amusements and other social features.

The authorities were in a mood to oblige us and they came promptly to our help. It was now that we discovered what diverse talents we had in our ranks. Artists for different kinds of work came forward to take charge of specific tasks. To drama,

we devoted most of our resources and it proved to be the most successful item of our celebration. We formed our Drama Committee that included among its members, coach, manager, electrical engineer, prompter, technical director, music master, in short, the complete troupe of a dramatic company. For scenes we collected a large number of our bedsheets and stitched them together. Our painter comrades by their day and night labour transformed them into scenes far better than what one ordinarily finds in amateur dramatic clubs of our small towns. Wings also were painted. Our artists had been so successful in their enterprise that they earned universal praise. One local high official even expressed his desire to purchase one of the scenes. While on our side, the large number of actors and 'actresses' were busy with their rehearsal, on the other hand, there was a mushroom growth of committees for different functions. We had our Puja Committee, Stores Committee, Amusement Committee, Reception Committee, Kitchen Committee or Subscription Committee—the list was endless. It seemed as if we were determined to realise one part of the slogan of the future society, 'from each according to his ability.' Only a few comrades were left who had not shouldered any responsibility. There were regular formal and informal meetings of the committees with resolutions, amendments, budgets and cuts,—in short, we were out to stage a big affair in our jail life.

The Kitchen Committee had a most thankless task to perform, for it had to deprive us of a part of our daily rations. It was collected and stored for the four day feast for us and for the large number of ordinary prisoners also, whom we were allowed to entertain. Our month of preparation passed so quickly; and then one day, amidst beating of brass gongs (jail

plates) and dhols and loud meaningless shouts of a bunch of our youngest and most naughty comrades, the beginning of Puja was heralded, with the ceremony of 'Infusion of life' in the idol of the mother Durga. The beautiful idol had been fashioned by one of our comrades who was an expert hand at this art. The function of carrying on Pujah rituals fell on three comrades who took up the task very seriously. They belonged to that minority which consisted of devoted and ardent believers. In the face of their manifest devotion, other comrades in general did nothing that could in any way be construed to mean disrespectful or incompatible behaviour. But there is always exception to the rule. On the second day of the Puja, some mischievous fellows stole a part of the essential puja articles. When the matter was widely known, one of our theist comrades, who had felt greatly hurt, declared that he would go on hunger-strike, as a protest against the irresponsible and the shameless act. Their was a search for the culprits but they were not to be found. An ugly situation was developing till at the eleventh hour it was saved by the discovery of the stolen articles in a remote but open corner of the yard. We all thanked our stars, for that night our main drama was to be staged and we had feared that its enjoyment would be marred by the day's incident. The dramas, during the three nights proved to be the most important and enjoyable feature of our whole programme. Both the actors and the 'actresses' and the people in the auditorium were satisfied. In the middle class Bengali families, specially of the towns, training in dramatic art, music and dance etc., is generally treated as a sign of polish and culture. These faculties are assiduously developed. Most of us had in our outside life, participated in theatrical performances, or had been keenly interested in them. The dramas

were staged therefore, on a fairly high level. They turned out to be real live performances, and not mere apologies for them. There was some dancing too, but our dancers could be congratulated rather for their boldness, than for art, for they had never danced before. It was funny to witness their limping figures on the stage followed by the focus thrown by our expert electric light operator. Good or bad, our dancers were greeted with tumultuous applause at their finale when bowing 'gracefully' to the audience they vanished behind the wings.

During the daytime too, we had a round of entertainments. There were Burmese dances and concert, dagger-play and physical feats, sports and many other items. In between the amusements we had delicious dishes, served under the supervision of our kitchen experts.

After a crowded programme of five days our Pujah was over. We had enjoyed the festival more than we expected. We now craved for a change. Normal seriousness of our life returned. We began chalking out our programme and our daily routine etc., each with an eye on his individual needs and abilities. The old order was changing yielding place to new.

## CHAPTER IV

### RETROSPECT

In the new order of things studies and discussions formed the main feature. Our reading was, however, anarchic at this stage. It lacked a system, or a clear purpose. A few comrades would form a group and read jointly while many would study individually on their own lines. There was no uniformity in the choice of books. Some busied themselves with the pages of the ancient Indian History and culture ; others read modern European history. Several comrades who had been severed from their college life by their arrests, renewed their college studies. For our young comrades who had no opportunity to enter the university precincts, lectures on elementary biology, physics, and chemistry etc. were organised. The latest experiments and discoveries in these domains filled their minds with curiosity. An amazing variety of books on different subjects were read in succession. Cheiro's 'Palmistry,' Hazen's 'Europe since 1815,' Bertrand Russel's 'Roads to Freedom,' Liangli's 'China in Revolt,' Bernard Shaw's 'Saint Joan,' Saratbabu's 'Shesh Prashna,' Rabi Babu's 'Shesher Kabita'—such diverse books would be read by a single individual, one followed by the other. This phenomenon was not rare. It was rather a common sight. No doubt some of us were pursuing a definite line of critical studies but our number was negligible. The general trend was more like excursions in the intellectual domain. Such incoherent reading of our early days could not contribute to our general political advancement.



What, however, proved of great help to us, was the discussions of those days and our review of the past. Coming from different places, we had brought with us different experiences gained in our specific party work. There were some who had been sentenced to long terms for organisational activities. A few others had been charged for murder or attempt to murder, some were imprisoned for dissemination of revolutionary literature, while a large number had been convicted under the Arms and Explosives Acts. Again, the raiding of postal mails accounted for many convictions. Parties also there were more than one. Those coming from provinces other than Bengal had been members of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. The majority who belonged to Bengal had been mostly members of the one or the other of the four important groups—Anushilan, Jugantar, 'Revolting Party' and the Shree Sangh. The former two were the old pioneer parties of Bengal, active since the first decade of the century. The third group, as its name signifies, originated with the revolt of some members of these two parties. These persons had come together with the idea of following a more extreme programme. Shree Sangh also was of recent birth. One need not be surprised at the formation of these groups when the broad aims and the methods of the movement were the same. We have to seek the reason in the class-character and the composition of the movement. In the world history wherever a petty bourgeois class has endeavoured to form revolutionary cadres exclusively from within its own ranks, and carry on its secret conspiratorial activities isolated from the masses, the movement has manifested distinct signs of anarchism. Unco-ordinated scattered groups have functioned in the place of a centralized

organisation. Loyalty to leading individuals has dominated in place of allegiance to clear ideas, and sporadic actions have been witnessed instead of a planned campaign. Coming thus from various groups and with different convictions, it was at first no easy task for us to hold discussions with that degree of freedom and frankness without which they lose all meaning. The initial difficulty, however, was soon overcome. We realised that sooner or later we would be free once more to take our share in the country's struggle. We had to go out with clear ideas about the fight, the aims and the methods to be followed, and the forces to be mobilised. But how could we acquire a correct perspective of the future unless we critically surveyed our past and, from our general experience, detected our mistakes and weak spots?

So began the process of self-criticism. We became the judges of our own activities. For this purpose no better place could be had than the prison. In the jail we were far away from the din and bustle of outside struggle, or from the heat of a raging conflict. We could take a dispassionate view of things such as would have been quite impossible outside. Bertrand Russel in one of his books, analysing a revolutionary character observes that standing in the thick of a grim fight a revolutionary worker is infected with a fanaticism that makes it impossible for him to take an unbiased and objective view of things. But he has overstressed the point. We had, no doubt, in us a spirit that was akin to fanaticism but it was for the cherished goal and not for any particular method. It is true that our goal was not clearly defined. It was vague, and yet it was there. We stood for national revolution, for the liberation of our oppressed millions. Our very determination to reach the objective led us to judge ourselves and admit our mistakes.

For days together our discussions went on, not in general meetings in formal manner, but in informal talks in select circles, in small interchanging groups. During those hours we surveyed the whole past of our movement that began with the opening of the century. It had its definite phases. Our predecessors during the first decade had been moved by the ideas of a virile militant nationalism. The socio-religious features of the movement were more marked than the political. Shivaji Anniversaries and Ganpat Festivals in Maharastra, Rakhi-bandhan Melas and Kali Pujah in Bengal were so many outward manifestations of the same trend. During the second phase of the Great War years, the movement had broadened and taken roots in the peasant masses, specially in the Punjab. Large number of Sikh farmers had returned from America with crusaders' zeal to galvanise their fellow peasants, into an armed revolt. The Sikh soldiers were a major factor in the army. They were approached by their kinsmen and asked to join the Army of Revolution. The whole plan of the national insurrection, however, failed. The episode ended in hangings and shootings, court-martial in Meerut, Ferozepore and Dagshai and imprisonments in hundreds. The third phase reached its highest level in the Thirties which was a remarkable period. New trends were manifested. In Bengal the 'actions' on the lives of the President of the European Association, the Editor of the Statesman, and the Midnapore Magistrates revealed a new approach. The revolutionaries were protesting against the unprecedented repression on the people and winning wide public sympathy. A net-work of revolutionary youth associations was also spread all over the province. When the governmental tyranny was sweeping ruthlessly over the province, the revolutionaries replied in the

form of a district rising,—The Chittagong Armoury Raid. Outside Bengal, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association was gropingly moving towards socialism. It also had its allied youth organisation,—The Naujawan Bharat Sabha, all over Northern India. The Saunder's case and the Assembly Bomb case incident were activities of a new type. During this phase the urge for moving towards broader forms of struggle was clearly evident. But in the concrete national situation of the time, this urge assumed a form that the Russian Social Revolutionaries of the Eighties called 'Propaganda by Deed.'

From a survey and appraisal of this long history we became convinced that our exclusively petty bourgeois movement, and that too, of a predominantly secret character had reached its climax. It could not develop further. Our achievements had been disproportionate to the sacrifices. Much of our energies had been frittered away because our ideas had been vague, our plans had been of a conspiratorial character. We had not organised the masses, the driving force of a revolution. We had not even tried to understand them, as the first step towards working shoulder to shoulder with them in the common struggle.

We were realising our mistakes, but not without much pain and suffering. Sometimes when we had finished discussions, some one of us would march away from the rest to a remote corner and think to himself. Was it all for nothing that so many of our comrades fought and perished on the scaffold? The next moment he would reply, 'No, martyrdom never goes in vain. They had defied British Imperialism and broken its spell of terror. They had awakened their countrymen and inspired in their hearts self-confidence and a spirit of unbending resistance. They had left for us a noble tradition of iron will, supreme

self-sacrifice and dogged persistence. In the darkest hours of the national struggle their lives shall light the path and fill us with hope and courage.' With these soothing thoughts the comrade would march away. He would still, however, feel disturbed and agitated. I cannot forget a particular incident that happened in this connection. Three or four of us were engaged in a discussion when to our cell entered one of our young comrades. He listened to us and protested. He could not argue but his protest still grew in vehemence till in the end he could not suppress himself and with tears flowing down his face, burst out saying, "No, I cannot accept your views. They are all wrong. You are insulting our dead comrades." He then rushed out of the room and our discussion was brought to an abrupt close. This young comrade was one of the finest of our lot. He had been an active and daring party member in his outside life.

The conclusions that were being arrived at in the course of the discussions, were not immediately accepted by all. The number of those who agreed increased with the lapse of time till it could be said that we had helped crystallising a general conviction in our Andaman community.

This growing conviction, however, was of a negative character. Its positive aspects were lacking. With the realisation that the methods we had pursued in the past had to be abandoned, there loomed large the question—What next? What methods must we adopt in the future? What forces shall we organise? We had no definite reply. Undoubtedly, we believed that a mass revolutionary movement was necessary. But the notion was too rudimentary. What we needed was a clear insight into the problems of this movement,—the question of its strategy and tactics, its phases and its goal,

the correlation of forces and the immediate possibilities and dangers. In the course of our national struggle these issues had not been clarified yet by the march of developing events. It was the year 1933. In the country there was no C. S. P., or any centralised Kisan movement. The working class and its vanguard were yet isolated from the national movement. The Congress leadership had lost its rudder. Gandhiji had staked his life in his epic Poona Fast over the Harijan question. Political confusion prevailed. The news, therefore, that we got from the country through the columns of newspapers allowed to us, did not help us to clear the mist. When we looked to the international arena, there too we found no clear bold lead for an organised movement of the exploited classes. Disunity and confusion prevailed in the midst of which finance capital was resorting to its last desperate measures. Their arch-agent Hitler had emerged at the head of the brutal fascist dictatorship, marching over the corpses of thousands of exploited Germans. The mighty Popular Front movements and the anti-fascist crusades were yet on the anvil.

To gain the necessary knowledge and perspective we had only one way left open to us now—to take to serious systematic studies. From our analysis of the past we had found that it was the absence of revolutionary theory that had been our greatest drawback. We also knew that this theory was no product of a fertile, intelligent brain, but the generalised experience of the world revolutionary struggles, of the historic conflicts of the past and the present, waged in different political and economic conditions. There were the fundamentals of the struggles as also a mass of details, and we felt we must learn them all. We became once more diligent students—more diligent than ever we had been at our college and school desks.

## CHAPTER V

### UNIVERSITY

We became the students not of schools and colleges that we had left behind long ago, but of an university, our own creation, that was to equip us for our future life, that was to impart us revolutionary political education. But who were to be the professors? We had none amongst us who could claim to possess a versatile academic knowledge, combined at the same time with vast practical experience of mass revolutionary movement. But we were all members of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia. A large number of us had received university education. There were others who by continuing private studies had acquired knowledge, far better than an average college student. Some of us had ideas of mass movements, gained during our outside work in the Congress, youth associations, and labour unions. All these qualifications had to be combined to serve the general needs. We made the best of the circumstances and introduced division of labour. Thus, we had our staff of teachers and the ranks of students.

Our university career began. For the period of full four years that we were in the cellular jail, this formed the main story of our life. We had our holidays, forced and voluntary. There were brief episodes of clashes with authorities and also occasions of our periodic recreations—annual Durga Pujah and sports etc.; but after the termination of each holiday we would run to our classes, teachers and

students, with redoubled vigour. We studied as we had never done before. We all felt that the more we learnt, the better we were equipped to take up new tasks in the new forms of future struggles.

What would be our syllabus? That was the first question confronting us. Of a political university we had no experience. In our country, before we were arrested, there had been no Summer Schools of Politics or Peasant Schools such as, of late, are being regularly organised in various places. We had our Vidyapiths started in 1921 Non-cooperation days. But the training that some of us had in these schools did not prove of much help. Vidyapith education had been marked only for the definite nationalist orientation given to it. No comprehensive change had been worked out in the fundamentals and the details of the system. In a period when our national movement itself was in a state of flux and was being moulded and shaped by the developing events, one could not expect that the Vidyapiths would grow up to a full finished form. Both were closely linked together and progress had to be simultaneous.

We put our heads together, but could not draw up a clear detailed course of study. This had to be evolved through experience. As days passed on we recognised our defects and shortcomings and took necessary steps. The story of our four years of study was dynamic and full of changes. Our progress was not in a straight line, but it followed a zig-zag course. Many a time we deviated from our main line of studies, but on every occasion we came back, after having strayed in the bye-paths and learnt from the school of experience. We were like masses moving forward in their struggle through ups and downs. Our endeavours too resembled a struggle for learning



and unlearning things which trained us as soldiers of national revolution. Our studies acquired form with the lapse of time, till at the closing period, we believe, we had succeeded to raise them to a level that was quite suited to the needs of the nation's anti-imperialist work. We were, however, all the time conscious of our great handicap in that the education was imparted within jail walls far away from the scene of struggle. How could we forget it? For it was the factor that we discovered every time, as the root cause of our deviations. But where was the remedy? We were prisoners and no amount of efforts on our part could negate this central fact.

We all realised from the outset that the subject of history should claim our greatest attention. But learning of the historical details of different periods, of different countries of the world, without first acquiring an approach to it, a way of looking at it, could not be of much use, specially when most of the history books that we had with us were works of bourgeois authors who advanced their pet theories. Their way of interpreting events we had already been taught for long years during our school and college days. We had been told to view history not as mighty convulsions of class struggles, but as mere creation of some great men—the Kings and the Popes, the Generals and the Statesmen. The masses had no will, no role; they had merely to work and obey the dictates of their superman, who was placed high above them by an unknown destiny. Besides, this absurd philosophy of history we had sometimes learnt of the other theories, that the racial factor was the fundamental force behind history, or again, that the physical and geographical conditions determine evolution. We had first to unlearn these theories before we could become critical students of history, drawing rich lessons from the

pages we read.

The classes on philosophy and sociology were therefore started first. To begin with, the students, having been of different levels had to be divided for convenience in three categories. The members of the highest category were almost all ex-college students who had sufficient knowledge of general history and science. The method followed in teaching them had to be radically different from the one pursued in category No. 3, where the pupils were mostly ex-school students who had little knowledge of English and other subjects. The teachers had to face great difficulty in conveying to them in choice and simple language technical terms e.g., dialectical materialism, teleology, or ego. Besides, at every step elementary principles of natural science—physics, chemistry and biology etc., had to be told in a story form. The progress was, under these circumstances, very slow and we too, were not in a hurry, as we had plenty of time at our disposal. Besides, a comparative study of philosophy beginning from ancient Greece to the modern times could naturally not be finished early. We had to survey from Plato to Green and Bosanquet of the Idealist school and again from the eighteenth century mechanical materialists to the latest dialectical materialists. In the classes on sociology we had to go into details of history that had not been read till then by the average student. Our first classes on sociology and philosophy extended well over six months. From the first experience, however, we gathered that we could well skip over some unnecessary details that had been taught, without in any way affecting one's grasp of fundamentals. A more important lesson, that we learnt, was that a harmful tendency to grow academic was present in us which often concealed the purpose that had inspired our studies.

We forgot that we always needed to have a worker's approach rather than that of a professor. Our harmful trend was glaringly manifested in the classes when the students and teachers occupied themselves with hundred and one questions that could merely satisfy their intellectual curiosity but in no way help them to understand the main problem under consideration. In the classes would naturally crop up such topics as the theory of relativity, psycho-analysis, the latest experiments in physics and chemistry, or the startling discoveries in the realm of biology, and instantly there would be digressions and aimless discussions. James Jeans, Eddington, Huxley, Oliver Lodge, Freud, Marconi, Einstein, Darwin, or Haeckel—these were the favourite authors those days that interested the average student much more than those who had produced learned works dealing with immediate and acute problems of the struggle in our country and the world over. Books on dialectical materialism we had few and these were read and re-read by most of us.

Through this method of trial and error we had the necessary grounding in the two subjects of sociology and philosophy. We had recognised as cause of historical motion the march of class struggle,—a struggle whose forms and methods were born and developed from the definite conditions of the prevailing economy. But it is very difficult to acquire a correct scientific outlook in the case of a beginner who calls himself a believer in economic determinism. He often grows too mechanistic in his view of historic forces and incidents. The founders of the theory themselves were painfully conscious of this shortcoming of their over-zealous adherents and had openly acknowledged it. It was not surprising, therefore, that, armed with a dogmatic outlook, we, at times, interpreted our country's events and the history that

we read, in a most crude manner. We rushed to declare our opinion with a set of catch-words, not caring to detect the subtleties of each specific situation. Ridding ourselves of one defect we fell in the arms of the other. Thus, however, we proceeded in our enterprise.

We now took to more concrete studies. Classes were organised on world history, with greater stress on modern period, strategy and tactics, and on economics. It is significant that we had not yet taken up seriously the study of Indian History, politics, and economics as special subjects. Our general history classes proved very interesting. The whole world history, that we had in the past days crammed to memory, we were reading anew. The story was unfolding itself with new meaning. Incidents that had been simply passed over once, now appeared full of significance. We started the subject with introductory lectures on the march of human history, tracing it from its beginning in primitive communism to the world capitalist order of to-day. The different phases of the society—patriarchal, feudal and the capitalist, were discussed in full details of their rise and decay. How the whole evolution was a linked up chain and how from the womb of one economy that had outlived itself, another system grew up, was shown clearly to the students. These lectures ended with discussions of principles that would govern the world socialist society of tomorrow,—the new system that had almost been established in one-sixth part of the globe, in the land of the victorious workers and peasants. These lectures being over we devoted our attention to the epochal events nearer to our times—the great social revolutions of England, France and Russia, the Commercial and Industrial revolutions, the Imperialist phase of capitalism, and the chronic colonial

revolts. This second series of lectures was in a way learning the background of the post-War period—the years of profound changes that have transformed the whole of the world.

The classes on strategy and tactics that were conducted simultaneously were of a complementary character. Here we fixed our gaze on the mass-revolutionary struggles of different epochs and discussed their character and the causes of their success and failure. The heroic but unsuccessful struggles of the oppressed peasantry in medieval ages and after, the first independent working class movement in the form of Chartism in England, the 1848 proletarian struggles in France and Germany, the glorious and short-lived Paris Commune of 1871, the unsuccessful First Russian Revolution of 1905, the victory of the workers and peasants in the latter February and October Revolutions, the history of the First and Second Internationals, and the theoretical and practical aspects of the colonial struggles against imperialism,—all these were taken up one after the other. This course took a long time but the students never grew tired. On the other hand their interest increased everyday.

