

Road to the Future

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Rano had no peace of mind. Although he did not belong to any political party, his heart was drenched with tears of love for the Motherland, shaped mainly by his inherent nature, roused to its proper shape by the musical adoration of the mother, Bande Mataram in Anandamath, by the great and pioneer among the Indian patriots, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, followed by the call of Aurobindo Ghose who adored the country as his Mother. When Ghose left British India on 1st April 1910, sometime after being acquitted from the Alipur jail on 6 May 1909 at the early hours of the morning, Rano was not born but his memory was live as he followed all the details of such freedom fighters' lives as a child, may be from the time he was three years old; hearing from the elders helped by his studies from his teens. There were others with Aurobindo Ghose like Balgangadhar Tilak, Bepin Chandra Pal and Lala Lajpat Rai, besides the fiery armed revolutionaries. His heart was pierced, mental agony increased day by day as the tumultuous waves of activities up and down the scale happened throughout the country in the shape of Gandhi movement on one side and the secret revolutionary activities on the other. Subhas Chandra Bose, in particular, stole his heart when he absconded fooling the alert British police after 1.30am of 17 January 1941.

As a human being he felt the throbbing in his heart, a love for the non-human entity, the country, which comprised of not only the human beings but the vast Natural resources of Mother India from time immemorial. His sleep was often disturbed by what he saw and experienced. This was a time for both; the Quit India Movement and that notorious event in history, the Bengal Famine.

He got up before the dawn and out of utmost curiosity and with a pain of unheard agony came out of the house when most others were still in deep slumber as they got into their bed, as usual, after 11.30 or after 12 in the night.

Walking to some distance as he reached the Hedo or Hedua park of Kolkata with the tank inside, he saw a strange scene from a distance. A police van was standing in a corner at Beadon Street. Some police personnel with lathi in hand were loitering while two, three trucks were in the waiting. As he was nearing it, he found brisk activity around. He came and stood near the trucks. Nobody obstructed his standing there. He found that good numbers of dead bodies were scattered here and there and some persons were busy getting the bodies thrown inside the trucks, one above the other, properly placed by two persons who were inside to ensure maximum use of the space. Before his eyes he found some ten, fifteen bodies were staggered in a small truck, pulled by legs or heads. Observing one of the dead bodies trying to rise up, he advanced towards it but was prevented by the police. "Go ahead," they said and the truck started. In no time its place was filled up by two big trucks which began to be filled up with the cadavers. In the darkness it seemed that a body turned to another side but a police with the help of a worker thumped it to swoon. The body was raised and with force thrown inside the truck. As he proceeded to the police van for talks he was prevented by a worker. "Go ahead", he was told again. But he did not go.

A police officer walked towards him and said that they were on duty taking the dead bodies to proper places for disposal as the city was littered with the dead bodies. Having come from the villages near and far in search of food they often died when they became unable to walk more.

The ones seemed to be living were actually dead. Their apparent movements were mechanical twitching of the muscles, he explained.

“But I have seen with my own eyes,” Rano said and with sympathy asked if some such persons could be treated to revive. The police officer moved his head in disapproval. “See, there is a person from the Medical College who’s attending the cases if there is anyone to be helped to live and arranging to take them to the hospital. He is there,” he pointed his finger towards the van but none other than the driver was there, smoking bidi and chatting, as if with an invisible person inside it.

“We know, it’s really very unfortunate affair. Some are daily taken to the hospitals. Hospitals seem to be jammed with such refugees from the villages. City dwellers are denied places for treatment. This is a horrible time, indeed,” said the police officer. “You please go ahead, we are on duty, we shall do our best,” he said, ending all possibilities of his lingering on.

Rano walked ahead towards Shyambazar. As he walked the darkness was clearing gradually and he met some other walkers but very few compared to the other times. Suddenly he saw some shadowy figures, as if haggard, coming out of Rang Mahal theatre house. They started running, chased by the darwan of the hall. While he was expressing his grudge, one of the runners fell down. Rano with another person raised the man to his feet. Looking at his face he was horrified, death was shaping his face. The man with hollow eyes, face bones protruding, looked at them without a word. “Where have you come from?” Rano asked.

There was no reply. The man seemed to be unable to think or reply. As the two of them were consulting what to do with him, he suddenly ran towards a van with relief materials belonging to Arya Samaj. Rano could comprehend seeing the festoon on the body of the truck. Then he walked further and found some trucks were moving covered with tarpaulin. Sometimes in the countryside such trucks are seen with merchandise or animals for slaughter but in these trucks were cadavers, no doubt, Rano surmised.

Walking more he found some people were sitting or sleeping on the footpaths. Some road dwellers were getting up as usual but some were still sleeping, as if they did not know if they would ever get up. He remembered that few days ago, while passing by the Wellington square, he smelled a nauseating odour from some by lanes. People walked covering their nostrils with handkerchiefs. The sun rose up showing the shadows and shame of the night. The day began as usual. People were on the road. Trams and buses plied. But the air was not cheerful. The morning breeze did not clear the smell. A dismal feeling hung in the air. Rano walked back home for he too had works in hand, to get ready for going to the office.

Rano remembered later that this terrible Bengal famine which took a toll of some 30 lakh human lives besides innumerable cattle and other animals, had its beginning in the severe cyclone which hit the Midnapore district on 10 October 1942. At that time Bengal had a coalition ministry with Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee as the finance minister and Fazal-ul-Haq as the chief minister. Like the Midnapore disaster this ministry too had a disastrous start on 17 December 1941. Sarat Chandra Bose, the elder brother of the legendary Subhas Chandra Bose, was to join the ministry making it a grand prestigious alliance between the three and their followers. But Subhas Chandra Bose’s escape during house arrest period caused the arrest of Sarat Chandra Bose. He could not join the ministry.

The disaster stricken Midnapore was reeling with loss of thousands of human lives and huge loss of crops. Instead of helping the calamitous people the British government and its bureaucracy, under the direct control of the Governor, struck further blows to the people by letting lose the reign of terror and harassment. Thousands of houses were burnt under the direct

supervision of the district magistrate, N. M. Khan, it was said, and relief was withheld for the sin of the people for participating in the freedom movement. The magistrate, armed with the power of the rulers, refused to hear the counsel of the Minister, second in command. The position being such that Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee surrendered his resignation to the Governor, Sir John Herbert, on 16 November 1942. Soon after it the legitimate Government of Fazl-ul-Haq was dismissed and was handed over to the worst rulers of Bengal who were born to divide the country in collaboration with the foreign rulers.

The situation further deteriorated with the threat of Subhas Chandra Bose entering the country with Japanese forces. The colonialists, for fear of losing their colony to the neo-colonialists, took devastating actions against the people making the cyclone hit famine a great weapon to reduce the people to poverty stricken mass, making them emaciated to the extreme degree so that they would not dare to support their incoming hero, if by chance he would enter. The traitors of Subhas Chandra inside and outside the country should remember that he was