As a third subject Marxian Economics was taught and it is here that we failed to make our classes as lively as on other subjects. Amongst us we had no brilliant student of Economics, who could bring into the teaching, his clear knowledge of the working of bourgeois economy of our times, and thus create sufficient interest. We felt that our studies could be penetrating only if we combined our knowledge of the fundamental principles of economics as learnt from Marxian text-books, with a clear insight into the complex detailed workings of banking, money, and exchange, etc. For the lack of this latter knowledge, the students could not get a complete grasp of the

chronic phenomena of the world economic crises, though they understood the basic underlying features.

In concrete studies of these three subjects more than a year lapsed. When we had finished this course, we found that most of our academic trend that had been manifested in the early days had disappeared. From every category of our students came now spontaneous demands for still more concrete studies, of coming to grips with problems that would confront us in our day-to-day struggle in the country. All people now wanted to read of history that was in the making, as if before their very eyes, all over the world with a terrific tempo.

From the beginning we had formed a committee called Study Board whose function, as the very name signified, was to direct the whole studies. To it came complaints and reports from different classes. The demands of the students, their difficulties etc., were promptly communicated to it. Periodic teachers' conferences were organised by the board and in these sittings, suggestions were received in the light of the past experience, and new lines chalked out. The number of teachers was over thirty. They were divided in groups—each preparing itself assiduously to teach the particular subject assigned to it. Discipline in the classes was also enforced by this board and it proved a very easy task, for the students themselves were very eager to see that a system prevailed in the class hours. Both in the morning and the afternoon classes were held. On an average one student attended four classes for six hours. Some of the teachers were in heavy demand for their popular mode of teaching. Poor people ! they conducted the classes from the early morning till night, hardly getting time for their own studies. They were getting shattered physically, yet, they never murmured. Before the

zeal of the students their physical exhaustion vanished, as if by magic. The board ultimately intervened and prescribed the maximum number of hours that a teacher could take.

The division of students into different categories was done by the board. Periodically, advanced students were promoted to a higher category. All people did not start reading simultaneously. As an intellectual ferment was growing, more and more students, coming under its influence, were joining the classes. Special arrangements had therefore to be made. Classes and lectures had to be repeated for newcomers. To pay individual attention to comrades, who stood in need, the board arranged for special teachers outside the general classes. Great difficulty was felt regarding the large number of students who did not know sufficient English. During later days, they were not satisfied by mere attendance in classes where the teachers gave lectures, and taught from books in English. They wanted translations of important books, at least of some portions of them so that they could read for themselves. The board had consequently, to arrange for such translations but could not record much advance in this direction; for the translation work could be properly done only by the teaching staff which was already overengaged. The demand for more concrete studies reached the Study Board with a mass of suggestions. A teachers' conference was called, opinions of all students were collected and subsequently a new course of study was drawn up. The subject 'India' was now taken up. Indian politics and economics were taken separately. Indian general history we did not include in our course as we felt it unnecessary. All of us in the past had read enough of it and could now apply the method of interpretation to the broad facts that

we remembered. Besides India, we did not take up any other particularized subject but formulated specific questions concerning the Indian struggle and the world abroad. Some definite aspects of the revolutionary mass struggles also engaged our special attention. Post-War world history we now included in our new course.

In starting our classes on India we faced the problem of extreme paucity of books. Most of the recent books that we purchased were censored and withheld. An idea can be formed of the rigid censoring from the following books that were held objectionable :—

Glimpses of World History—Jawaharlal, Provincial Autonomy—K. T. Shah, India Analysed—all volumes, The Indian National Congress brochures on economics and politics.

Of the Indian magazines, we were getting only Mysore Economic Journal and Indian Review, Hindi Vishwamitra and Visalbharat. Bengali Prabasi and like magazines we were not allowed to subscribe. Much of the Indian news also was taboo. We were getting no dailies; of the Weeklies supplied the overseas Statesman, meant for European businessmen and bureaucrats retired from India, contained little political news. The vernacular Weeklies were only slightly better. The authorities, however, denied us even this meagre news by blackening columns after columns with press ink. This they called their method of censoring.

We were at our wits end to devise means for remedying this lack of literature. We purchased a number of books on modern India by reputed die-hards. There has been a crop of such books in recent years. Besides, we also procured government reports on Agriculture, Labour, Banking Commissions etc., R. T. C. reports, Times' Indian Year Book,



Government of India's Annual Administration Reports, Statistical Year Book and many other such publications. Gleaning through the pages of these works we endeavoured to compensate ourselves for the lack of authentic and standard works. But it was a futile attempt. Our classes, however, could not be delayed and these were started eventually with what poor material we had at our disposal. We began with the study of Modern Indian History at the Industrial Revolution of the last century that disintegrated the feudal economy and destroyed the self-sufficing character of the Indian villages. The first reaction in the form of a countrywide revolt—the Mutiny of 1857 was studied. The later phenomena of the birth and development of an Indian industrial capitalist class in the face of opposition from British capitalists, the rise of a petty bourgeois intelligentsia, the growth of a permanent landlord class as henchmen of British Imperialism, the pauperised peasantry exploited by the landlords, mahajans, and the government, an Indian proletariat coming into its own in the towns, the anachronism of medieval princes lording over the one-third of India—all these were dealt in their causation. In the class of politics we discussed how in the newer alignment of class forces our national struggle had evolved in its long course of fifty years, how the different classes participating in it had contributed their share in shaping its dominant methods and form, and how British Imperialism had adopted measures from time to time to thwart the national aspirations. The history of the petty bourgeois revolutionary movement since its inception, as also the story of the organised working-class struggle since the termination of the Great War, were treated separately. Lectures were also organised on current topics—ratio-controversy, communal question, and the new Indian Constitution.

For our reading of modern international history and politics we had sufficient number of good books, as fortunately the censoring authorities were comparatively liberal in this sphere. Perhaps to their intelligent thinking it occurred that it did not matter ; for after all it did not pertain to India, so they thought. We conveniently divided this subject into several parts and treated them one by one.

Apart from its significance of being most desperate counter-revolutionary measure of finance-capital stalking all over Europe, Fascism had peculiar features to interest us all. We were all members of the lower middle class and moreover, we were once students, the rank from which Hitler and Mussolini had recruited a large number of their active adherents. In the emergence of Mussolini and Hitler, and the working of their Corporate State and National Socialism we had to read the sorry plight of our class. Reading the vivid description of the June Massacre in Germany we felt great sympathy for the victims who, belonging to a class as our own, had once more made the wrong choice in history and stood on the wrong side of the barricade.

Our second part, the study of the Soviet Union, it need not be said, inspired us with immense hopes and courage, as it does all revolutionaries who in their countries are still fighting the battle for the destruction of a regime based on exploitation, and for the birth of a new social order. The wonderful story of the successful Five Year Plans, that were raising the standard of living of seventeen crores of people higher and higher, when, in the surrounding countries all over the world, crisis was deepening and thousands were dying of hunger and cold, filled our minds with visions of the future. We dreamt of 'The India of to-morrow,' of the future World Federation of Soviet

Republics.

Our third part formed the study of Imperialist governments, specially of Great Britain—the bulwark of world reaction. Gone were the days when a Briton sang that he ruled the waves. British Empire was fast disintegrating in the post-War years. With this perspective the character of its National Government, its home and the foreign policies needed a close examination. In another great imperialist country Roosevelt's 'New Deal' experiment was being worked out. Many were the bourgeois apologists who cried out that here at last was the panacea, that it would show how the world problems of hunger and unemployment could be solved within the framework of a capitalist society. From the facts we were to see how hollow were their pretensions. Nearer our home Japanes Imperialism was engaging our attention. Facing an explosive situation at home it was resorting to desperate measures for colonial expansion.

Our fourth part related to the world wide colonial struggles of which our own struggle formed a part. This study was full of lessons for us, and threw light on many of the pressing problems of our country. Our communal question had its parallel in the Arab-Jewish feud in Palestine as fomented by the government. The Wafd Party of Egypt, that had once under Zaglul led the whole nation in a relentless struggle, entered into a deal later and signed a treaty of concessions with British Imperialism. In another colony, Ireland, the renowned fighter De Valera had entered practical politics and was resisting a section of his own countrymen who still stood for a complete break with England and for an advanced programme of social reconstruction. Did we not face these dangers in our own national struggle? The history

of the Chinese Revolution, its episodes of 1925-27 and the later development again forced us to draw analogies. In the days of 1926, when the revolutionary forces of China were triumphantly marching forward, the upper classes, represented in the right Kuomintang, forced a break to safeguard their vested interests, and betrayed the struggle. The class organisations of the peasants and the workers which were not prepared for the sudden stunning blow went down before the offensive. Only later they emerged in outlying regions and for years a war against foreign imperialism was replaced by a tragic civil war at home.

The fifth part related to the application of United Front principle. In our own country, the Anti-Imperialist National Front was growing. The slogans of collective affiliation and democratisation of the constitution had been raised to transform the Indian National Congress into this solid front of all the national revolutionary forces. There was an amazing rise in the membership of the Congress. Masses in their millions were rallying under its banner. We had to draw lessons from the successful working of the United front tactics in different countries. We, therefore, studied closely the contemporary history of France and Spain where the Popular Front had been most effectively launched to check the tide of fascism. The valiant struggle that the whole Spanish nation waged, almost unaided, against the brutal offensive of the world fascist powers, moved us profoundly. We used to get news of the battle front on Saturdays in local Andaman bulletins. That day we used to be restless since the morning. When in the evening the eagerly awaited bulletins reached us, a huge crowd waited in the yards. Someone with a loud voice read out the Spanish news. Generally



# PRESS TELEGRAMS.

Chief Commissioner's Press.

DATED AT PORT BLAIR THURSDAY THE 15TH OCTOBER 1936.

INDIA

**Simla 13th:** In the Assembly, J. K. Mukherjee referring to the Home Minister's reply previously regarding the health of political prisoners in the Cellular Jail at the Andaman, inquired how prisoners came to have fractures, multiple injuries, contusions, sprains, wounds, abrasions and burns, while in jail. (Crack replied, I have no information as to how prisoners received injuries. The accidents probably happened either at play (football etc.) or at work in the shed or kitchen. Mukherjee asked in view of the prevalence among prisoners of pneumonia and other diseases, the Government propose to provide them with sufficient warm clothing and make the cells sufficiently damp-proof, and more sanitary. Crack replied that the Government do not warrant the view that pneumonia has been thronged asthma and rheumatism are prevalent among prisoners. Regarding influenza experience has been that each batch of prisoners from Calcutta brought influenza with them. There has however been a notable decrease in influenza cases. Adequate clothing is provided for the prisoners. Cells have good ventilation & are free from damp. Sanitary arrangements are satisfactory. A large majority of malarial cases are recovered. The Honorable Member is quite incorrect in assuming that malaria on the increase. Contrarily the percentage of convicts suffering from malaria has very much decreased. The improvement was achieved by draining swamps and by careful medical treatment of the prisoners. There are no patients in the jail who have been suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis from 1931. Very few prisoners who suffered from this disease were sent to India. All had an unsatisfactory record of health before they were sent to the Andamans. (Crack added, there is no increase in disease. If the increased number of prisoners taken into consideration in the period under review (the number of prisoners has risen from 100 to 300 nearly), many ailments, that is, dyspepsia and erysipelas which account for a large number of cases are trivial. The health figures of the Cellular Jail compare very favourably with those jails in Bengal where most prisoners came. Government is satisfied that the health of the prisoners in the Cellular Jail is a credit to the jail authorities.

**Shillong 13th:** The Governor and Lady Keane left for Cochet today where they reached this afternoon.  
**Simla 13th:** The Viceroy's Empress ordered that two more medals be ordered on the 15th November at 11 a.m.

Rome is authoritatively informed that the Palestinian Committee will not leave until order is completely restored.

Another day has passed without the opening of the urgent attack on Madrid and reports of fresh skirmishes around the capital indicate that France is not ready to order a general advance.

Following the suggestion by Prince Victor of Coburg when he was in England, that English cricketers should be second to raise the standard of Indian cricket, two players are being sent this year, and it is hoped that every provincial centre will have one next year from the middle of October till the middle of March.

**Zurich:** Florenz, head secretary of the Secretary for Scotland, Sir Geoffrey Collier. His death creates a Cabinet vacancy which may occur on a minor Cabinet reshuffle.

**Berlin:** Rumour after it has been spread by a conference held by Hitler at Berchtesgaden with Keitel and the Nazi regime. It is understood that Germany's policy with regard to the colonial question was discussed and it is believed that the conservative group which favours friendship with Britain won the day and it was decided not to force the colonial issue too much at present.

**Paris:** Franco's men filing arising from references to Hitler at the Communist demonstrations on Sunday has suddenly died down. It is now stated that the incident is regarded as closed by both parties.

**Madrid:** Government wishes to make public its gratitude to the Soviet Government for the dispatch of funds and food supplies, states a Government communiqué.

**Lisbon:** Plans concerning both the attack on Madrid and the Government thereof after its capture, it is reported, were discussed at a three hour conference yesterday between the insurgent Generals Mola and Varela. "The machine is now ready to start and is only waiting General Franco's indicated hour for a decisive attack" and Mola to a newspaper representative.

**Burgos:** An insurgent column has entered Oviedo and established contact with the defenders.

**Berlin:** German naval re-armament is proceeding rapidly. Shipyards at Kiel are working night and day. Ships being constructed at Kiel include a 26,000 ton battleship and a 10,000 ton battleship of the Deutschland type.

## The Bulletin

'We used to get the news of the battle front on Saturdays in local Andaman bulletins.' (p. 98).

## The Port Blair Island

To this remote island were exiled three hundred



it was of disaster and defeat on the side of our gallant republican comrades. Silently the crowd melted away. That night we would be so depressed. Many of us would not take their meals. We got agitated and disturbed. We would offer our silent homage and greetings. How we longed that we could be privileged to express our solidarity in a practical form, by enlisting in and fighting as units of the International Brigade. To the Spanish Fund we all wanted to contribute from the money that we had in our jail account but this opportunity we did not get. Similarly we were denied later a chance to send money to the China Fund. I am glad that recently my comrades got this privilege in their confinement in Bengal jails. In a letter to our *Rastrapati* on this occasion they expressed the revolutionary solidarity with their brave comrades in the Chinese and Spanish Fronts. Apart from Spain and France we had also to study the workings of Popular Front in the presidential elections of Czechoslovakia and America, in the Belgian bye-election against the Rexist leader and lastly in some smaller countries of Latin America. Till that time the National Peoples' Front had not been forged in China. It was in the making.

Post-War working-class history had to be read minutely. For in India the proletariat was growing politically. The impress of its ideology was clearly discernible in our national struggle. Our working-class movement had many currents and cross-currents and their significance could be gauged properly from an examination of the history of the labour movements in advanced European countries. In this course we gave special attention to the history of Labour Party governments in England and the betrayal of 1926 general strike, the post-War revolutions in Central European countries and the surrender of the reformist

leaders, the disastrous workings of Social Democratic Party's 'Lesser Evil' policy before the fascist offensive, the phenomenal growth of C. I. O.<sup>1</sup> as a rival to the old established A. F. L.<sup>2</sup> of the United States of America, the new technique of the stay-in strikes, and the Comintern and its national sections.

The 'Role of Petty Bourgeois in History' formed a special part of our course. Coming, as all of us did, from the ranks of the petty bourgeois class of our country, this study was of immense value to us. We picked up details from wherever we could get in history. The role of Jacobins in the French Revolution, the part that the Blanquists played later, the story of the petty bourgeois Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries in the three Russian Revolutions and the anti-Imperialist Student movements in China and Japan—were all dealt thoroughly.

By the time we had finished our new course we had reached the closing months of the year 1936. The air was thick with rumours. The constitution was to be inaugurated in the April next. From the trend of events we believed that offices would be ultimately accepted by the Congress. We speculated about our future. One thing appeared certain to us that we would be taken back to the country and that at no distant future. Some of the students who had not followed our courses from the beginning now approached the study board and insisted that special arrangements be made for them. They said that they were sure that in Indian jails they would not get facilities for systematic reading, for people would be scattered and confined in different places. Their argument was cogent and the Board consequently

<sup>1</sup> Committee for Industrial Organisation.

<sup>2</sup> A. F. I.—American Federation of Labour.



appointed a special staff to teach them. This time the method followed resembled somewhat the practice of our summer schools. A syllabus for six months was drawn up and within this period all the subjects that formerly the students had studied for three years, were taught in a concise form.

The study board now introduced some new features in view of the fact that everyone was then too busy in making up his individual deficiencies and had no time to read all important books, journals and papers that regularly arrived by every boat. Immediately a new book came, it was read over by a competent comrade, who later in a lecture of two or three hours gave a full review of the book, reading lengthy extracts from it. For papers and magazines different persons were appointed who on fixed days, gave, in a news bulletin form, all the important items that they had selected. It was our jail broadcast of news. That this practice saved much time of the students can be clearly understood from the following list of some of the books and periodicals that had been received little earlier. The journals were subscribed by us and continued coming regularly.

### *Journals and Papers*

London 'Labour'.  
International Affairs, London.  
World Review of Reviews.  
Foreign Affairs.  
Current History.  
London Times.  
Manchester Guardian, Weekly.  
New York Times, Weekly.  
New Statesman.  
Indian Review.



Land Problems of India—R. Mukerji.  
Why Socialism—Jai Prakash Narain.  
Federation in India—D. R. Lele.  
Indian Crisis—Brij Narain.

As our repatriation, we felt, was imminent, we inaugurated Hindi, rather 'Hindustani Prachar Sabha' activities. We felt that for a mass movement worker some knowledge of Hindustani was essential. A large number of Hindi Primers and Readers were hastily procured, and the Bengali comrades busied themselves with the learning of the alphabets. It was amusing to see them taking their lessons and speaking in a strange language—a curious admixture of Bengali and Hindustani. It was compulsory for them to endeavour speaking Hindustani during class hours. Our comrades who lacked knowledge of English asked the board to arrange English classes for them. The board realised that by no method was it possible for the student to gain a working knowledge of English within a few months. The comrades were informed likewise. But they, too eager to learn, grumbled that they were given no opportunity.

In the mind of the reader a question might have arisen as to how the jail authorities allowed us to continue our general studies on the lines described. But it will not be hard to discover the reason, if we remember the story of the early days—our hunger-strike struggle and the subsequent victory. The authorities since then feared to challenge us. They knew that their interference in our studies would be construed by us as the greatest provocation, and that it would meet with our determined resistance. They had once attempted, to force classes on us on the lines of outside schools and colleges, but, sensing our resentment, they hastily retreated.

Six months had hardly passed when we approached the period of our second and last hunger-strike in the Andamans. For four long years we had been learning and learning. Now the time came to act. From theory we had to go to practice. Just at this juncture, we read one day in 'Hindu' of the sad yet glorious end of Ralph Fox in the Spanish fighting lines of the International Brigade. Ralph Fox was a young intellectual and a leader of the labour movement in England. He showed us how revolutionary intellectuals have to realise their theories in practice. We thought—would we not be able to follow?

## CHAPTER VI

### TRAINING

During the last days of our studies we felt that reading alone was not enough. We should also develop some other faculties to be better equipped for outside work. It was realised that in the stage through which our mass movement was passing in the country a political worker above all had to be a good organiser and a trained propagandist and agitator as well.

But who was to give us lessons on agitational problems, the class organisations of workers and peasants, the trade unions and Kisan Sabhas and their technique of organising the toiling masses? The Indian National Congress did not represent any one class but was a common platform for all anti-Imperialist forces. Here the method of working also was, therefore, somewhat different. Then again there were ways of teaching the masses and of learning from them. The formulation of day-to-day grievances of a locality for partial struggles was an art. We felt that our inexperience and ignorance of these all-important aspects of the organisational work would prove a great handicap in the future, in the practical field. But we found no way out. There was none amongst us who was fully competent to guide the rest. Some of us did possess a little experience and some ideas on the subject but they were not sufficiently mature. We, therefore, reserved this part of our training for the future—the future, that sooner or later, was

to grant us the privilege of becoming students in the live practical school of struggle.

To become trained propagandists and agitators, however, we had some scope. We could organise debates and speeches, or write articles and thus cultivate the necessary faculties. We lost no time in initiating these activities on a wide scale, aiming at making each comrade a powerful speaker and writer. As in studies, in these spheres also, we formed our Debating and Editorial Boards that were to lay down the general line and direct its workings. The record of our development in the new direction was as interesting as in the case of studies. We steered our course here again through many deviations, alternately to the right and left, till in the end we reached the stage when majority of us could speak and write fairly well on popular and topical subjects.

Our 'School of Journalism' opened with the starting of a monthly hand-written magazine. What was to be its name? The Editorial Board invited general opinion and a number of suggestions reached it on the appointed day. Several names had been proposed—Masses, Spark, Red Star, Vanguard, Dawn, Call and others. Finally for our venture the name 'Call' was considered to be the best. In the foreword of the first issue, our editors, declared, that in the remote islands, behind our prison bars, had reached us The Call of the teeming millions and the fighting masses. To respond we deemed it a privilege. The discussions in the pages of the magazine were to clarify issues and train us in the art of writing. It was part of our necessary training for the future—for the Hour of Response.

Those whose suggestions were not accepted were much disappointed for they had come forward with many historical references, and arguments in their support. The name, 'Call' however, had tremendous

appeal for us in our specific situation, and its proposers carried the day.

The magazine had its English and vernacular sections. The first few issues came out in time in bulky volumes. The articles that had been written were too lengthy and abstract. An average article ran to 30 or 40 pages. A contributor was asked to write on Imperialism. He began his introduction of the subject with Industrial Revolution—the story of steam engines and the weaving looms, complete with dates and ended in a description of the contemporary world economic crisis. A mass of details and data were given. The treatment of the different aspects of Imperialism lacked proportion. The salient features were not brought out prominently. The style was too heavy. The particular contributor did not represent only himself; he, on the contrary, showed the general trend. As a consequence, we were not satisfied and decided to give a completely new direction to our enterprise. In the meantime another difficulty had arisen and it demanded an immediate solution. The form in which the magazine was issued, did not afford scope and encouragement to the large number of eager comrades who looked for the opportunity. The selection of subjects was such that only a limited few could write. Generally articles were invited on subjects of a wide range, e.g., The Russian Revolution, The Role of Petty Bourgeoisie in World History, Three Decades of Revolutionary Struggle in China, The Art of Revolution, Lenin, Trotsky or Stalin. Our general comrades could have written short articles on these subjects but they hesitated when they saw that the select few were writing on the same in thesis form, quoting various authorities and presenting an array of details. As a sequel there was universal murmuring and a clamour for

rearrangement of things.

The new scheme that was drawn up now was designed to remove the defects that had been brought to light. This time a large number of periodicals was started. The total number was over a dozen. Ten fortnightlies were started in Bengalee and one in Hindustani. The 'Call' continued as before.

Our new scheme was inaugurated in a meeting where the Editorial Board's spokesman explained the purpose in view and gave his own ideas on the art of proletarian journalism. The general aim that we had to keep before us, said the speaker, was henceforth to provide chance to all of our comrades. The new vernacular periodicals were to serve this purpose. The editors of these new papers had to keep in mind that they were to give such training to their writers that, while outside they could easily assist in the work of conducting the provincial left weeklies that were coming out in large numbers. The new papers were, therefore, to be completely topical in their contents. Important contemporary events were to be discussed in leaders and leaderettes. Minor developments and the news of the struggle were to be presented in forms of comments. Small topical articles had to be included. A page for statistical survey would be useful. The get-up and the arrangement of the different features were to be attractive. Proceeding, the speaker said that all comrades had to remember that they were preparing themselves to be writers for the masses. Their method of expression should be marked for its clarity and precision. Language must be simple and yet forceful. Theory was to be taught not as doctrinaire recipes, but day after day by its concrete application to the contemporary events. This method of teaching the masses was to be reflected in the writings. The revolutionary writers were generally to aim at convincing



and converting their reader and not to issue mere proclamations of their cut and dried views.

When the lecture was over, great was the enthusiasm of our comrades. They now only waited for the next fortnight to show how they had been able to follow the rules laid down. A fortnight passed and the result was out. It was definitely an achievement. The general level of the writings was satisfactory beyond our expectations. It did not mean that the writings were faultless. Defects were there and the task fell upon the Editorial Board to point them out. The Board devised a very interesting method of performing the work. It announced that as soon as the new fortnightlies come out, a judge would be appointed to go through them minutely. He would next announce as to which paper stood first and why. A detailed review would be given by him of all the papers, pointing out the best writers and their special talents. General merits and demerits would also be discussed.

Every fortnight the announcement of the result was keenly awaited. Each set of writers vied with the other to top the list. This system of introducing what we called socialist competition in our field of journalism, proved very stimulating. There was an amusing aspect too. Very often it was found that some features of the papers had been emphasised to an excess, usually the one which was pointed out to be lacking by the previous judge. Once a judge rightly remarked in course of his review that he had found the general language of the papers lacking force and vigour. He added that thoughts should be expressed with passion that must sway the readers. Next time to the Board's astonishment the papers came out with a language that best suited the demagogues. On every page one read revolution. There was a flood

of emotional outbursts. The writings were marked for the little solid substance in them, and, on the other hand, for the profusion of militant revolutionary terminology. When it was pointed out that things had been overdone and in future it was always to be borne in mind that facts must speak from the articles and the comments, another spectacle was witnessed. This time papers appeared as if they were statistical sheets, full of numerous facts and figures. On another occasion trying to carry out the instructions of the Board regarding attractive headlines, the editors acted as if they were the heads of yellow journals, outbidding each other. In an effort to improve the get-up of the paper, one editor once engaged our artists to do colour work all over its pages. Such was our story of earlier days through which we steadily moved ahead.

Most of the comrades had begun to take greater interest in the new journals. Readers of the 'Call' were waning in numbers. We now reserved its pages for the discussion of theoretical aspects of the important questions that confronted the national and international struggle. Special Numbers of the 'Call' were brought out on several occasions. The May Day, Spain Day, and October Revolution numbers proved as great success. Articles were written for them by our best writers after laborious collection of all available materials that we had in our libraries, in the books or the periodicals. Some literary journals were also issued and in their pages were discussed specially the progressive trend of the Bengali literature as manifested in the works of a host of young writers. But we had become too much of political creatures and failed to devote sufficient energies to our literary enterprise. As a result these journals had all, unfortunately, brief spans of life.

In training ourselves in the art of speaking we could not achieve that measure of success which crowned our writing endeavours. The atmosphere in which a speaker could grow up was singularly lacking and it could not be produced artificially. We had heard of an Irish orator practising his art before tree trunks, imagining them as his audience. But in our case, even standing before a hundred and more live human beings we did not become inspired to speak, had no feeling of that urge from within, which is expressed in the form of a powerful speech that sways the listeners. We became convinced that we could speak as effective propagandists and agitators only when we got chances of coming in grips with live fighting issues, in the midst of the real outside assemblies. Yet, we had to make the best of the circumstances and do what little was possible.

We made a start with debates on topical subjects. It reminded us of two of our debates, rather discussions that we had in our earliest days. We were too academic in our outlook at that time and in keeping with it, two queer subjects were chosen—whether it was absolute or relative over-population that prevailed in the days of food-gathering stage of society, and again, whether it was a conscious or an unconscious effort with which our ancestors of the hoary ages used their little sticks to get fruits from the trees. Through our studies we had now developed sufficient critical acumen to see the absurdity of such an approach. Our first subject this time, therefore, was a burning issue of world politics ‘The coming War and the Alignment of Forces’. It was an issue admitting of various formulations. Even renowned students of international politics differed in their views. It was no wonder, therefore, that we put forward a large number of propositions, almost each individual speak-

er coming forth with his own contribution. The discussion lasted for three days. Our first sitting continued for seven hours and we reluctantly adjourned it, only when the kitchen gong announced evening meals. As we were getting a good number of standard foreign journals, a mass of facts were cited in the course of the debate. Our Board found, however, that several speakers while looking at the facts took a superficial view of the international situation. They did not bear in mind the fundamental factors that governed the contemporary world politics. It was therefore, stressed that speakers in future should not rush to draw conclusions from day-to-day news and utterances that came in an endless stream. Some diplomat's hurried visits, recurring border incidents, granting of foreign loans, strong governmental protests, or thundering national pronouncements—these were not the exclusive material from which one was to draw conclusions about the future. In the debate, the role of the British Imperialism was the bone of contention. The majority opinion was declared in favour of the view that England could not remain sitting on the fence. In spite of all its pretensions, it was steadily working for the strengthening of the Fascist Camp, and, it was certain, that in a major war England would be seen allied with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The forces of reaction had their own contradictions too, which offered scope for England's manoeuvring to delay the war, in its own interests.

Our second debate was arranged again on a question of world politics. We discussed whether it was possible for the world capitalist powers to launch a combined offensive against the Soviet Union. Could they repeat the story of 1918-20? Due to the nature of the subject much passion was introduced in our arguments. Comrades who contended that the

possibility was not remote, were literally floored not so much by cogent facts and figures, as by the ardent and passionate advocacy of the other side. The whole affair proved very interesting and specially, the attempts to analyse objectively the strength of the two camps of Revolution and Counter-Revolution. The World-Economic Crisis, the emergence of Fascism, the huge re-armaments, the League of Nations, the Five Year Soviet Plans, the Soviet trials, and the rising wave of mass revolt in colonies and Imperialist countries—all figured prominently, while estimation of the respective fighting powers was made.

When these two occasions were over, we had to face the same problem that had confronted us in our initial stage of 'Journalism School'. Only a few comrades who could speak participated in the debates, and others merely listened to them. The latter were not satisfied, and rightly, too, for it was no training for them. The Board now made it a rule to pick up a few names from the general list, and these comrades were to speak first in the next debate. This innovation did not succeed. The new speakers felt shy and nervous. Confronted by their audience, they stammered a few sentences and sat down. To understand their position one must recall the experience if any, gained during his own maiden speech. We discovered that there was a particular reason that added to their hesitation. It was the fear that they were to be followed by comrades who would speak on the same subject citing many facts culled from their comprehensive knowledge of the issue in dispute. The Board decided, therefore, that, in future, these latter speakers should usually desist from participating in the discussion and leave the field open for newcomers. Contrary was the effect that was produced. The level of the debate became too low. The audience

felt bored and yawned; and in this atmosphere, our new friends lacked the encouragement that they needed. As in all our enterprises, we were learning in this sphere too, through a method of trial and error. Our experience showed our mistakes and made its rectification possible.

Another defect had also come to the fore. We realised that we were not discussing Indian issues sufficiently and were thus neglecting what was of prime importance. The Debating Board now completely changed the method. To give widest scope to all, it formed certain definite groups with a good speaker at the head of each. In these groups speaking for a prescribed time was compulsory for each member. This plan worked with some success. The members were overcoming their nervousness. In the general debates, which also continued to be held at intervals, the best of the new comrades were given chance. The Board was constantly impressing upon the speakers the need to endeavour upon delivering speeches of a fighting and at the same time of a logical nature. They were to guard themselves both from the ways of a fascist demagogue as also of an academic professor. They were being trained to work amongst the masses, and thus, their speeches were to be substantial, and expressed in the language of a spirited nature.

In the selection of the subjects too, a change had been effected. The most important issues of our struggle in India were henceforth discussed generally. On different occasions Congress Election Manifesto, the National Convention, the Anti-Imperialist Front in India, or the emergence of the Congress Socialist Party were the chosen topics. In course of these debates speakers could not support their viewpoints with as many facts as they did on international issues. As I have said, we were all along getting only meagre

news of the developments in the country. Besides, in India itself forces were moving with amazing rapidity; new organisations were being formed, new issues were raised; their potentialities, their dangers and possibilities were not yet clearly recognised even by our struggling people. Then how could we in our place of banishment take a correct view of the situation? We shot usually too wide of the mark, often to the extreme left. When we first heard of the birth of the Congress Socialist Party from within the ranks of the active and tried Congressmen, we were puzzled. We failed to recognise it as an inevitable development after years of mass struggle, in which the National Congress had failed to give the correct uncompromising revolutionary leadership. Instead, we readily thought that it was a manoeuvre, a mere tactic, adopted to maintain the leadership over the masses with left phraseology, when in action, constitutional methods were to be readopted. Analogies we had ready at hand, for in Europe socialism was in the air and its tremendous appeal was being used to serve the ends of even extreme reaction. There were 'Socialists' whose only aim in life was to fight every moment against its basic principles. Only during our later days we corrected ourselves and rightly estimated the immense revolutionary possibilities of the C. S. P. A copy of 'Why Socialism' by com. Jai Prakash Narain and several issues of 'Congress Socialist' that we fortunately received those days, helped us a great deal. It is unfortunate that our hopes about the C. S. P. that we cherished those days have not yet been fully realised due to certain unforeseen developments that we must all deplore. Regarding the Anti-Imperialist Front the majority of us believed that it would be formed by the coming together of the premier class organisations under a revolutionary

leadership. All India Peasants Conference, the United Trade Union Congress, the Students Associations, etc., came prominently before our view. We did not know then what great revolutionary changes had taken place in our greatest national mass organisation—the Indian National Congress, ever since the 1934 session at Lucknow. Then how could we recognise in it the growing platform of the Peoples Front? Later, we came back to the country and realised how wrong had been our ideas and it has been this consciousness in us, that has led everyone of the released Andaman prisoners to declare in his first public utterance, his unflinching allegiance to the Congress. Even while discussing the Election Manifesto we acted as unsparing critics and failed completely to see in it any programme for mobilising the masses for a militant struggle, and for transforming the elections into a huge anti-Imperialist campaign.

I am not ashamed to describe in detail our mistaken views entertained in these Andaman days. They were due largely to the prison limitations imposed on us. There was another and a powerful reason too, that I do not forget. We all formed in our prison an exclusive assembly of petty bourgeois intellectuals. And it is well known how in history this element has frequently failed to make an objective study of the situation. A swing to the right and more often to the left has been the general trend. It has been so difficult for a petty bourgeois to become a revolutionary intellectual. He has usually raised his intellect above the movement, and has grown dogmatic and arrogant. Ultra-leftism has been a malady from which the majority of them have suffered. Alert petty bourgeois intellectuals have been corrected only by the revolutionary workers and their struggles. It was not without reason that Lenin issued his famous



slogan for Bolshevik Committees—‘Eight Workers to two Intellectuals.’

Foreign subjects we had not tabooed. From time to time we discussed them also. Memorable was our debate on ‘The Future of Spain.’ We did not feel it as an artificial debate. We got inspired and agitated while discussing the fate of our own comrades—brothers and sisters, fighting so heroically on the Spanish revolutionary front, but falling and retreating before the well-equipped brutal mercenaries of Franco’s gang. I still remember how with glowing passion and almost with choking voice some of the comrades pleaded for a bolder lead and a greater assistance from Soviet Union—the base of the World Revolution and the acclaimed leader of the struggling peoples.

In our later days when Hindi classes were started, the Hindustani enthusiasts initiated Hindi debates also. It proved, however, too difficult for our Bengalee comrades. They could not manage to speak even passable Hindi, as the time available was too short and the scope limited. The language problem had to be solved in the general debates also. A campaign was once started against English speaking. It was argued that it had no use for mass workers. Whenever any debater spoke in English, he was greeted with shouts of ‘Hindi’ ‘Hindi,’ ‘Bengalee.’ The scene was reminiscent of the congress and other conferences. Ultimately English speaking was allowed and it was admitted that it had still a place in our political movement.

The Debating Board occasionally organised popular lectures by advanced comrades. The lectures on India since 1934, The New Indian Constitution, Faizpore Congress, and the ratio controversy were much appreciated.

There was another line of debating also which reminded us that intellectuals suffered not only from ultra-leftism, but from other maladies too. We had several questions over which controversy always raged. Two such issues were the character of the existing Indian Economy, and the historical possibility of transforming a bourgeois democratic revolution into a proletarian revolution. The Board fixed occasions for the airing of the different views. Those who were considered to be the leading intellects participated in these discussions. Every speaker stood before the table with dozens of volumes, for quoting extracts and authorities. The discussion went on for days. New political terms were freely coined. No sooner an eminent authority was cited, critics were ready to contradict by another quotation. In a jungle of details the poor 'rank-and-file' lost its way. The net result of the endless discussion was that confusion was worse confounded. Only one redeeming feature of it all was, that we became conscious of our harmful tendency of indulging in hair-splitting discussions, to enjoy a game of vain intellectual jugglery.

Our librarians had shouldered a thankless but arduous task. It was a regular problem as to how to serve with our little stock of books, the needs of general studies, debates, papers, and also of private individual reading. Ingenious methods were adopted to cope with the demand. Strictest rules were enforced for the issue and return of books, yet, there always remained demands unsatisfied. We had two main libraries. One was called the Jail Library. But it was a misnomer as the overwhelming majority of the books here belonged to us. Only about two hundred volumes had been supplied by the government and these too were mostly trash that did not deserve a place even in the second-rate railway bookstalls. In

this library we had a large stock of books mostly on belles-lettres. Complete works of standard modern writers of England, France and America as also the classics of the 19th century were all on the shelves. As a matter of course, we did not have, however, the works of the most recent radical writers. Yet there were enough good books for a person of literary tastes. Unfortunately, the number of such individuals was dwindling fast. We were getting more and more absorbed in political studies and had little time left to pursue a literary line. During our later days only, to get some relaxation, we used to pick up a standard fiction or a drama, now and then, and went through its pages. Bernard Shaw, Galsworthy, Romain Rolland, Anatole France, Upton Sinclair, and the host of 19th century Russian writers were our favourites. The Bengalee fictions of the modern rising writers, however, were always in great demand. For the general use in the reading rooms the government was supplying us with ten copies of the Illustrated Weekly and the same number of weekly Statesman. We requested the Chief Commissioner to provide us with copies of Round Table, Contemporary Review, Nineteenth Century, Asia, Literary Digest and other like journals as substitutes for some of the copies of the two weeklies. At first our request was granted but later the authorities, for reasons best known to themselves, changed their mind at the eleventh hour.

The rush for books in the library in which the volumes on politics, economics, history, etc., were stocked, was great. It was here, that our librarians faced enormous difficulties. All important books were issued not for days but for hours. One book would go round from morning till evening through six or seven hands. This method too, did not work for books of a purely topical nature. For instance,

we received a book 'Spain To-day' that had been written in the earlier days of the conflict. By the time it had reached the majority of our readers, several months had passed and the narrative portion had almost lost its value. Circulation of books by hours had one great disadvantage in that the reading of books was piece-meal, with breaks. One did not get the full pleasure of reading; he almost felt tortured at times when at the end of his fixed period the interesting book was abruptly taken away by the next claimant. But there was no remedy. Some of the latest books were in such great demand that they were not even issued to individuals but to groups for a limited time. Books on Modern India, Marxian Economics, strategy and tactics fell in this category. It was a sight to see the rush for a new book. On the day on which the entries of readers' names for the new book were to be made, scores of comrades would be waiting before the library cell long before the opening hour, pushing and jostling each other. Subject to the discretion of the librarian a book was to be issued in the order in which the entries were made. The scene forced one to recall the rush at the lower class ticket windows of our Indian cinemas. We had our reading rooms where journals subscribed at our cost, and the manuscript magazines were kept. Here too, early in the morning there was always a tremendous rush for registering the claims for different journals.

During our latest days, we found out a way of issuing the books that went a long way to satisfy the demand. The binding of each important book was removed. The book was then conveniently divided into several parts and circulated as such. To further aid circulation of some books that were perpetually in demand for class hours and later for

revision, hand-written copies, sometimes more than one, were made. It was a very tiring labour but it had to be done to satisfy the eager students.

We had a separate reference library also. The writers in the magazines and the speakers of the debate made its fullest use. During our later days we used to keep our new books here for a few days during which our fastest readers would finish them. Of the reference books, the Statesman and the Times of India Year Books and the Statistical Abstracts issued by the Government of India were found most helpful. We had also been presented with a set of Encyclopaedia Britannica for our jail library by our great friend Mr. Mohan Lal Saxena. The teachers made regular use of it.

The purchase of books and magazines was usually made from a general fund that was raised by liberal voluntary contributions. We had collected in this fund several hundred rupees. In purchasing books we had to take our risks ; for when they ultimately came, our censoring authorities often withheld them. During the closing period of 1936 and the year 1937 we were deprived of a large number of books in this manner. The following books from the list of intercepted matter give an idea of the type of books that were held objectionable.

France Faces the Future—R. Fox.

Final Crisis—Allen Hutt.

Chinese Soviets—Yakhontoff.

Behind the Spanish Barricades—Martin Lawrence

France To-day—The Peoples Front—Thorez.

League against Imperialism—Pamphlets on China and Palestine, 1936.

The Chief Commissioner took some pride on our high level of studies. It was because he himself was a well-read gentleman. He had once purchased

for us copies of the books 'Hitler over Europe' and 'Inside Europe.' When the Bengal Governor came to visit us in prison he told him of our taste and said that we needed standard books on world history and allied subjects. After Sir John Anderson's return we received a set of books passed by the Secretary, Bengal Government. We were surprised to find included in it 'Theory and Practice of Socialism' by Strachey, and 'Foreign Trade in U. S. S. R.' (Soviet Studies Series). We recalled how in the past the Bengal Intelligence Branch had even objected to some of our books on biology. Strachey's book is now banned in India. Such are the ways of the red-tape of the bureaucracy.

## CHAPTER VII

### REPRESENTATIONS

During four years of our life in Andamans, we had only a few visitors to our jails. Even our ordinary jail interviews were effected only five times during this whole period. The Government was satisfied, for it had all along been its intention to deprive us of all contacts with our people. The visitors that came, with the solitary exception of Raizada Hansraj, M.L.A., were members of the bureaucracy or Government's henchmen. In the country, agitation continued from the beginning for our repatriation. The Government felt its strength and to counteract it, sent its agents at intervals who on their return from the islands invariably sang loyal songs. They did their job well but unfortunately for them, the public did not give credence to their statements. Mr. Mohan Lal Saxena and some other leaders several times sought permission to visit the islands. On every occasion, it was refused. The authorities knew well, that if any one of them got a chance to see things personally, the whole Government game would be exposed in no time.

The first visitor to our jail was Mr. Sloane of the Home Department of the Government of India. The first hunger-strike had terminated a little earlier. The Central Government had been much perturbed over the turn of events. It deputed a new superintendent for us from Indian jails—a gentleman who was reputed in government circles for his tact in handling

knotty situations. To guard themselves better against any future trouble, the Simla authorities asked Mr. Sloane to see things for himself. On his visit to the jails, he was daily found closeted with the superintendent presumably giving him definite instructions to avoid a major trouble, at all costs.

After the lapse of a year came Mr. Narayanswamy Chetty of Madras. Mr. Chetty's zeal and loyalty for the Government were not unknown to us. Yet we decided to put before him in writing our demands and our grievances thinking that it would either force him to keep silent or to make public some details of the wretched Andamans' life. But to our surprise, we heard later that Mr. Chetty on his return lavished praises on the local administration and described our 'happy life' with copious detail.

Next year, in 1936, Colonel Barker visited the islands for the second time. A farce of general medical examination was held. We all stood in our yards in a long file and within a few minutes Mr. Barker had finished his work. He marched in front of us and stopping before a few comrades did what was an apology of medical examination. We had not the good luck to know later as to what long report the Colonel submitted to the Government on the basis of his painful labours.

The Government was feeling the growing volume of public agitation. It was forced to send now its Home Member on a visit. With great ceremonies arrived Mr. Henry Craik. The whole island was astir. There was a round of entertainments. As a part of the programme, our jail also was visited one day. These were the times when momentous changes were wrought in the country. The Government was loud in its pretensions. From Simla and Whitehall rained pronouncements. It was said that England



and India were 'Equal Partners', and that our country was to march towards sovereignty. People were not deceived by such declarations. They were mobilising forces, to wreck the coming constitution. We, therefore, seized the opportunity of submitting a representation (the text is given below) to the Home Member, incorporating therein a part of our national demands.

"Sir,

On the eve of the impending changes, we, the political prisoners here, are naturally watching the fast developing events on the Indian soil. Incarcerated, as we are, in this small island far away from the country, we are virtually cut off from the outside world except, in so far as we get a chance, now and then, of getting meagre information out of the few approved weekly papers. But this much we clearly learn that the people of India are pressing their demands for the release of all persons deprived of their freedom for participating in the political struggle, withdrawal of all repressive laws, and for the removal of ban on all political exiles. We strongly feel, it is incumbent upon the government to give effect to the expressed will of the people upon whose support it solemnly declares to stand. At the present stage, the government can have no valid reasons to keep the political prisoners in jail, to maintain the repressive laws or to keep restrictions on exiles. It may be pointed out, that nowhere in the recent world history, has any government ever been able to prove its sincerity to the people without fulfilling the unanimous and unequivocal demands of the people, on like occasions.

However presently we beg to draw the attention of the Government to our repeated representations regarding repatriation and uniform classifica-

tion—questions that have for years been agitating the minds of us all.

The grounds for repatriation need not be detailed here again as they have been exhaustibly treated in different representations from us and from various other quarters as well. Above all, the incarceration here, hundreds of miles away from our near and dear ones, we beg to submit, is extremely vindictive and in stating so we only echo what the Cardew Enquiry Commission appointed by the Government pronounced in unambiguous terms. A correct idea of the rigorous nature of confinement here, and of what great strain we are subjected to, can be formed, when it is learnt that more than one of us have lost their reason and were consequently repatriated; and several more amongst us are showing signs of imminent nervous breakdown. Again, so many of us have fallen victims to wasting diseases like tuberculosis, rheumatism, etc., and as a sequel, there have been more repatriations.

As regards the question of treatment within jail, a uniform special political class for all political prisoners, we hope, will be immediately constituted with provisions for a daily diet allowance of not less than Re. 1/-, for educational facilities including permission to sit for examinations, for reading all non-proscribed books, magazines, and daily papers—English and those in the Modern Indian languages, (such as *Statesman*, or vernacular dailies of Calcutta) for proper arrangements for suitable games, (football, hockey etc.), and for an annual adequate recurring grant for sports and books, and proper civil dress, etc.

We have intentionally refrained from repetition of local complaints, which may be known from mere casual reference to relevant documents as mentioned below. Still we have to draw your kind attention

to the fact that the release of many of us that has fallen due according to Andaman Remission Rules, has not been brought about on account of the absence of an explicit order from the Indian Government.

In conclusion we beg to reiterate that we are oppressed due to unwarranted rigours and penalties inflicted on us. We are sure, however, that the Government will, at an early date, give effect to the country's unequivocal wishes.

Dated the 28th April, 1936."

After a few days Sir Henry Craik was back to the hill-tops describing eloquently to a group of Simla journalists that there was a place called Andamans which was a 'Prisoners' Paradise.' Ironically enough, we were provided with a report of Sir Henry Craik's talks in our local news-bulletin. Gleaning from the columns of our newspapers, we found that the more the Government was stressing the beauties of the Andaman life, the greater was the suspicion roused in the public mind. On the Assembly floor a witty Congress M.L.A. suggested to the Government to move its seat to the heavens that it had discovered.

We were feeling that in the absence of concrete details, the agitation against the policy of deportation was much handicapped. We felt, therefore, relieved when it was announced that Raizada Hansraj along with Mr. Yamin Khan was coming to the islands. They visited us in October, 1936. Events by then had further developed in the country. This time, to our visitors, we submitted a detailed memorandum about the local conditions. We also sent a representation to the Government of India through them. We had put these documents into the hands of our visitors, when

we got news, from the local Bulletin, of Sir Henry Craik's growing eloquent once more on the floor of the Assembly. He had made a series of wrong statements consisting of perversions of facts. The 'Maharajah' had not yet left for the country. We hurriedly drew up a supplementary memorandum refuting the statement of the Home Member and submitted it in time. The text of these documents is reproduced below. The supplementary memorandum giving full details of our weights and ailments is omitted.

"To

The Secretary to the Government of India, Delhi.

(Through Raizada Hansraj, Esqr., M.L.A., & Sir  
Mohammad Yamin Khan, M.L.A.)

Sir

The occasion of the visit of the two honourable members of the Legislative Assembly to these islands, at a time, when India is on the eve of vast political changes and when things are developing fast on its soil, provides us with an opportunity for giving a proper exposition of our demands and difficulties, which might secure us against the usual misrepresentation by some interested parties.

In this far off island, cut off from the outside world, it is only meagre information that reaches us of the developments in India. We learn that there have been fresh pronouncements from Whitehall and Delhi, that the government values most the support of the people and that it stands to give effect to its declared will. Side by side, however, the Indian Government has opened wide the flood-gates

of repression. The press has been muzzled, speeches have been gagged, associations banned and persons in hundreds deprived of their freedom, for participating in the political struggle. This dual policy has widened the gulf between the people and the government. The nation, we beg to submit, can only judge the government from its deeds ; and pronouncements can have value only when they are promptly implemented by actions. We, the political prisoners, who are always one with the nation in its express demands, therefore, reiterate, that at the present time when from the press, platform and the floor of the legislature, the people of India are asking for the repeal of all repressive laws, withdrawal of ban on political exiles, release of all political prisoners and detenus, and restoration of the freedom of the press, platform and free association, and at a time when momentous events are being shaped by historic forces on the Indian soil, we believe, that it is incumbent on the Government of India to put the sincerity of its declarations to test by readily accepting, among others, these demands so unequivocally expressed by the people and thus accede to the people's will. We hope the government will discharge its responsibility to the people, by taking necessary steps as has been done in other parts of the world by governments in the face of analogous conditions.

We also beg to impress upon the government the necessity of :—

(a) The immediate repatriation to India of all political prisoners permanently incarcerated in the Andamans. The details given in the Memorandum will show that no amount of the so-called amenities can remove the effects of the enervating climate. Our life here, for all these four years, has been a story of endless trials and privations.

(b) The immediate introduction of necessary amendments in the Jail Code, in order to make provision for uniform classification of all political prisoners on the lines suggested in the representation to the Hon'ble Home Member, a copy of which is attached hereto.

We, also, take this opportunity to state that being incarcerated, we are deprived of the liberty of a proper exposition of our views and difficulties. It is a matter of great regret that the representations made to the Government by us have always been misinterpreted and the people have been often misguided regarding the views of those who are behind the prison bars to-day. As an instance, as to how the things are misrepresented we beg to state that on the occasion of the visit of the Home Member in April last it had been echoed from this island what the people of India had voiced as their united will. The said representation had expressed our fullest agreement with the demands of our countrymen as has been reiterated above. We noted, therefore, with considerable regret the press statement issued by the Hon'ble Home Member on his return to India, in the course of which it was stated that we had simply "petitioned for release." To what extent the press statement was far from the actual truth will be seen from the copy of the said representation. We also are constrained to observe that in the course of the said statement not only there was misrepresentation, but in addition to it, important aspects were suppressed.

Referring to the local conditions, Sir Henry Craik characterised the Andamans as "Prisoner's Paradise." It has been stated by him that the conditions of living here are better than those prevailing in any other jail in India and that we were all passing our days happily.

From our side, we beg to submit that the picture is just the reverse. Our impressions have been gathered through our daily and hourly sufferings of the last four years of exile, which was stated in writing to Sir Henry Craik. We are passing our life under the most depressing conditions, as the memorandum attached hereto will prove. We emphatically declare that to us, who are the actual sufferers, Andamans is not a 'Paradise,—it is the 'Prisoners' Hell.'

In conclusion, we hope that the government, at no distant date, will fully respond to the demands, so unequivocally put forth, by the people.

Dated the 13th October, 1936."

### *Memorandum*

(Depicting conditions, submitted by 239 political prisoners—all signatories of the appended representation).

Dated, the 13th October, 1936.

While challenging the Hon'ble Home Member's statement for the Indian press in which he characterised the Andamans as the 'Prisoners' Paradise,' we, the permanently incarcerated political prisoners, have, in the appended representation, pointed out that the case is just the reverse. It is a veritable prisoners' hell and through the present memorandum also, we intend to prove the same.

### *General Conception and Report of Ex-deportees*

Years before, while we were free, we had heard with horrors the tales of these tombs of the living. And later, while in the Indian jails, we learned much

more through ex-deportee prisoners, who described as to what these islands mean for the prisoners confined here. Our experience of four long years, we are here, only confirmed the painful impressions of the past and now we stand to voice the same. But the prisoner's voice seldom finds its way beyond the high stone walls surrounding him. The suppression of reality here, is further facilitated by the fact that this 'paradise' has rarely received a visitor and that too, when the pressure of the public opinion in the country became too insistent to be ignored. But even then, the facts were distorted by interested persons; the Hon'ble Narayanswamy Chettiyar, Sir Henry Craik and others may yet try, but the truth, we believe, shall certainly be out some day. It is with this hope that we are writing down these few lines to-day.

### *Cardew Commission and its results*

The system of transporting prisoners to the Andamans had, as it is well known, been stopped, following the report of the Cardew Jail Enquiry Committee out in, 1920. The Indian Member of the committee from Madras condemned the whole system as a relic of medieval times, opposed to all fundamental principles of penology. Evidence of several medical officers who had served in these islands, were cited by him to show that no amount of endeavour and expenditure on the part of the authorities could substantially improve the unhealthy local conditions that were due to adverse climatic and physical factors. The logic of truth ultimately prevailed. The settlement was condemned and the political prisoners were repatriated to the Indian Jails in 1926.



*Resumption of Deportation in 1932*

But, again, to our surprise, the practice of deporting prisoners to this island was resumed abruptly towards the end of the year 1932 ; the politicals again being the worst sufferers. Whereas, the ordinary criminals have the privilege of making a choice between the Indian jails and the Andamans, the political prisoners—men, whose only offence is that they aspired and endeavoured for the freedom of their country, for the emancipation of the suppressed and the exploited millions of the motherland, have been denied this privilege. With handcuffs and bar-fetters the first batch of politicals was brought to this place some four years back and since then fresh batches have been coming, swelling our number which is 310 to-day.

*Hunger-strike and the deaths*

Our life here is a tragic tale of sufferings and privations, which are continuing even to-day and parts of it we wish to relate here. At the very outset three of our comrades, namely

1. Mahabir Singh—P.I. 68, Lahore Conspiracy Case.
2. Mohan Kisore—P.I. 89, Swari Kanda case and
3. Mohit Moitra—P.I. 93, Arms Act,

had to lay down their lives in May 1933, as they refused to submit to the intolerable conditions prevailing here. Hunger-strike means a march to death inch by inch and 55 of our comrades had to choose this path. The conditions which forced them to it can be easily imagined. However, the story of our pains and protests reached the Indian shores. The feelings of our people ran high ; the Government too,

was perturbed, and ultimately, after the arrival of Col. Barker, sent here by the Government of India, the hunger-strike was called off on the assurance that our demands shall receive their due consideration and that jail conditions would be bettered. But later events proved that the assurance was all mirage. Certain amenities were granted to us ; but they were in fact pieces of cruel joke rather than kind concessions. Our conditions, far from showing any improvement, became worse with time. The stress and the strain of confinement in jail under almost unbearable conditions proved too much in the case of some of us, who to our intense horror, began to show signs of mental aberration and finally two of them collapsed into insanity. All that the authority did for them was to send them back to India under imposing and heavy escort. There are other cases of nervous breakdown still under treatment, but with no signs of improvement till now.

### *General diseases and repatriation*

Yet others, in the meantime, had been falling victim to serious diseases one by one, and no one knew whose turn would come next. Under the peculiar local conditions, tuberculosis had taken the heaviest toll. At first, the cases remained undetected, except for a record made of the general symptoms of breakdown and daily slow fever, etc.; and they were X'rayed and declared T. B. patients only when their conditions were past remedy. The authorities at this stage, picked them from their beds and with medical attendants sent them off to Indian jails, perhaps only to die there. The following comrades have till now been repatriated under such conditions to Indian jails :—

1. Mukul Sen, P.I. 7.
2. Prafulla Mozumdar, P.I. 38.
3. Budhu Sen, P.I. 87.
4. Jagat Roy, P.I. 39.
5. Mohit Adhikari, P.I. 110.
6. Nepal Sarker, P.I. 249.
7. Suren Sarkel, P.I. 307.
8. Nikhil Guha Roy, P.I. 72.

And those who stay here are perhaps no better. Only last week four of our comrades have been sent up for X'ray examinations of the lungs. Their names are :—

1. Keshab Samajdar, P.I. 341.
2. Keshab Prasad, P.I. 201.
3. Shashi Bhattacharya, P.I. 123.
4. Saroj Guha, P.I. 146.

Besides these, there are others showing the early stage symptoms and among them we fear the cases of :—

1. Sunil Chatterji, P.I. 119 and
2. Sudhangsu Sen, P.I. 148.

are developing into T.B.

Besides T.B. there have been many other diseases and there has been frequent repatriation on that account.

- (a) Birendra Roy, repatriated in 1932, on account of appendicitis.
- (b) Satya Bose, P.I. 64—in 1933 with inflammation of gall bladder.
- (c) Kamal Srimani, P.I. 241, in 1936 with kidney stone ; while
- (d) Mohesh Barua, P.I. 285, was repatriated on grounds of heart trouble.

Amongst asthmatics some cases are serious as of Ram Pratap Singh P.I. 111 and of Ajay Singh, P.I. 251.

Heart diseases attacked a number of us and at present :—

1. Dhrubesh Chatterji, P.I. 112.

2. Prasanto Sen, P.I. 234.

3. Rebati Saha, P.I. 196 and

4. Satyen Mazumdar, P.I. 369, are under treatment but showing no signs of improvement. Who knows what is in store for them? One of our friends has already undergone a surgical operation for piles. The cases of Kali Bhattacharya, P.I. 133, and Bejoy Chakravarty P.I. 315, are serious. Rheumatism has attacked a number of our comrades. The conditions of (1) Hemandra Chakravarty, P.I. 51, (2) Ranadhir Das Gupta, P.I. 22, and (3) Amar Sutradhar, P.I. 137, are causing anxiety. Dyspepsia and dysentery are, however, common diseases. Malaria and influenza have perhaps spared none of us. Approximately about one-third of the P.I. prisoners is suffering from eye-trouble, and the condition of Sheo Varma, P.I. 115 is serious. Another one-third of us is suffering from pyorrhoea and other serious diseases and are being treated by the medical authorities. Such is the general physical condition of us all here.

### *General loss of weight*

The lowering of the vitality of the P.I. prisoners is apparent from the general loss of weight. Official health returns, which, as a rule, fail to give a correct picture of the real conditions, will, at least, in this case, partly give a glimpse of the reality, if read with some corrections which would be necessary for any

ordinary chart. The corrections necessary in the official charts here are :—

(a) The weight taken as the starting point should be the weight at the time of arrest or conviction and not the one that is recorded at the time of the arrival in Andamans. The loss of weight taking place in the Indian jails and during transit in batches, when prisoners were actually caged near the boiler of the steamer, in that heavily choking and closed atmosphere, regularly handcuffed and barfettered in addition, and the weight lost in Andamans can never be considered separately. The Andaman authorities may not like to hold themselves responsible for the weight reductions taking place under other officials, but it is cruel and inhuman to wait for a further substantial loss to take place before considering it worthy of medical attention. The callousness of the procedure can never fail to strike the medical eye—only if it is not forgotten that prisoners are human beings who can claim the usual medical treatment meted to others. The case of Keshav Prasad, P.I. 201 and many others can be cited as they were the cruel victims of this callousness.

(b) It is a pity that it never struck the medical authorities that the weight of a person, its movement and proper significance can never be understood unless they are read along with the age of the person concerned. This is necessary because interests of a large proportion of the P.I. prisoners make that insistent demand. It is up to the government to take note of the fact that many, if not the majority of the prisoners, were convicted and sent here at a very tender age. If they had not been prisoners nobody would have questioned that theirs was the age of growth.

The fact that in many cases weight remains cons-

tant is no cause for comfort or consolation. It is with mixed feelings that we watch these young friends deteriorate into stunted, dwarfish and weak specimens of humanity and hear of communiques that pretend that all is well in the best of all possible islands.

Those amongst them who are losing weight, in addition, are or will develop into shrivelled little creatures—a living stigma for the British penal system in the Andamans.

(A supplementary memorandum is appended, giving details of the cases of dental and eye diseases as also of some representative cases of weight reduction.)

(c) A clear conception of the height-weight ratio that was in vogue in Andamans is necessary to understand how it cuts both ways. In the case of a person of small stature, it would never show the danger point even after he is dead. In the case of a tall man, it would not come into play for if he is under-weight according to the height ratio, this will be taken as normal for him.

### *Slow Fever*

Another ailment of serious implication, so serious indeed, that it would perturb any lay person, is that of suffering from regular slow rise of temperature. Helpless prisoners have no satisfaction in knowing that nothing effective is possible under the prevailing conditions. A chronic case disgusts equally the physician and the patient. A chronic slow rise of temperature, no matter, what is the cause, can never fail to arouse suspicions. It is not a thing to pass over. In such a case, talk of helpless legality adds insult to injury. It betrays an attitude which should be censored as immoral, to say the least.

*Significance of various ailments*

What else do the chronic pyorrhoea, asthma, and eye-trouble, and the prisoners' other ailments demonstrate except the one fact—that human beings have been placed where they should not be. It has no justification because somebody thinks it cannot be helped. It is no comfort to hear that we shall die together ; or that if we go mad we would do so together. This is a negation of human codes which no amount of platitude, publicity or lip sympathy can compensate for.

*General devitalisation*

The growing number and the duration of the acute cases, exclusive of the chronic ones, can again have only one meaning. It indicates progressive devitalisation. It indicates creeping of old age in those who are in years quite young. It indicates that they can no longer fight disease and infection as normal healthy beings should. Above all, it indicates rotting constitutions which become helpless prey to any sort of bacterial attack.

There can be only one meaning of the fact that the number in the convalescent gang is constantly swelling, presently embracing almost one-fourth of the total number, though many deserving are not yet in it. It is hardly necessary to point out that the happily mounting figures are no indication of any corresponding liberality in matters of extra food-allowances. Signs are there, which foreshadow a further decline of our average health and a growing seriousness of the situation. Convalescent gang experiment would not prevent what the medical

authorities apprehend—an extensive disaster in the future.

### *Climate*

No prison is a sanatorium and it would be too big a thing to ask the public to believe that a prison housed in a tropical island will differ from the usual prisons so as to be a paradise.

Why is it that the tropics have been the graves of those who were outsiders is a question arising now in our mind.

It is a commonplace of geography that the temperature oscillations in the islands are small. The effect of this lack of variations of temperature on health is simply devastating. It chokes the physical system and clogs the body machinery affording no acclimatization even under the best of conditions. The result is simply sapping of life and vitality every minute of our existence in the dark and dingy prison cells, in a tottering building which some of the members of the Cardew Commission thought to be uninhabitable. Some last-minute repairs are not enough for reclamation.

### *Rainfall*

The continuous rainy season—the downpour, the drizzle and the cloudy atmosphere, has an enervating effect on the health. The humid atmosphere and the continuous perspiration with little evaporation serves only as an additional irritant making us all desperately long for a cool dry climate, no matter, where. This experience of ours corroborates the medical evidence put before the Cardew Commission.



*Water-supply*

The rainfall provides us with drinking, cooking and bathing water. Ever dependent on the vagaries of the weather, the supply is naturally scanty; stored in bunds and the like it can never be delivered for consumption as water should be. A penal settlement is not big enough for filtered water, nor are the prisoners able to provide themselves with their own filter. The result is the frequency of digestive troubles, chronic constipation or dysentery among cellular jail prisoners in particular seasons. Skin diseases are extensive; so are the thread-worms.

The scantiness of the supply completes the picture. It is a well known fact admitting of no refutation. The question is, why should persons be brought here and then told that there is not water enough and good enough for human beings? The same difficulty when it concerns the hospital, becomes a serious problem brooking no delay about solution.

*Nature of the food question*

In addition to all that, what made this situation totally intolerable was the question of food. A place which depends for its food supply on distant main-lands can never be made to become an ideal place for prisoners' habitation by any process of logic. The supply, for the prisoners, it is well known, comes from the worst in stock. Not to speak of the market articles which are scanty, we cannot even pretend that we are satisfied so far as the vegetable and such other articles are concerned. They cannot be made better. We are convinced that the quality of the articles cannot be improved either by our complaints, or by the promises and attempts of the authorities.

What variety to expect in vegetables in a place which grows almost none and gets them from a great distance ?

### *Uniform classification*

The result is that even the so-called Division II prisoners cannot cope with the ravages of the climate. But the overwhelming majority of us are placed in Division III, thanks to some unknown and mysterious reasons. The Division III conditions require no great strength of imagination to understand. No wonder, the grim struggle of 1933 had the food question as one of the major causes. They were faced with the alternatives of a desperate demand for redress or of a slow march to physical ruin. The result of the strike was the introduction of a new diet scheme for Division III without any substantial improvement. It was done by high medical authorities, who were those days, the highest in Andamans. It goes on running for two and a half years ruining the health of unsuspecting prisoners, and producing annual quotas for repatriations. The majority of the Division III prisoners were suffering from deficiency diseases of one kind or the other. A look at the official charts of weight will conclusively prove and a list of repatriated prisoners will help.

The prisoners who were repatriated owing to tuberculosis were almost all Division III prisoners. It is never clear to us why political prisoners coming from the same social status and having been accustomed to the same mode of living are placed in separate classes. The vicious principle of dividing the political prisoners in arbitrary categories has been challenged by the numerous hunger-strikes of Division

III prisoners in all parts of India. We are of the opinion that political prisoners think of following the heroic examples of Jotin Das, Mahabir Singh, Mohan Kishore and Mohit Moitra only when there are sufficient reasons to make them desperate.

### *Interviews and letters*

There are factors other than the climate which add to the rigours and hardships described above. We have been confined in this small island hundreds of miles away from our homes. Almost complete severance of all ties with our near and dear ones, with our friends and relatives, has been forced on us. During all these four years, there were only five occasions when interviews were held between a prisoner and his relatives. Letters we are not allowed to write to our friends, even for the sake of money, books or other such simple requirements. We are completely segregated from the world. A glaring instance is afforded by the hunger-strike deaths during 1933. The country knew of the deaths of comrades Mahabir, Mohan Kishore and Mohit nearly a month later; and that too, when the government chose to give to the people some fragmentary details through a few lines of an official communique.

### *Nature of the Civilization in Andamans*

Outside the jail, there exists no large free population in the islands which can give expression to a healthy public opinion affording a wholesome check on the prison authorities; this factor alone had made possible for the local administration to inflict the barbarous punishment of flogging upon our comrades—one of whom was flogged on the very

next day of his being X'rayed as a T. B. suspect. Infliction of this inhuman punishment against which the whole civilised world militates to-day, and that too, upon a political prisoner on the sick-bed, could not evoke a single protest ; so dead is the public opinion here. To our knowledge, there is not a single public library in these islands that can cater to the needs of the enlightened readers. Questions like those of a public press or say an association do not arise at all. We feel that we, who have known of the culture and the amenities of the civilised surroundings, have been unjustly banished to these islands, where the whole prevailing atmosphere is just one of the medieval times. It is a cheerless life in dismal conditions for those who have to live here as exiles, with no change whatsoever. Our life is one long-drawn story of suffering from day to day.

### *The so-called Amenities*

The Home Member has proclaimed from the Assembly that the prisoners here enjoy many amenities which are not allowed to them in the Indian jails ; but curiously enough, he forgot to mention that these so-called amenities that we enjoy are but shadowy things ; and that instead of alleviating our sufferings, they add insult to injury. And many of the amenities that he has referred to are allowed to prisoners in the settlement outside, the public having no knowledge of them. The government had granted a meagre sum of money for our library which at present contains mainly our own books, and even this petty sum has been misspent in buying worthless second-hand fictions which do not cater to our tastes and are not read by us.

In many jails of India, we had been getting daily

newspapers and prisoners there, are still getting them but in spite of our repeated requests and even when we had tried to buy them out of the money sent by our relatives, permission was not granted.

Government have made much of the so-called football game allowed to the P. I. s here but the play is carried on in a field which is not much bigger than a maximum size tennis court and is supposed to be used by more than three hundred P. I's ; and the ball we play with has generally so many stitched patches that nobody outside would use it. And even this was bought by our own money, for the government has conveniently forgotten to make a grant for a football.

Such are the amenities that the government triumphantly proclaims we have got. Though all of them are worthless, the facts enumerated above show, that the government wants to mock at our suffering and will refer to those amenities for proving that we are passing our days in happiness and peaceful bliss. These much-vaunted privileges as mentioned, the visitors are welcomed to examine. We would request them to enquire into other advertised privileges and convince themselves as to what they actually mean for the prisoners here. We are confident that the impression that any impartial investigator will gather from this description and investigation of the so-called 'Paradise,' will be one and the only one that we have gathered so far. It is a hell admitting of no adjustment, or alteration that can transform it into a habitable place, not to speak of a 'Paradise.'

### *Our conclusion*

This is the Andamans over which Dewan Bahadur Narayan Swami Chettiar waxed so eloquent and this

is the Paradise of our Hon'ble Home Member! In concluding our memorandum, we make once again the emphatic assertion that for persons of flesh and blood, as certainly all prisoners are—this island is 'Prisoner's Hell.'

*Supplementary memorandum*

*"Dated the 18th October, 1936.*

A Rejoinder to the Hon'ble Home Member's statement before the Assembly on the 13th October:—

After all, our fears, as expressed in our memorandum dated the 18th October '36, have singularly come true. The Hon'ble Home Member has, it seems, begun a regular campaign of misrepresentations about the condition of political prisoners permanently incarcerated in the cellular jail at Andamans. The other day casting all sense of fairness and decency to the winds, Sir Henry Craik in reply to interpellations by Mr. L. K. Moitra in the Assembly, uttered things which, we are constrained to remark, are more of fiction than facts. Nevertheless, we are not surprised, for, as prisoners callously separated from our people, carried over to these far off islands and confined here behind the cold stone walls of the prison, we have lost all sense of surprise. We are wont to expect everything—from flat misrepresentations to flogging. The Hon'ble Home Member's statements, therefore, though a deliberate twisting of truth, evoked not the least surprise amongst us. We know what axe he had to grind and we congratulate him upon grinding it so well. Regarding the lot of misrepresentations, he has had to indulge in about us, we believe, that our previous memorandum shall serve effectively

to dispel and destroy them. In the present rejoinder, we only wish to point out few of the grossest distortions and falsehoods which abound in the Hon'ble Home Member's statement.

In the first place, regarding the general health of the P. I. prisoners confined at present in the cellular jail, Port Blair, Sir Henry Craik has tried to show that the health figures of the cellular jail compared very favourably with those jails in Bengal whence most of the prisoners came. But our own experience, we make bold to declare, ranging over several long years of confinement in Bengal and other jails in India, and also in Andamans, says that truth is just the contrary. We had been in the Indian jails, we had struggled and suffered there, and under very adverse circumstances meeting frequently harsh treatment, but we never fared so bad as we do here in the Andamans. Most of us came here in full youth of our life with all its accompanying vigour and vitality but to-day whichever face we look at, whatsoever person we examine, we find a pathetic paleness and physical debility of the old. In our memorandum appended hereto, we have given detailed statistics of the sick and the convalescents amongst us and they will tell only a harrowing tale of tragedy, to all persons with sympathetic hearts. In this 'Paradise' of Sir Henry Craik, we have repeatedly pointed out, the prisoners, whose only offence is that they aspired and struggled for the freedom of their people, for the emancipation of the suppressed and oppressed millions of India are put to such a strain that it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to keep body and soul together. Everyone, including the Hon'ble Home Member knows how and under what trying circumstances, three of us died here and more than a dozen were repatriated. A good

many lying on sick bed are awaiting the same fate.

And yet, in face of such glaring facts, Sir Craik almost unblushingly sings aloud that 'the government is satisfied that the health of the prisoners in the cellular jail is a credit to the administration.' And he is perhaps right, for has not our dissatisfaction been a satisfaction to them so long?

Further, the Hon'ble Home Member, adding insult to injury has remarked: "There are no patients in jail who have been suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis after 1933." But before our very eyes there are lying in the hospital and in the yards so many who are suspected to be T. B. patients. Who knows that suspicions may not be confirmed about some. Even leaving these cases aside, our attached memorandum points out clearly how some of us fell victims to this almost fatal disease and have been repatriated to the Indian jails. But the truth is most mercifully disfigured when Sir Henry Craik adds that 'Very few prisoners who suffered from this disease were sent to India. All had an unsatisfactory record of health before they were sent to Andamans.' Sir Craik must know that all the prisoners who come over here undergo a thorough medical examination before their deportation and that they are examined by the qualified doctors of the government. As for us, the political prisoners, the examination has been even more thorough and strict than in the case of ordinary prisoners. We had been medically examined firstly by the medical officers of the jails we were in, in India, and lastly by the medical board at Alipore Jail.

And it is after being certified by these authorities, as perfectly fit physically that we were allowed to be deported. There were many cases that were



detained by the Board at Alipore and elsewhere, and were not sent here at all or were kept back for as long a period as was necessary for the patients to recover completely; in certain cases for over a year. And yet the Home Member unblushingly asserts, 'All had an unsatisfactory record of health before they were sent to the Andamans.' What can be further from the truth? However, if for the sake of assumption, the Hon'ble Home Member's statement be accepted at its face value, did not then the doctors in the Indian jails and the Medical Board at Alipore do a criminal act by sending us to this place under false certificates? Why then the Hon'ble Home Member did not punish the culprits for the irreparable injury they have done to us, as also to the 'prestige' of the government.

The Hon'ble Home Member has further stated, "Regarding influenza, experience has been, that each batch of prisoners from Calcutta brought influenza with it." After all the strict medical examination as mentioned above, the prisoners are kept in the quarantine for fourteen long days. The prisoners are examined carefully on their arrival, and before being let out of the segregation, they are again examined and only when found fit, are allowed to join the rest. There has been only one instance when there was an apprehension of some disease (in 1934). In this case, the prisoners were not allowed to disembark and they remained in the ship for nearly a week till the medical authorities declared the prisoners perfectly free from all diseases.

We challenge the Hon'ble Home Member to examine the record of the Medical Board at Alipore and here, and prove the truth of his statement.

Another distortion is about the accommodation and the sanitation here. We have dealt with this in

detail in our previous memorandum. Here we wish only to point out, that the Hon'ble Home Member did not even take pains to peep into our cells, where we have to remain confined for the whole of the night even in the hottest season. If he had a look into them, we believe, he would not have perhaps been so bold as to distort the reality. The cells are in fact, too dingy, dirty and dark for human beings to live in. Centipedes are our usual companions there. The blocks are all old and rickety; the yards are too congested. Where latrines, kitchens, and the dining halls are close to each other, the situation can be best imagined. To the Hon'ble Home Member, the sanitary arrangement is, nevertheless, satisfactory, and why should it not be? Prisoners are so cheap these days for the government; it can have as many as it wishes and at any moment!

The Home Member's statement from the beginning to the end forms a story of grossest misrepresentations of facts, and militates against the records regarding the medical examination of prisoners sent to the Andamans.

Those who have seen the Andamans and ourselves here in this jail shall testify to it and our appeal to them, therefore, is that they let the truth out."

Our last visitor was Sir John Anderson. He came in January 1938. At first we decided to boycott him completely. He had been responsible for many measures of repression in Bengal. He had brought sorrow and misery to millions of homes. We could never forget his doings. At the eleventh hour we, however, changed our decision. We felt, that if we did not represent anything at that stage, we would be offering Sir Anderson wide scope to misrepresent us. We, therefore, submitted to him a short written representation as follows:—

“The occasion of Your Excellency’s visit to these islands provides us with the opportunity to place before you our demands and difficulties. We brought these to the notice of the government previously also, in the course of our representation addressed to the Government of India on the 13th October, 1936, a copy of which is attached hereto for your kind perusal. We reiterate that it is the duty of the government to respond at no distant date.”

The Governor of Bengal could himself understand our mood. He did not come to see our ‘file.’\* Only for a few minutes, he went to our jail library and had some talks with our Chief Librarian about our general taste in reading and enquired as to type of books we would welcome at government expense. With the departure of the Governor, our life was entering into a new phase. We were preparing for the coming hunger-strike.

\* A jail term used for the standing together of prisoners for inspection.

## CHAPTER VIII

### INTERLUDE

Our life of exile began with a hunger-strike and was brought to a close by a second strike fought on a broader basis and for larger issues. In the intervening period absolute calm, however, did not prevail. Minor clashes occurred again and again. The authorities smarting under their defeat after the first strike were constantly endeavouring to score a triumph over us, at least, in some petty conflict and drew thereafter, some solace for their wounded pride. This was the psychological background which gave explanation for the recurring troubles.

The strike of 1933 was a trial of strength. It had been our common experience that in jails when political prisoners were first admitted such trials became inevitable; these were forced by the authorities. If the prisoners went down, their lives were thereafter, made one of perpetual misery. They were deprived of even ordinary jail privileges and humiliated at each step. If on the other hand, they came out stronger and bolder, the authorities usually retreated and became considerate and accommodating.

From our first struggle we had emerged successfully and our jail officials for the time were completely transformed. To our requests, they would readily accede. Sometimes, even without our asking they granted us some privilege. In treatment, they were overcourteous. But we were not deceived. We

knew that they had their iron hands under velvet gloves.

We had not to wait for long to see them again in their true colour. It was in the year 1934. A batch of our comrades had arrived by the 'Maharajah'. As usual, we were eager to greet our friends and learn of first hand news from the country. But the jail officials stood in the way. They locked us all inside our respective yards, and then marched our new comrades into their quarantine yard. We felt aggrieved. One of us requested the warder on duty to allow him to go out. He had his intimate friends amongst the new arrivals. The warder instead of listening to his request, abused our comrade and also roughly handled him. When we rushed to the gate—as many of us were at a little distance—the warder safely locking the door ran away and was beyond our reach. The whole matter was immediately brought to the notice of the Superintendent. He sent for our comrade to the office and without even hearing him, got him fettered and locked up in a solitary cell. We at once sat down to decide our course. We were unanimous of the opinion that the superintendent's move was a feeler. If it was not resisted at the very initial stage, the officers would grow more audacious. We started a fight. With a demonstration we ceased to work. Our jail task these days was nominal and our step, therefore, was more of the nature of an open defiance. We refused to obey certain other rules also. The Superintendent ordered punishments on a mass scale. The majority of Division II prisoners were immediately declassified and transferred to III class yard. Our light, papers and games etc., were also stopped. The authorities said that their grant and continuation was incidental to our good behaviour. We had lately been permitted to

make some wooden chairs and racks with our own labour. These were taken away along with our wooden cots. The former were smashed and burnt in our presence. Our going from one yard to another was stopped. In the meantime, approached Monday the Superintendent's weekly parade-day. On such days ordinarily we stood on the file. We refused it now. The Superintendent was non-plussed. Was he to go forward? He hesitated. Instead he played a game of bluff. About 60 to 70 bar-fetters were collected and heaped under a tree within our sight. Ordinary prisoners were polishing and jingling them demonstrably. We were so amused when, that very evening, our Superintendent had his volte-face. All our punishments were cancelled and we reverted to the previous status. The comrade who was originally punished was brought back in our midst. Such were the ways of our new Superintendent, Mr. Upson who had come from the Madras Presidency. We enjoyed the whole episode as a pleasant break in our jail monotony.

Mr. Upson was succeeded by another Superintendent, Mr. Rosair of the U.P. Jails. As he was a medical man, he took charge of the hospital also. From the first day, we had conflicts with him. With peculiar notions in his head, he had arrived on the spot. When he went on his first round in the jail, he expressed his surprise and dissatisfaction at what he called 'lack of discipline amongst the prisoners.' He wanted us—political prisoners—to be always alert and humble in his august presence. What queer ideas! He always took pleasure in lending his patronage; but unfortunately, there was no political prisoner to oblige him. We had imagined that gradually he would have a grasp of the local situation and adjust himself to it. He, however, followed the opposite way.

He grew extremely vindictive and selected the hospital as the place for inflicting extreme hardships and at times humiliations on us. There was no end to his pin-pricks. Several of our ailing young comrades were the special victims of his maltreatment. These were the days of 1936, when we were busy with intensive studies. We were not in a mood, therefore, to fight but on the contrary, wanted peace. For we were aware, that once a fight started in jail, there was no knowing where it would end. Starting from a trivial issue a struggle often grew into one for revolutionary prestige and then its character became protracted and grim.

Our wishes did not prevail till the end. The Superintendent was going about saying with arrogance that he had come to our jail to write the last chapter of his life and it would be the story of taming the revolutionaries. Every day, he was making things worse for us. Finally, no choice was left open. We took the risk of discontinuing our studies for some time and started a general fight. We disobeyed jail rules and started not a hunger-strike but a protest-fast for three days. Communicating our decision to the Chief Commissioner through the Superintendent, we submitted simultaneously the following representation:—

“The Chief Commissioner

Sir,

Under circumstances of greatest duress and sufferings, we beg to place before you the intolerable state of affairs that have been forced on us in confinement here within the prison walls. On the occasion of the Home Member's visit to this jail, we had made written representations addressed to the Government

and had hoped for a favourable reply. Just at this juncture, arrived our present Superintendent. Ever since his arrival unnecessary hardships and fresh sufferings are being imposed on us every day. Endeavours are being constantly made to heap up on us indignities and subject us to varied forms of humiliations. The amenities and privileges that we were enjoying are being curtailed one by one.

Treatment in the hospital has become unbearable. Suffering patients do not at all get proper medicine, care and attendance. Instead of treating the ailing patients with the proper sympathy of a medical man, the Superintendent, who is as well our Medical Officer, takes pleasure in constant pin-prickings and in provoking us in the hospital. Moreover, he professes to treat the patients according to their past jail conduct. When complaints are lodged, instead of instituting a proper enquiry and removing the grievances, the Medical Officer evinces a most unsympathetic and curt attitude. A glaring instance was afforded a few days back when a patient trying to make a detailed complaint, was given a punishment in place of relief. Many of us though suffering, prefer keeping themselves away from the hospital rather than get admitted and undergo fresh rigours.

Hundreds of miles away from India, once a year we were celebrating Pujah here, and this time, that opportunity too, we are deprived of without reason. In the settlement even the ordinary prisoners are allowed to visit cinema shows and to celebrate festivals so often. In view of that the sudden curtailment of our facilities to celebrate a single annual festival, can be very well appraised in its real significance.

Water scarcity we are made to feel beyond limits; it is not even possible for all of us to have pro-



perly our usual daily bath. In kitchen management fresh troubles are arising daily. Letters that we were writing to and receiving from our friends have been recently withheld, thereby, rendering it impossible for us to get money, and books etc. from our friends. Books withheld by censors, as per rules, must be deposited with the jail authorities, but we find to our surprise that they are confiscated here. On a request being made, when the present S. M. O. acted as the Superintendent, a reference was made to Bengal regarding the deposit of money in jail account. We were informed of a reply received to the effect that ordinarily there is no restriction for deposits up to Rs. 40/-, and despite this information, the new Superintendent had allowed us to have deposits of Rs. 10/- only for Division III and Rs. 20/- for Division II prisoners.

We also take this opportunity to mention here that daily papers including *Statesman* that are supplied in U. P. jails, are not yet allowed to us. 'Current History' approved by the Intelligence Branch, Delhi, we subscribed for fifteen months but later, we were not given the permission to renew the subscription.

We have all along been trying to get matters settled and our grievances redressed by making representations to the Superintendent, but instead of giving patient hearing and effecting amelioration, the Superintendent at times curtly refused to see us. Many times he would not allow joint representation of our grievances. On other occasions when he saw us, he made it a point to impose indignities.

In conclusion, we beg to reiterate and draw your kind attention to the fact that we were experiencing hardships for a long time past and the recent encroachments by the local authorities added to them, have made things intolerable for us.

We beg to request you, therefore, for an early redress.

*Dated 15th September, 1936."*

Our first Chief Commissioner of the 1933-34 days had finished his term of office and was succeeded by Mr. Cosgrave. The European S. M. O. had also been transferred and in his place had now arrived Capt. Choudhary a member of the Indian Medical Service. Both these new gentlemen arrived in jail on the second day of our fast and heard our grievances. The government wanted peace, as has been mentioned earlier, and a settlement was, therefore, readily arrived at. Mr. Rosair felt his vanity wounded and growing peevish and sulky left the place quietly. So the 'last chapter' had been written ! On our part, we were glad that our fears had not materialised. The break in our classes was brief. We renewed our studies with redoubled vigour.

The stories of minor clashes are too many to be narrated here. Most of the troubles started over the medical arrangements. As years passed on in the islands, we were steadily losing our vitality. Several of us had fallen victims to T. B. In serious condition, our comrades were being repatriated one after the other, More than half of us were suffering from eye and dental troubles. We were, therefore, very sensitive on the point of medical aid. From the doctor's side, however, we met with callous indifference. At times the sight of our friends suffering acutely and the attitude of criminal negligence of the medical people, became unbearable. In these circumstances, fights were precipitated. As a sequel, no permanent improvements were made but for the time being only, things were bettered.

Kitchen was another sphere where troubles were frequent. The rations supplied were of the worst quality. Division III prisoners were entitled to get fish thrice a week, but the authorities were always irregular in its supply. Funny were the pleas that they advanced. At first, for several months, they said that a party of fishing experts was being formed. Next, for another few months, that a fishing boat and a net were being arranged. Fishing and its arrangements became a popular joke. When we got tired of hearing their excuses, we insisted that either fish was to be immediately supplied or we were to be given a substitute. Now came the crowning piece of the joke. The authorities wrote a letter to the All India Food Institute, Coonoor, and in reply were told that groundnuts will have the same nutritional value. Accordingly, one day worm-eaten nuts were supplied to us. We refused to accept them. Subsequently, the whole thing was settled. We were to get fish or butter regularly.

An interesting line of argument was advanced by the jail officers whenever we asked for any privilege. It may be remembered that we had been declared P. Is, i.e., permanently incarcerated prisoners. Now if we asked for any facility that was available in Indian jails, we were promptly told that those rules no more applied to us as we were P. Is. Several times we pointed out, that in U. P. and the Punjab jails, daily paper was allowed to 'B' class prisoners, but to no effect. Next, when we demanded some privileges that were enjoyed by ordinary prisoners in Andamans the officers observed that they were helpless, as they were guided by definite instructions from India Government, and by the precedents of different provinces. The treatment, however, was not uniform in various provinces. When we, therefore, requested for an

amenity available in U. P. or the Punjab, the reply was given that majority of prisoners belonged to Bengal and its practice had, therefore, to be followed. If on the other hand an extension of Bengal facilities was asked for, the officers refused and said they were primarily to act on rules laid down by Simla. This constant shifting of ground was made most shamelessly.

In course of the repeated conflicts, all forms of jail punishments were awarded to us. The common and usual forms were the stopping of our interyard communication, outdoor recreational facilities and cancellation of remission. Once we were refused the grant of full facilities regarding the annual Durga Pujah. We protested and did not celebrate the Pujah at all that year. Several times, we heard that arrangements were being made in a lonely island in Nicobar for segregating a considerable number of us, who were thought to be the ring leaders. Such a policy had been followed by the government in case of detenus, with the opening of the Deoli Detention Camp. We, therefore, believed in the possibility of transfers there too. We speculated regarding the to-be-transferred, the life that awaited them in the new place and the effect that would be produced by the transfers over the intellectual life of the cellular jail. Later, we found that it was all unnecessary. Our apprehensions were groundless. The whole story was a canard set going by the authorities for obvious reasons.

Of the punishments most barbaric were the floggings that were inflicted on three different occasions. Three of our comrades were awarded stripes. The reader will be surprised to know that the last of these floggings was carried out after the mass hunger-strike of July-August 1937 when the attention of the whole country was riveted on the Andaman political pri-

soners. The news was completely suppressed by the authorities. On all these occasions, we felt extremely disturbed. To be made naked and tied to the flogging frame was an experience most painful, not because of the physical suffering but for the torment caused to the mind at this outrage on human dignity. Then we remembered, we were prisoners of an Imperialist government. In this very jail, it had flogged, years back, our predecessors one after the other. Why not then receive stripes at its hands and thereby cement our bond? Was it not the proud privilege of revolutionary soldiers to march from victory to victory through greater tortures and sufferings?

## CHAPTER IX

### SOCIETY

Political workers in their social life present some special features distinct from the lives of ordinary citizens. These are almost unique when the workers are detached from their field of action and confined in prison. For four years, in Andamans, we formed a small community. It had its history, not only political but social also. The latter had again its general and particular aspects. To view it, properly, a peep into the background is essential.

With a few exceptions, we were all young men assembled in the distant islands, cut off from our intensely active life. But this life had not been of an all-round character. It was exclusive, purely political. We had been transformed, as a consequence, into an abnormal set of creatures. Since our boyhood, the majority of us had come in contact with politics, had been initiated into our party circles. Once entering a group we were absorbed more and more in its activities. Gradually we lost touch with the general life around us. We lived in our homes, read in schools and colleges. Yet, all the time we were there as outsiders, as strangers. When our ordinary young friends used to play and make merry in the evening hours, we usually gathered in some fixed spot to hatch a plan and disperse when it was dark. To the enthusiasm of our school and college friends over a football match, a new drama or a love film we were indifferent. We had our own thoughts, our own sphere. We

felt depressed or elated as our hopes or fears materialised regarding the activities of our 'circles'. We walked about with a glow in our eyes, an expression in our faces that clearly demarcated us from others, in the view of a keen observer. We had no round of picnics and excursions; instead, there were rifle shootings and political meetings. At a period of life when others of our class were gay, free and carefree we were grave and sober having shouldered responsibilities that related to questions of human life and death. In the midst of such a life, we were growing old in our very youth. But did we repent it? No. We knew that we had no right to seek pleasure when all around us the life of toiling millions was a story of frustration, of colossal waste.

We were, however, not ascetics, indifferent to pains and pleasures of life. We had our cravings for a full, rich and beautiful life. We had our individual tastes for music, paintings and flowers.

When we arrived in the Andamans, paradoxical though it may seem, we were glad. Our repressed life did get there some scope in the individual sphere. We were reviving our youth. In the corridors groups would burst into laughter over some boyish prank. The midnight stillness would be broken by the ringing happy voice of a singing comrade. Were not these, signs of our being taken back to the days that we thought we had left behind for ever?

In our outside life, we had never an opportunity of coming together in such large numbers and with plenty of leisure. We, therefore, made the best use of the privileges that we had earned since the first hunger-strike. General social life was organized in all directions. Games, music, drama, painting or sports, —nothing was left out from our programme. With our fast deteriorating health, and within the prison

walls, it would have been impossible to continue our intensive studies and debates etc. for long, had there been no recreation of a diverse and rich character. Without it, many more of our comrades would certainly have broken down physically and mentally.

Games were the most popular item and they were such as all comrades could participate in. After reading the whole day long, we literally ran to the playgrounds in the evening hours to join in the different sports. Football naturally occupied the central place. The spot, however, that was cleared in the yard No. 1 and served as our playground, was too small. It was a little bigger than the tennis court. The ground again was rough and full of stones. Nothing deterred us from playing, however. We had to make the best of the worst. As playing eleven-a-side was impossible we usually managed seven-a-side. The next problem that had to be faced was how to give chance to two hundred of our comrades who were football enthusiasts. We introduced three daily rounds of half an hour each and thereby provided scope for about fifty persons. The rest had to be disappointed and seek some other opportunity. The only other outdoor game that was arranged by the authorities was volley-ball. Another about forty comrades were absorbed. But what about the rest? A good number of them engaged themselves in hard physical exercise regularly. Some comrades played Indian games, 'Kabadi' 'Daria Bandha'. Still, a large number of us was left out, who had no option but to roam about in the grounds and take sides in the games that were played. Our sports committee arranged football matches quite frequently. On these days, the entire unemployed army of our comrades thronged in the grounds and took active sides as spectators. With loud hurrahs they cheered their respective teams and



favourite players. The game was played with a fairly fast pace, and as the ground was too small, the players had heads cracked and arms fractured on over a dozen such occasions. It must be said to the credit of the players, that these repeated injuries only added to their zest. They enjoyed running risks. We had one lifer\* comrade as one of our best half-backs. Due to years of long incarceration, he had been physically shattered. Yet on every match day, we found him playing. He used to take some stimulant before the play but it did not help him always. On several occasions, at the close of the match, he dropped unconscious and we carried him out of the grounds. Some spectators rivalled the players in the matter of taking interest in the games. During two or three tournaments, they brought out a sports wall-paper. They had their editors, reporters and cartoonists—a complete staff. Their paper was posted on a big wooden board in the playground. Great was our rush to it, to read the previous day's 'news' and to find which unfortunate player had fallen victim to the unsparing cartoonist. We had running shields played on knock-out or league system. These shields we had made ourselves. One of them was solemnly named the Hunger-strike Memorial Shield. In front of our jail there was a big full-size playground. Its use was never allowed to us despite our repeated requests. For competition, we formed our sporting clubs. The life-term prisoners who numbered about seventy had a Lifers' Association. The contest between them and the non-lifers combined evoked the keenest interest. On the days of the match, from morning till evening the yards resounded with cries of 'Down with Lifers.' In the matter of cheering, seventy were

\*A jail term used for prisoners sentenced for a life-term.

pitted against more than two hundred. It was an unequal contest. Not so in the game, however. It was often played drawn, for two or three days successively.

For indoor games we had little time excepting on sundays. When heavy rains set in and it became impossible to play outdoor games for days together, our Sports Committee arranged for indoor competitions. Chess, carrom or cards were played usually.

We had a large number of athletes amongst us and they naturally made the gymnasium a very attractive place. A parallel and a horizontal bar had been purchased at government cost. Many other equipments we procured ourselves from general subscription. We had our boxers and wrestlers. Their contests were always watched with great zeal. There were special days for the demonstration of physical feats. On one such occasion, the jail officers brought a car inside and our experts gave a miniature circus show. Motor car stopping, chain breaking, passing of a loaded cart over the chest, hammering a heavy stone over the chest, and bar play were the main items. Jujutsu tricks and dagger play with the help of our 'home'-made tin daggers, were shown on two or three occasions.

Our annual sports was a gala event. To participate in them, a number of our comrades held regular practice for the full preceding month or even more. They were candidates for the trophies that the organizers had received as gifts or purchased from subscription. On the sport days our whole community turned up in the sports grounds of yard No. 1. Blindfold race afforded immense pleasure. As the space was narrow and the 'blind' too many, a pandemonium ensued. The contestants beat each other. Some rushed headlong among the spectators, others

stumbled and fell flat on the ground. Pole jump and tug-of-war proved two other exciting items. The sack race was another interesting feature. Very often, some fat, bulky fellow was forced to get into the sack. His movements caused much amusement. Once it happened that one such poor comrade could not get up at all and was still rolling on the ground when everyone else had completed the course and touched the finis line.

In the early morning hours, usually about 50 to 60 comrades took training in military drill. They had their distinct uniforms and badges. At first, they had with them fairly good wooden imitations of rifles and with these, the 'march past' and such items of their parade looked imposing. During later days, these 'rifles' were taken away by the jail officers and as substitutes only small bamboo sticks were given.

Our kitchen at times became an additional field of recreation. After the first hunger-strike, we had been allowed to combine the kitchens of Division II and III. We pooled our rations and had common cooking. Only for a few months, however, owing to some unhappy developments, there were separate group kitchens. In our common kitchen, our expert cooks came forward to show their skill. With the poor rations that we were supplied with, they worked miracles and entertained us with dishes that were most favoured outside. Jalebi, Rasgulla, Sandesh, Samosha, Polao—all were prepared on different occasions. Objectively, they were often mere apologies. All the same, we relished them with gusto and congratulated our chef.

In the beginning, the annual Durga Puja formed the biggest of our festivities. But there was evolution in this field. Our new celebrations came to the fore. They were of a political nature. The Russian Revo-

lution Day Anniversary later became our chief annual event. Great was our joy and enthusiasm. We held our meetings, feast and rally for the day. Unlike Pujah, however, we had to celebrate the events without the knowledge of the authorities, and we managed to do it well. In like secret manner we observed other revolutionary days—May Day, Spain Day, and Anti-Constitution Day etc.

The story of the dramas that we played is also dynamic. The usual social and historical plays receded in the background. Our dramatists wrote out several topical plays and these were staged with greater success. To the jail officers, who did not know Bengalee, we said we were having social plays. The first of these depicted the transition in our lives in prison. The second related to our hunger-strike. The last drama was the most successful, in it the plot was woven round the life of the Indian workers. There were scenes of brutal tyranny of employers, of the workers' awakening and resistance and of arrests and shootings. We were so much encouraged by the performance that we immediately decided to have our next drama about Spain. But our plans did not materialise. It was 1937 and it proved to be our last year in Andamans. On one occasion, we staged a congress conference, complete with our Jawaharlal, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Satyamurti and other leaders. There were trade unionists, peasant leaders, raw peasants and workers. Our Pt. Jawaharlal opened the conference with a forceful plea for United Front. He was questioned and heckled. There were cries of 'Shanti Shanti.' At the end of the proceedings, there was slight scuffle too. Slogans and counter-slogans were uttered by rival sections. This whole function was organised by our Debating Board to give an idea to the general comrades of a conference

atmosphere.

Sundays had special significance for us. Tired by a crowded programme running through six days of the week, we eagerly looked forward to sundays for relaxation and for some variety of enjoyments. On that day, we were all in a holiday mood, everyone of us keeping his appointments. Wherever we went, we found songs, games and entertainments. Our mirth was in manifestation everywhere. Our music gatherings were also held generally on these days. We had four or five stringed instruments with us. Our comrades who could play on them assembled together in select circles and had solo performances. On some of these sundays, we staged caricatures and magic shows.

In course of all these recreational activities, varied were the talents that were discovered amongst the comrades. I pondered, how, in the wider society thousands of talents went unrecognised and undetected. How many born geniuses silently sunk in their graves in our extant society! Art and science were deprived of their rich contributions for the only reason that they were poor and had no opportunity.

The description of our social life would be incomplete without mentioning of certain manifestations of petty bourgeois traits that at times disturbed our individual lives and caused us intense pain. If our society had its bright aspects, there were certain unhappy dark features too. Fissiparous tendencies, 'jail politics,' intrigue, malice, mudflinging, or squabbles were frequently in evidence on the surface. In the earlier days these manifestations were natural, for those were the times when we were undergoing a radical change. By the impact of a revolutionary ideology, our old relations and loyalties were breaking. We

had all come from different groups. These were now, disintegrating. How can one expect that this stage of transition could be traversed without pain and bitterness? Personal and group relations were bound to be strained; disturbing recriminations had inevitably to be faced. Unfortunately, however, the deplorable factors did not disappear with the termination of our early transition period. These persisted till the end, sometimes with great virulence. In these later years, however, we were not overwhelmed, not so profoundly disturbed as before. Our new scientific outlook that we had acquired, now came to us as our refuge. We had learned to see reality in its face. We realized, that no amount of pious wishes could transform men who were essentially moulded and shaped by their material environment. In this frame of mind, we started analysing the causes that lay at the root of the virus; and it did not take us long to discover them. Once we found them out, we felt less tormented. We accepted things as necessary evils.

The main reason that we discovered was the peculiar conditions of our exile—of a life of stagnation and fearful repression. We were all young men full of energies feeling an urge for ceaseless activity. But where was the scope? The existing was too limited and one-sided. Few were the opportunities when we could seek the joy of creative individual activities. No wonder then, that one's individuality often slipped to unhealthy directions. Our environment not only starved us spiritually but mentally too. We lacked even most common things of human life—the articles of elementary needs. Is it strange that under these circumstances, lack of large-hearted spirit was often witnessed? Reading the stories of the life of political exiles in foreign lands, we found that ours was no

exclusive drawback. It was the common history everywhere. We read in Krupskaya's 'Memories' how Lenin got sick and disgusted of the cramped personal life that exiles led in Paris and Switzerland under conditions of forced inactivity. He always flew from them and sought protection in solitary quarters. From other books we learned of Siberia, where several eminent Russian revolutionaries avoided each other's association. Our serious thinking and reading about the aspects of exile life, lightened our burden and helped us conquer our depressing moods.

Whenever there were clashes with the authorities, our disruptive and other tendencies almost vanished. We became one solid body facing the enemy and forgot our small dissensions and differences. How happy we felt at such moments after periods of stress and strain. On the days when some batches of our comrades were repatriated to the country on medical grounds or for release, we again felt this dominating sense of revolutionary unity. To our sick friends we bade farewell with our most earnest wishes for recovery. Many were the comrades who could not restrain their tears. I still remember vividly the touching scenes amidst which Phani Nandy of Chittagong Armoury Raid Case was separated from us at Andamans. We did fear but did not know that day that he would part from us so soon, for ever.

Of our rejoicings for the prisoners that were being repatriated for release, there was no limit. We felt they were going, privileged to take their share in the active struggle. In farewell meetings, we read addresses to them expressing our revolutionary greetings and warmest good wishes. We told them how eagerly we would wait to learn of the cheering reports of their activities. With emotion hardly subdued, the departing friends gave short replies

pledging their services to the country's cause—the cause of the poor and the downtrodden. Our whole community followed them to the jail gate on the day of their departure. When they had gone, we returned with slow steps thinking to ourselves—they were reading so long, now have they gone to act. But when would we get our coveted chances?

Monotony and regimentation of lives are two greatest curses of prison life. Jail rules do not view the inmates as separate individuals but as a herd, to be driven all along with a common iron rod. In Andamans, to lessen monotony our social life and political activities came to our rescue. But how to fight regimentation? Amidst us, we had people of different tastes and different temperaments. These were brought together in little families that had gradually grown up within our community. No purpose was, however, served. These little select circles, of artists, songsters or poets found disappointment gaping at them at every step. There was no scope for the flowering of their group individualities. Slowly the families melted away, their affinities did not bear fruit for lack of nourishment. It was a cruel reminder to them, that they were prisoners.



## CHAPTER X

### ON THE EVE

It was the year 1937. We had passed three years of our 'University' life. We had been diligent students of dialectical materialism. In books of history, economics, or politics, we had read it. In our debates, lectures and papers we had discussed it. We now felt tired and restless. How long can one go on studying revolutionary philosophy without hurling oneself in the thick of the fray? Historical materialism that we were studying was not a mere theory, it was above all, a guide to action. It did not only explain the past and the present, it did also teach how to act for the future. Theory and practice were indissolubly linked up. The call for fight against iniquities and against exploitation, was inherent in dialectical materialism. That is why one found Marx and Lenin, its greatest propounders, not only as brilliant theorists, but also as undisputed leaders of the revolutionary masses.

Our restlessness grew all the more due to events happenings around. The battle drums were being beaten. In Spain, in France, and in Abyssinia the people were fighting, men and women, old and young—all united, vigorous and bold. We felt like smelling the smoke of gunpowder and thirsted for front line trenches. But were we not prisoners? Our high cold stone-walls rudely reminded us that we had limitations, that we were fettered.

But we were determined to act. In the country, there was a tremendous upsurge of the mass movement.

Widespread peasant riots and struggles spoke of the seething agrarian revolt. Workers' strikes were many and protracted, often rising to political plane. Under the Congress tricolour millions of our hungry and naked toilers had marched to the polling booths. Congress to them was the hope of their deliverance, and a call for struggle against Imperialist blood-suckers. There was hope ; there was life everywhere. Every mail boat brought us news of the developing struggle. We felt at times, as if it was raging just outside our prison walls.

We resolved we would not sit silent. No matter, if we were prisoners ; we will find out some means to link ourselves up with the struggle in the country. In our distant islands, we would raise the flag of revolt. We would become the soldiers of a remote front.

How could we act ? What should be our demands ? These were now the concrete questions to be discussed. One thing was clear that we could take up only such national issues that at least, distantly touched our prison lives. If we raised broader general questions unconnected with us, we would fail to mobilise the continued support of our people. In that event, it was sure that tremendous pressure would be brought on us 'to save our lives for future struggle.' There was, however, the instance of the epic Poona Fast of Gandhiji. But we concluded, that we could not draw an analogy from it.

By common agreement, we decided to base our fight on the issue of civil liberties. India Government was adopting increasingly fascist methods, while at the same time, it indulged in tall talks of 'partnership with the people,' of responding to its declared aspirations. It had imposed the slave constitution on the unwilling people and was impudent enough to

call it a forward step towards India's ultimate goal.

From our prison front, we declared that it was a huge lie. The nation would expose it. We too, would expose it as its humble units. It was the month of July now. The Constitution had already been inaugurated in the April last. We saw no reason for delaying action and as our first step submitted the following representation to the Viceroy :—

“Sir,

On several occasions in the past, we, the political prisoners confined in these distant islands, made representations to the Government, drawing its attention to certain specific demands of our people, that were so insistently expressed, concerning the thousands of our countrymen, who stand deprived to-day of their liberties, for having participated in the struggle for emancipation. We have been waiting so long, hoping, that the Government would not fail to do its duty in showing a ready response to the declared will of the people. Our hopes however, have been belied, by the developing course of events. Yet we deem it necessary, at this juncture, when the new Constitution has been inaugurated, when the volume of the said demand has grown in the press and in the platform, when a clear mandate has been given by the people to their representatives to reiterate, that we are one with our countrymen who demand from the Government an honest policy that logically follows from its latest declarations from Whitehall and Simla. We do not know, however, if the Government, to accede to the legitimate demands, awaits forms of sanction other than the mighty and unequivocal popular will. Declarations have been made by the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India in which solicitude for the people,

and an earnest desire to co-operate are manifest. At the same time, however, we witness in the country the grim spectacle of a spirit of repression pervading the whole atmosphere that is forcing our comrades to take recourse to hunger-strike in protest. We mention here the cases of comrade Jogesh Chatterji, who went on hunger-strike last year and of comrade Sachin Bakshi who is on hunger-strike these days in U. P. jails.

Under Regulation III of 1818, the Criminal Law Amendment Acts of Bengal, Assam and other provinces, more than 2,500 citizens including some of our sisters are being detained behind bars without even the semblance of a trial. Under what inhuman treatment they have to pass their days can be guessed from the reports of several suicides and of cases of insanity which of late, cast a gloom over the whole country. Hundreds of our brothers have to waste their valuable years in the prime of their lives in internment, under most humiliating conditions and hardships. Again, in prisons, all over the country are confined, in adverse circumstances, hundreds of political prisoners, for their having taken a share in the past, in the country's fight for rights. Their political status is not recognized and the treatment meted out to them is vindictive to the extreme, against all canons of modern penology. In foreign lands, thousands of miles away from the land of their birth scores of India's sons are pining to return but are invariably denied this most elementary right belonging to a country's citizen. In the teeth of popular opposition, the system of penal settlement for political prisoners has been reopened in the Andamans since 1932, and as a sequel more than 400 (at present the number being over 300) political prisoners have been transported to these islands that can be fittingly

termed as 'Prisoners' Hell.' The attached memoranda give graphic details of the evils prevailing here fighting against which three hunger-strikers—Comrade Ramrakha in Great War years and Comrades Mahabir Singh, Mohan Kishore and Mohit Moitra in 1933, heroically laid down their lives.

This policy of country-wide repression, of the deprivation of liberty and its curtailment for thousands of individuals, goes counter to the government's declarations for ushering in a new regime based on co-operation and public good-will. We beg to point out, however, that it is never too late for a government to take steps to bridge the widening gulf between the people and itself. We, therefore, feel that it is incumbent on the government at this stage, to accede to the following national demands without the least delay, which have been voiced by us also in our previous representations to the Government of India :—

1. Declaration of a general amnesty which should mean unconditional release of all detenus and state prisoners and of all convicted political prisoners.

2. Withdrawal of orders of internment, of ban on exiles, of restrictions and directions on political workers and institutions, and repeal of all repressive laws.

3. Permanent abolition of the system of deporting political prisoners to the Andamans and consequently immediate repatriation of all political prisoners from the Andamans.

4. Framing of permanent rules and regulations, as part of Jail Code, for the treatment of all political prisoners in a single class, providing a standard not lower than that of the present Division II prisoners, with added facilities for intellectual requirements.

In the end, we assert once more, that it is incumbent on the government to prove the sincerity

of its declarations by immediately acceding to these demands. We hope that the government will not fail to do its duty and will not tax our patience any further.

Dated, the 9th July, 1937.”

As we had amongst us prisoners belonging to different provinces and the issues concerned the whole of the country, we simultaneously approached the Hon'ble Prime Ministers of different provinces. In Bengal and the Punjab, communal cabinets had entrenched themselves. In most of the other provinces, puppet ministries were functioning. We approached these cabinets with the object of helping the growing agitation about us. We had also hoped, that we would be able to get our documents published in the nationalist press. We made some arrangements but these failed, as we came to know later. The following are the extracts from the communications addressed to the Honourable Ministers :—

“You are aware that tremendous popular movement is sweeping the whole of India, demanding the liquidation of the extant atmosphere of repression and that the people of India in press and platform have been demanding for a long time past the release of all those incarcerated in prisons and detention camps for participation in the national struggle of emancipation, the removal of bans on exiles and the abolition of the Andamans Penal Settlement for political prisoners.

The inauguration of the new constitution has not led to any diminution of the agitation, but on the contrary, it has been accompanied by a wider insistence on the fulfilment of those demands, thus proving that they come from the inner core of the heart of the people. We hope a regime claiming to base itself on

the popular will would fulfil them.

As the attached copies of our representations to the Government of India will show, we, the political prisoners incarcerated in the Andamans, though cut off from our motherland, had been urging for a long time past, upon the Government of India to do its duty by meeting the demands of the people. Unfortunately, all our efforts have been in vain.

The new constitution has been inaugurated by proclamations for a change of policy on the part of the government. It is incumbent on the ministers to prove their responsibility and sincerity by immediately acceding to these demands and thereby implement the announced change of policy."

When we submitted these documents we had resolved to follow them up by a mass hunger-strike. For we had no other effective method of struggle open to us. We believed that if at least, a few of us, succeeded in courting death and baffle the medical authorities this time again, the anti-constitution agitation would be raised to the highest pitch. This and other political aspects of the struggle were discussed for days together.

There were arguments and counter-arguments and it was not surprising that much heat too, was engendered in that connection. Our strike was going to be of a purely political character and we all felt that a wrong approach or an incorrect move would be suicidal. Everyone, therefore, was very keen to express his opinions and put them forth with as much force as possible. The bone of contention was the time factor. One school favoured the immediate launching of the strike. The other view was that we must await the outcome of the constitutional dead-lock and begin when the Congress Ministries were formed. General debates were organized. But this time, it

was no mere discussion as of the past. We were thrashing out a live political issue. In the meantime, news reached us that the impasse was over. Puppet ministries had been removed and in their place had come Congressmen returned by the mass of peasants and workers. Our discussion was now meaningless. We agreed, that no further time was to be lost. In coming to this decision the analogy of the Popular Front government of France loomed large before us. When the Blum Government first came in power in 1936, there was an unprecedented wave of strike all over the country. The workers demanded what was incorporated in the election programme of the 'Front Populaire.' The two hundred families of France leading the reactionary forces of the country had to retreat. The government feeling the power of the teeming masses behind it, carried out boldly its election pledges. The strikes were called off. They had emerged triumphant. In our country, in six provinces, Congress had driven out the reactionaries and just held the reins of office. In its Election Manifesto, Congress had declared the restoration of civil liberties as one of its main planks. It was affirmed, that it stood for the unconditional release of all political prisoners. We, therefore, believed that by going on hunger-strike on these issues, we would strengthen the hands of our popular Congress ministries. We did not think that the analogy of France would hold good till the end. We knew how circumscribed were the powers of the ministries and what mockery the grant of responsibility actually was due to the arming of Governors with unlimited special powers. We argued that this aspect of the constitution might help the Congress in the implementing of its basic programme—the strengthening of the anti-Imperialist struggle. When the ministries would press for the



demands that we echoed in our strike, we expected the Governors would resist by virtue of their special powers. That would create a situation, we were certain, very favourable for the Congress whose fundamental ministerial programme was declared to be wrecking the constitution and not working it. We also calculated of another possibility. If in the Congress provinces, the Governors ultimately yielded before the mighty mass force of the Congress, in Bengal, Mr. Fazlul Huq's cabinet was sure to be influenced.

Such were our ideas when we submitted the following ultimatum to the Governor-General :—

“Sir,

On the morrow of the passing over of the impasse and the acceptance of ministries by the people's representatives in the various Provincial Assemblies, we need urge again, as in our last representation to Your Excellency dated the 9th July, 1937, that the question of general amnesty for all political prisoners, detenus, and state prisoners etc. now comes to the fore. As in the past, so also today, we reiterate that the inauguration of the provincial autonomy and popular ministries are all illusions, if political prisoners are allowed to rot in prisons. Comrade Sachin Bakshi is fighting for the issue with his life-blood. All the political prisoners wherever they may be, stand with him. We the political prisoners confined in ‘Prisoners’ Hell’ known as Andamans take this opportunity to point out to the government and to our people that Bakshi's demand is our demand ; that his fight is our own fight. We have waited so long in anxious expectations that the government shall accede to our wishes. Our waiting till now has borne no fruit. Our patience is now exhausted ; we shall not be able to wait any

longer. We feel, that there is yet time for the Government to accede to this supreme demand of political India regarding the amnesty for all political prisoners, detenus and state prisoners and the satisfaction of other allied demands as given in our last representation to you dated the 9th July, 1937. We shall wait at the latest till the 24th July, 1937. Failing to elicit any favourable response by that time we beg to intimate to you, that we shall be forced to resort to hunger-strike on or about the same date.

*N.B.*—For further details of our demands and views, please refer to our representation to you dated, the 9th July, 1937.

Dated, the 18th July, 1937.”

Simultaneously, we approached the Prime Ministers of different provinces intimating them of our resolve. Requesting the Chief Commissioner to forward these communications telegraphically, we remarked, in the course of a letter to him :

“To our regret, we beg to state that we have received no reply whatsoever to our previous representations dated, the 9th July, 1937, addressed to His Excellency the Viceroy and the Hon’ble Prime Ministers of Bengal, Bihar, U.P., Punjab, Assam and Madras. We have been waiting till now only to strain our patience, already almost exhausted. In the meantime, we have learnt of the hunger-strike of Comrade Sachin Bakshi with demands identical with ours. Bakshi’s demand we reiterate, is our demand, his fight is our own. Political prisoners wherever they may be, all stand with him. Remote though, we physically are from our brave Comrade and late though it is, we take this opportunity to intimate it through you to the government that we,

on this side of the Bay of Bengal, confined in the 'Prisoners' Hell' known as Andamans, stand with comrade Bakshi and voice the demand of our people regarding the amnesty for political prisoners and other allied subjects, also mentioned in our last representation to the Government."

So it was the 23rd of July! No reply had yet come from any quarter. Nor did we expect any. In the early morning, intimation was given to the local authorities that our hunger-strike was to start next day. The following short communication was also addressed simultaneously to the Viceroy:—

"Sir,

Our representations dated, the 9th and 18th July, 1937 could elicit no response from you. Your Excellency has chosen to be silent on our insistent demands. However, our last chord of patience is snapped today. We cannot continue any more inertly. We begin our hunger-strike from tomorrow the 24th July, 1937, to vindicate through this supreme act of self-sacrifice our cause which is also the cause of the whole of the Political India today. Our only solace will be that all our countrymen—oppressed and suffering, will stand with us in this struggle and help us to carry it to success."

Intimations for the Hon'ble Prime Ministers were also submitted in writing. The same day at 9 o'clock, the Chief Commissioner Mr. Cosgrave visited the jail. We were all locked up in the ground floor corridors. With a bundle of typed papers Mr. Cosgrave came to us. He did not keep us long in suspense. With little ceremony, in a grave and cold voice, he began reading the papers:—

"I am directed by the Government of India to

inform you, the permanently incarcerated prisoners..." It was a long document—a reply to our ultimatum, from the Central Government. We were informed that the government had no desire to effect a wholesale release or repatriation. Prisoners going on hunger-strike would render themselves liable to prosecution under Prisons' Act, and in addition, to jail punishments of forfeiture of remission, declassification, and of the deprivation of the special privileges of games, lights and association, etc. Concluding, the Government stated that it did not recognize the right of prisoners to voice collectively some political demands and, therefore, it refused to forward our representations to the different Prime Ministers. The reading being over, Mr. Cosgrave in a condescending manner asked us to reconsider our decision in the light of the Government's reply. He added that in case we persisted in our resolve and went on strike, it would be his painful duty to punish us as directed. His remarks merely compelled us to smile. On our behalf, in my yard, I replied with equal courtesy and formality that we regretted our inability to accept his kind advice. There was nothing to be reconsidered. I next requested Mr. Cosgrave, to inform the Government of India of our reply—that our right to feel with our countrymen did not need anyone's recognition. Not only to voice but further to fight collectively for the national struggle was our inalienable right. Political prisoners would never tolerate Government's encroachment in this matter.

After visiting all the yards the Chief Commissioner held prolonged consultations with the jail officials and the medical staff, and then went away. As soon as he had turned his back, we held a general meeting to settle certain details of the hunger-strike. At the outset, three or four from amongst us, who had

resorted to protracted group hunger-strikes in the past, narrated their experiences. They described in detail the process of resisting forced feeding. Instructions were given regarding all its different stages, beginning from scuffle and ending in the attempts to disturb the tube-end in the throat. Such comrades as were going on strike for the first time, asked several questions and these were clarified. It was also decided in this meeting that whenever any offer of terms was to be considered or the termination of the strike was to be discussed, all strikers would meet together and give judgment. In view of the peculiar nature of a hunger-strike struggle, this course was thought to be the most expedient. Every striker was also told that no rumour was to be given credence to, as the authorities would circulate many stories to influence the morale of the fighters.

Meeting being over, we rushed to the big general dining-shed to join in the grand feast that had been organised by our Kitchen Committee. Who could say that for some of us it would not prove to be the last such occasion of their lives? The whole atmosphere was surcharged with emotion. It was to be specially observed when we had dispersed after the feast. Only a few hours now separated us from the moment of our launching the struggle, "Again we will have Mahabir, Mohan and Mohits. But how to locate them?" We were all thinking. No one knew, no one could say. Would my most intimate friend, my best companion be one of them? May be, so everyone fancied. I have mentioned earlier how on the basis of tastes and temperaments, little families had grown up within our bigger community. The members of these groups were going round all the yards and meeting each other in the cells. There were parting songs, farewell tea-parties and animated

conversations. Many who were younger embraced their friends and parted with tears.

In the afternoon, there was a general function again. A short drama was staged. Some of our comrades were returning to the country for release, by the boat that was to leave on the 28th July. They were entrusted with the task of carrying our strike news to the country. Before the performance began, we bade farewell to them. So touchingly they replied, everyone of them.

We took light meals that night and went to bed. Many of us could not sleep. Our thoughts were all pell-mell. The morrow was our blessed day. The bugle would be blown. We would march out with defiance in our eyes and boldness in our steps.

## CHAPTER XI

### STRUGGLE

That fateful day, we woke up early in the morning. We had thought, we would be kept confined in our cells but contrary to our expectations, the usual warders came and unlocked the cells. We stepped out and gathered in the yard grounds. The jailor, the deputy jailors and the additional staff arrived. They were running to and fro with typed lists in their hands, arranging for the accommodation of all hunger-strikers in the first and second floor of the two biggest yards—No. 2 and No. 3. Ignoring them, we sat chatting, laughing and speculating. Invigorating was the atmosphere that day. We did not feel the usual heavy oppressing prison environment. We breathed fresh air and were full of joy and hope. We roamed about from one place to another, free and careless. The die had been cast. We had no anxiety.

Yards No. 2 and 3 were packed up and still there were strikers unaccounted for. The total number was 183. To accommodate the rest, the authorities opened a new yard which was usually reserved for quarantine and ordinary prisoners. It was the yard No. 1 adjacent to the hospital. From the second day, we remained locked up day and night. As our cells stood side by side in a row, our conversation was not interrupted. Talking and reading—this was our routine. Everyone of us had got issued from the library about a dozen selected books of a light nature. It was a welcome change. For months, we were too pre-

occupied with ponderous volumes. Now, we started reading our favourite fictions, dramas and travels, one after the other. There were some topical books like 'Inside Europe,' 'Hitler over Russia,' 'Tumult and Shouting,' and 'Sawdust Caesar' which were in heavy demand. These we read in parts and passed on from cell to cell. Unfortunately, we were deprived of this privilege after a few days. The jail officers found out that we felt comfortable in the companionship of books. An order was issued for a general search and all the volumes were taken away. Religious books we were allowed to retain and having no choice left, we had to read them. One of our comrades had a copy of the Holy Bible with him. Several of us read and re-read the 'Sermon on the Mount' and the biblical stories of the Old Testament. In our last general meeting we had decided to raise slogans and they were many this time. At appointed hours, both during the day and the night, we uttered these shouts. Our voices rolled on thundering from yard to yard and echoed in the settlement. The large number of work-strikers who were locked up in the ground floors were allowed to come near our yards for bathing and meals. They moved together in their yards from one corner to the other raising the slogans. Locked up in our cells, we felt cheered. They cried, 'Inquilab Zindabad,' 'Angrez Sarkar Murdabad,' 'Kisan Mazdoor Zindabad,' 'Samrajbad Nash ho,' 'Down, Down with Imperialism,' 'Long live Revolution.' With a view to impress the ordinary prisoners and spread our ideas amongst them, most of our slogans during this hunger-strike were uttered in Hindustani.

After three or four days of our whole time lock-up all of us began to feel acute weakness. Four years' stay in Andamans had left little of the



physical vitality in us. On the sixth day, while rising in the night-time to drink water, one of our weak comrades fell down. There was a heavy sound, a thud and it attracted the attention of the comrades lying sleepless in the adjacent cells, and of the warder on duty. The doctors arrived and removed the comrade to hospital. When the incident was reported to Captain Choudhari—the S.M.O., he ordered the jail officers to open us in groups and in turns, for bathing. Our number was big and in consequence, the last group came out of their cells in the dead of the night.

Unfortunately for us, Capt. Choudhari was in his art, a very efficient man. Unlike his predecessor, he was very tactful too. Before the fight had started, he had meticulously gathered the details about the last strike and specially about the three deaths. He collected his assistants and lectured to them regarding the best and the safest method of feeding. He particularly stressed the series of precautions that were to be taken to prevent complications. Thus, both the parties to the fight had their rules laid down. The strikers had received their instructions in the general meeting and the doctors now chalked their line. Forced feeding started. The S.M.O. went into the medical history of every individual and on that basis divided the strikers into three categories—serious, weak and strong. Serious cases he separated from the rest. These were such comrades who had been suffering for long from chronic wasting diseases. The S.M.O. himself directed the feeds for the first few days. We began to get worried. We felt that the courting of death by someone of us was becoming impossible, in the face of the great care and precaution taken by the authorities. Would the struggle succeed without any death? We did not believe. The news of our anxiety reached

the comrades who had not yet joined the strike. The majority of them were serious patients suffering from T. B., asthma and rheumatism, etc. They had stayed back at our general insistence. Later, they said, they would not hear us. Everyday, they came in batches and joined us. Our number kept on mounting. It, finally swelled to 230, when 290 was the total number of political prisoners. The authorities now got alarmed. The S.M.O. came to many of us and argued at length that on no grounds the joining in the strike of patients was advisable, as it was fraught with danger. We replied that in our relative positions, the term 'danger' had different meanings. Mr. Choudhari understood us. Yet, he persisted in appealing to us on humanitarian grounds. While on the one hand, our number was increasing, on the other, our general condition was getting worse. Due to sheer weakness several of the strikers became unconscious on different occasions. The S.M.O. held hurried consultations with Mr. Cosgrave. Both, presumably, came to the same conclusion that risks were to be minimised by forcing comforts on us as much as possible; that we should not be allowed to sink early. A new order was issued to keep us all opened during the daytime in our corridors. Hot water was supplied in plenty for bathing. Extra blankets were issued. For the daily feeds, glucose, brandy and eggs were liberally used. By these steps the authorities did succeed to some extent in checking the pace of general deterioration, but they failed in their main object. The number of the serious cases increased everyday. The hospital was packed up. The whole of the yard No. 5, was transformed into an additional hospital.

When feeding began, the authorities faced immense trouble from an unexpected quarter. Ordinary

prisoners refused to join the feeding gang. They were heard saying, "Babulog hamara bhai hai, hamlog aisa kam nahi karega." Their step was not sporadic. It was organised beforehand. In our condition of relative freedom before the hunger-strike, we had held consultations with them. They were full of sympathy for our cause. They held their meetings—Pathans, Hindus and Burmese alike, and decided, that under no circumstances they would help the authorities in what they considered the dirty job of forcing feeds on us. Numerous committees were formed that were to carry out the excommunication of any member who dared to violate the common decision. Before this bold action the jail officers felt nonplussed. To their timely assistance a boat arrived from the country with new batches of prisoners. They were recruited wholesale and the feeding work was started by the doctors. From this group too, from time to time, there were desertions. Several people were punished for non-obedience of orders. To prevent the spread of the trouble, the authorities kept the feeding gang confined quite separately from other ordinary prisoners, and granted them special privileges.

The authorities wanted to keep us in complete dark, without any knowledge of the agitation that was set going in the country. Fortunately for us, the ordinary prisoners accompanying the doctors assisted us at all risks. By ingenious methods, they smuggled in bits of news. We learned that three or four days after the strike the Government in a communique from Simla, had broadcast the news of our strike, giving a brief summary of our demands. The fact that we had addressed communications to the Hon'ble Prime Ministers and that these were withheld, was significantly not mentioned in it. It was

also noteworthy, that the Government had indirectly requested our relatives and friends to bring pressure on us for abandoning the strike. We were sure the Government, following the precedent of the previous hunger-strike, would not have released the news to the country so soon, had it not feared that our comrades who had left for India on the 28th July 1937 would certainly spread it on reaching the country. After the publication of the communique, numerous telegrams reached us daily. Messages of a political nature were withheld. We learned later, that one withheld telegram was from our great Poet Rabindra Nath Tagore. The alarming and anxious communications that came from our relatives were, however, all delivered. Our sisters, sisters-in-law, old mothers, whom we had left behind in our distant homes wired in many cases imploring us to cease fasting. In some messages, it was stated that "mother had also started hunger-strike." We felt deeply moved. We were not oblivious of their sufferings. But what could we do? We simply wired back, "Don't worry." We knew it was poor consolation that we offered. In our lives, we had never cared for our own individual sufferings. But the constant woes and hardships that we had caused to our helpless dependent relatives, specially to ladies often disturbed us profoundly. Many of us had in our homes old mothers, little brothers and sisters with no one to look after them.

After about ten or twelve days, the Chief Commissioner came to us and personally communicated a telegram from Mr. Fazlul Huq in which he asked us to give up the hunger-strike. We enquired as a formality to from Mr. Cosgrave, "On what grounds?" He promptly gave us the stereotyped bureaucratic reply, "No Government ever considers demands under

threats or coercion.” We had to remark that our reading of history was different. Subsequently, we learned of the huge demonstrations in Bengal and understood what had led the Bengal Premier to express his solicitude for us.

Only a few days later, the Chief Commissioner visited us again, this time with the copy of the following lengthy communique issued by the Government of India. He came to the cells of several of us and explained it in details. We told him that the fight that had once been started would be carried on to the last.

*Government of India Communique of 12th August, 1937*

“In a press communique published on July 30, 1937 the Government of India announced the news that a large number of terrorist prisoners in the cellular jail at Port Blair had gone on hunger-strike to enforce certain demands. The strike continues although the Chief Commissioner personally communicated to the leading strikers on August 7, the message sent by the Premier of Bengal urging the prisoners to discontinue the strike.

An order for repatriation would have to be issued by the Government of India as being the Government administering the Andamans. The possibility of loss of life occurring through the strikes has caused the Government of India a deep concern. It is, however, clear that no Government could consistently with its responsibilities for a large convict population give way to a demand made in such circumstances. Jail discipline throughout India would be imperilled if it were demonstrated that a body of prisoners by resorting to a concerted hunger-strike could dictate the place for their incarceration and the conditions

under which they are to be detained.

For these reasons the Government of India desire to make it plain that so long as the hunger-strike continues they are unable to give any consideration to the demands put forward by the prisoners or by other persons on their behalf.

Along with the copies of this communique, was also delivered the following message of Congress Assembly Party leaders.

“We are extremely sorry to learn that you are continuing your hunger-strike. We urge you to discontinue strike forthwith.—B. Desai Satyamurti Asaf Ali”.

This was the first telegram from Congress leaders. We felt puzzled. Why did they ask us to give up the struggle when the demands were not fulfilled? Reading between the lines of the two communications, it became clear to us that the Government was prepared to order our general repatriation. But that was not our demand. It was a minor question. We regretted that our representations to the Government were not published in full in the press. For we were sure, that if they had been placed before the public, there would have been no misunderstanding and our countrymen would have formed a clear idea of our struggle.

A week had not elapsed when another telegram, this time, from Jawaharlalji, acting on behalf of the Working Committee of our Indian National Congress reached us. He appealed us to break the fast. We were now visibly perplexed. These appeals received naturally our respectful and serious consideration. But how could we abandon the struggle in the middle? On the Government side, no appreciable change was manifest in the attitude. It was as adamant as ever on the basic issues. On the other hand, from the news that we had received, we learned that a

tremendous mass movement had developed. Its pitch was rising. Hundreds of our comrades behind bars in Deoli, Behampore, Alipore and other jails had also entered the struggle. It was an historic mass hunger-strike movement linked up with outside revolutionary support. The situation had developed favourably beyond our hopes. Our object to strengthen the anti-Constitution movement was being achieved with such signal success. In these circumstances, we could not visualise the abrupt termination of the struggle. The very idea was almost a torture. We believed that the Working Committee was prompted to send its appeal under misunderstanding of our situation. We, therefore, wired back to it and the Assembly leaders that we were constrained to carry our fight to the end, till the demands were fulfilled.

We were sure, that the strike would last long and the degree of its success would be determined by the number of fighters who would die. We became desperate to create physical complications. All of us resisted the feeding tenaciously. As a result, bruises and sprains were frequently caused. One striker got a bone fractured. He was sent for X'ray examination to the hospital headquarters in another island—the Ross. Three or four of us touched the danger point. Of them, one comrade's condition was causing anxiety to the authorities every hour. He was standing on the verge of death. Oxygen was supplied to him and one night, in a precarious condition, he was removed to the Ross Hospital in an ambulance car. The comrade was one of those who had joined the fight lately. He was one of the worst patients—a declared active T.B. case. Therefore, when we heard in the morning of his removal, we instantly concluded that at last the medical people were going to be baffled. The second hunger-strike too, will have its 'Mahabir.' A number

of doctors had arrived from India on special duty. These persons along with their old colleagues, started playing a trick on us, probably under instructions from their higher officers. Everyday one or two of them pretended to take some of us in confidence and disclose official secrets. All the stories that they whispered into our ears were of the same type—that authorities were perturbed and were at the point of yielding. Some day, they said that an official body was coming with final terms. Another time, we were told, that the Viceroy had cabled enquiring as to the minimum that would satisfy us. I must confess, that we were duped at first. But when the ruse was too often applied, we saw through the game. We understood that by circulating such stories, the medical people were trying to raise false hopes in us. They wished that we diminished our resistance with expectations of an early settlement.

In the fourth week, a communication from the Bengal Government was read over to us which said that in the event of abandoning the hunger-strike we would not be victimised. We remembered how we were told just the contrary sometime ago. The Bengal Government was feeling the force of growing public opinion, so it seemed.

On the 26th morning, the Jailor came running and started collecting in the Central Tower all the Bihar prisoners from different yards. For long they did not come back. Rumour went round that they were under orders of release. Eventually, when they came back to our yards, we came to know that a telegram had been sent to them by the Hon'ble Bihar Premier stating that continuation of their hunger-strike was creating difficulties in his way. He, therefore, urged them to terminate the fight. After discussing the question amongst themselves our



Bihar comrades decided to stress the point that the strike demands could be satisfied on an all-India basis only. They had accordingly sent the following reply :—

“Thanks for your message, unable to discontinue hunger-strike unless assurances on demands put forth in the representations of political prisoners, Andamans, to India government, are forthcoming on all-India basis.”

Events were now moving rapidly. The same evening another telegram was delivered to us coming from Shriyuts Desai, Satyamurti and Saxena stating that the Assembly had passed a motion asking for our immediate repatriation, and further, that the situation demanded immediate termination of the strike. This message clearly showed it once more that our people were misunderstanding us as they thought that the whole fight was on the minor repatriation issue. We suspected that our replies were not being forwarded. We saw no effective remedy. We were hundreds of miles away from the country and no visitor was allowed to come to meet us. We were still thinking hard as to how to clear our position before the people, when on the morning of the 28th August, the Chief Commissioner came to the jail and sent for a number of us to the Central Tower. Handing us over the following telegram from Gandhiji, he said, that it was time when we should make up our minds in obedience to the wishes of the ‘Greatest man’ that modern India has produced :—

“I venture to add my advice to Gurudev Tagore’s and Working Committee’s to abandon strike relying upon us all trying best to secure relief for you. It would be graceful on your part to yield to the nationwide request. You will help me personally if I could get assurance that those who have believed in

terrorist methods, no longer believed in them and that they have come to believe in Non-violence as the best method. I ask this because some leaders say detenus have abjured terrorism but opinions to contrary have also been expressed."

We were closely following the text of the message and discussing it between ourselves when Mr. Cosgrave seated on a chair near us, making his own conclusions drew out a bundle of telegrams out of his pocket and said that we should know how the whole country was unanimous in asking us to give up the strike. Out of the telegrams that he had taken out he read over to us several messages remarking that these were from persons of all sections i.e. of, what we usually called, the right and the left wings of the political movement. When the Chief Commissioner had finished, we told him that no major step could be taken, unless all the hunger-strikers discussed it and decided together. Thereupon Mr. Cosgrave allowed all of us to meet in yard No. 2 under proper medical supervision.

Excepting the comrades whose condition was too serious, we all assembled within an hour in the meeting place. Some came walking slowly on foot and others were brought on stretchers. Our work-striker comrades with their heavy fetters had also joined us. For about two hours we held informal discussions. Later, with the election of a president, the formal meeting began. We discussed Gandhiji's telegram in all its bearings. We were all agreed that the fulfilment of the basic demands in the near future was not in sight. The government had not given any assurance. Still the whole country led by Gandhiji wanted us to abandon the strike. Were we to give it up? This was the crucial question. How keenly we preferred that the nation had allowed our struggle to con-

tinue and permit some of us to die in its course. But it did not. It urged for discontinuation of the strike. We had to choose our course. After two hours of discussion, we decided to suspend the strike and bow before the national mandate. It must be said frankly that we did not feel happy. One of the comrades, arguing the point that no demand had been fulfilled, got so much excited, that he dropped unconscious at the end of his speech. In coming to our resolve the idea that eventually prevailed and proved to be the decisive factor, was our realisation that as units of the national revolutionary army we had to abide by the country's declared wishes. We had no right to act in isolation. In the past, we had failed frequently to carry our entire people with us. We were, however, certain that at no distant future the fight will have to be resumed. It was, therefore, decided that we should emphasise that we were suspending and not abandoning the strike.

It had become dark. Seven o'clock had struck. Lights were switched on. We drew up the draft of the communication to be sent to Gandhiji. It did not take a long time. About terrorism our views had been formed by three years of studies and self-criticism. We were glad that an opportunity was presented to us to place our changed ideas before the country. After the draft was read out and accepted in the meeting it was signed by 225 strikers and formally handed over at eleven in the night to the S. M. O. and the superintendent.

We also wired simultaneously to some of our comrades in Bengal to inform hunger-strikers in the Indian jails of our decision and do the needful. The text of our reply to Gandhiji was as follows :—

“Touched by nation-wide appeal and your message. We suspend the hunger-strike on the as-

surance that the whole country has taken up our demands and the cause. We are confidently hoping that within a reasonable period of time, you all will succeed in getting all the demands fulfilled. We are glad that you have given us an opportunity to express our firm opinion on terrorism. We feel honoured to inform you and through you the nation that those of us who ever believed in terrorism, do not do it any more, and are convinced of its futility as a political weapon or creed. We declare that it definitely retards rather than advances the cause of our country."

Seven of our comrades still continued the strike. After exchange of telegraphic communications with Gandhiji, they also terminated their struggle within a few days and joined us in our yards.

On the 1st September, the following telegrams were delivered to us :—

Telegram dated 1st September 1937, from Gandhiji, Wardhaganj, to the Chief Commissioner, Andaman and Nicobar Islands :—

"Please tell prisoners—deeply grateful your full response—my appeal. Whole country rejoices over your listening to country's appeal cease hunger-strike. You may depend upon my doing all I can to assure full relief. Hope you are well getting suitable nourishment."

From Deb Kumar Das, Jagat Bose, Kundan Lal Gupta and Chitta Biswas to Chief Commissioner, Andamans.

"Please convey our thanks to hunger-strikers for suspending hunger-strike and also our appeal to remaining seven to suspend hunger-strike pending Governments considering your grievances. Your objective being attained. Congress, legislatures, public, ourselves doing best for your cause."

The second message was from our ex-Andaman comrades. It was a happy news to learn how these people who were only yesterday in our midst, were now in the public fore agitating for us. Gandhiji's solicitude even for our small physical needs, deeply moved us.

Our return to the respective yards after the hunger-strike was not happy as after the previous strike. The reasons were obvious. We did not feel that we had brought with us the spoils of victory. Eagerly we looked forward for our repatriation which, we were sure, was imminent. We had not to wait for long. On the 22nd September, 1937, 76 of us including all the prisoners from Assam, Madras, Bihar and the Punjab were on board the *Maharajah*. As a Punjab Prisoner, I was also in this batch. We were accommodated in the same old iron cages. The heat was stifling, but this time we were oblivious of the surroundings and its ill-effects. Were we not returning from our exile? Our land, our people, our homes—these were the engrossing thoughts. We were going near them after four long years. When our ship entered the Diamond Harbour, we deeply breathed the air of our country. As Calcutta drew near, on both the banks we sighted little green plots of land, thatched cottages and small fishing boats. At places, there was a sprinkling of human figures toiling in the fields. What a pleasant sight! Most of us stood at the peep-holes gazing at the panorama. In the evening, the ship touched the Calcutta jetty. Large number of people had gathered in the adjacent streets to receive us. They were held back by mounted police sowars. Handcuffed in pairs we were escorted to the deck. We were to be separated in batches according to our provinces and sent to different jails. Before we parted, we gave out loud shouts—'Inquilab Zindabad'

—‘Mazdoor Kisan Zindabad’—‘Samrajbad Murdabad.’  
We had returned to our country. We were pledging  
our solidarity with our struggling people.

## CHAPTER XII

### ROAD BACK

From Calcutta, I was taken to Lahore Central Jail. Years ago in 1929-30 in this very jail our special court was held. Daily, there was commotion. Surrounded by armed guards, we sat happily in the dock. We used to watch the farce of a trial. We were many those days, but now we were few; only six of our case-mates including myself were now in the Lahore Jail. Jotin, Sardar, Rajguru, Sukhdeo and Mahabir—all had departed, leaving behind for us hundred and one memories. Numerous were the incidents—big and small, associated with them, that had taken place here during the under-trial period. At times, we felt as if they had parted from us only a short time ago.

To our sad recollections was now added our anxiety for the health of comrade Kamalnath that had been shattered owing to the repeated and protracted hunger-strikes. Lately, in Andamans, he had fallen victim like so many of the deported comrades to heart disease and, in addition, to appendicitis. We got alarmed and feared that our number may further dwindle to five. On our insistence, he agreed to undergo an operation. In Mayo Hospital of Lahore he was operated upon by the surgeon-in-charge. Dr. Gopichand, our old friend, stood by his bedside. We heaved a sigh of relief when we learned that the operation that was a major one had been successful.

Due to the long years of incarceration, my health too had broken down. Some of my other comrades

also were ailing. 'C' class treatment that had been resumed in the Punjab made our conditions worse. Owing to the endeavours of our friends outside, our confinement in Punjab jails was fortunately of a short duration. In January '38, four of us who were residents of U. P. were transferred to Naini Central Jail and similarly comrade Kamalnath of Bihar was sent to Bhagalpore Jail. Comrade Kishorilal who was a resident of the Punjab remained in Lahore. His deportation to Andamans had been stopped in the past, in view of his weak state of health and consequently, he had been transferred from one Punjab jail to another. Throughout the last seven years, he had to fight single-handed and suffered all along. We were so glad to meet him after years but were equally pained when we had to part from him once more and leave for our provinces.

In U. P. jails, my health did not improve. On the contrary it grew worse. The Congress government of U. P. kindly referred my case to the Punjab Ministry. From outside, Gandhiji, Rajendra Babu, *Rastrapati* and a number of other Congress leaders, as also late Maulana Shaukat Ali and Mr. Jinnah made persistent endeavours for my release. Due to these efforts, one fateful day, it was suddenly communicated to me that I was under orders of release on medical grounds. I had hardly time to realize and feel the momentous change in my life when the jailor came and informed me that lock-up time was approaching and that I was to be released forthwith.

That evening, I came out from the Lucknow District Jail. Till late in the night, I was in the midst of friends who had gathered to accord me a reception. As for myself, I wanted to remain alone and breathe the new atmosphere. Was it unnatural for a life-term prisoner who had been liberated after a



decade? The whole of the next week there were rounds of receptions and entertainments. I was growing tired of them and wished to be left alone to my own self.

I thought of my being set at liberty after full nine years. But was I really free? How could one have freedom in a society where the masses toiled and starved while a few gorged and rioted in luxury. The teeming millions of the country were in chains. A decade ago when I was snatched away from them, I had seen those chains. They were yet visible, were still there. But now clanking was audible everywhere. The masses had realised their might. They had risen and were on the move. Historic forces of the land were astir to shape the country's Destiny.

I breathed a spirit of resistance and struggle all round. I felt exhilarated and inspired. I was in this frame of mind when press representatives came to me, one of these days, and asked for my views. Readily, I expressed my thoughts in the following statement:—

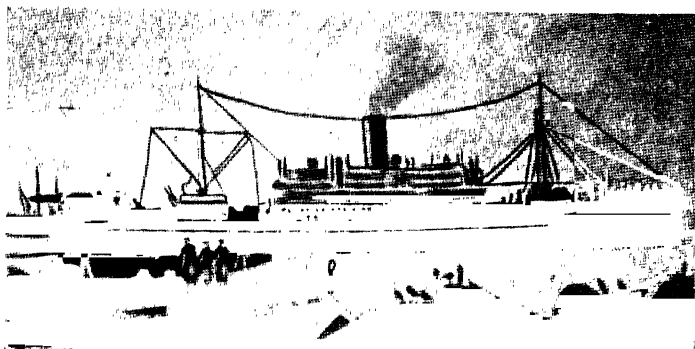
“It is a great privilege to come out of jail at a time when the phenomenal upsurge of the masses is witnessed in the whole country. From behind prison bars, political prisoners have been feeling inspired while watching the rising militancy of the kisans, the rapid awakening of the States' people, the united movement of the workers and above all the emergence of the Indian National Congress as the platform for all anti-Imperialist forces. As revolutionary youths, we all awaited keenly the opportunity to take our place in the grim struggle for national emancipation.

It is unfortunate that, of late, there have been manifested some developments which weaken the United National Front. As the struggle is advancing, complex issues are naturally coming to the forefront. They can be solved satisfactorily if we do not fail

to draw correct lessons from the struggle that is being waged today by the heroic bands of republicans in the Spanish and Chinese soils. Facing the brutal attacks of the Fascist aggressors, they have demonstrated so gloriously the miracles the unity of an entire people can achieve. In India, our struggle as a part of the wider world struggle must follow the same lines. We have to organize relentless resistance to the reactionary alliance of British Imperialism with the Native Princes and other vested interests. At this stage, any manifestation of vacillation in the national camp in the face of Imperialist offensive or again an exhibition of ultra-leftist attitude would be suicidal for the cause of the National Revolution. Congress is the embodiment of the nation's aspirations and its urge to fight. To it, we must pledge our unflinching loyalty and devotion.

The unity already achieved needs to be further cemented by dogged and day-to-day work in the primary committees. As the initiator and builder of the National Front, the Left forces have the greatest responsibility in this direction. To consolidate unity, it is essential for us all to view things in their broader setting and recognize the points of basic unity. When the fate of millions is at stake, our actions should be governed by larger considerations.

The partial struggles conducted by the toiling masses led by their class organizations and the stubborn fight put up by the States' people must be closely linked up with the broader political struggle led by the Congress. Around the immediate issue of the fight against Federation, the masses must be rallied and then hurled against Imperialism. In this task of mobilising the people, our national leadership should have unbounded faith in the strength, courage and determination of the masses.



### **'The Maharajah'**

At the Calcutta Jetty when the first batch of seventy repatriates touched the motherland.



### **Goddess Durga**

The Idol fashioned by our artist for our annual Durga Pujah.



The international situation is intriguing. Though a World War has been averted for the moment, the future remains very uncertain. The issue of 'War or Peace' still hangs in the balance. We have just witnessed the tragic spectacle of the mutilation of Czechoslovakia in the wake of Abyssinia and Austria. British Government following the dictates of England's High Finance has been consistently abetting the criminal designs of the Fascist powers. It is her insidious policy of connivance that has egged on the aggressors in Spain and China. In the fight for World Peace and Democracy, against Fascism and War, India can, therefore, best play her role by waging a relentless struggle right here, on its soil, against British Imperialism—the bulwark of world reaction. Thus alone we can offer our greatest assistance to our gallant comrades, braving death today on far-flung fronts, for the vindication of the ideal of humanity's liberation, and for the advent of a New Social Order."

These were not my exclusively individual views. I had brought them from my prison community. It was the general line of approach of the scores of my comrades who are still behind prison bars. I voiced them, because recently when I had the chance to come out, I trudged the way almost alone. These hundreds of my companions have not yet marched on their 'Road Back.' But will not they? The Nation alone can answer.

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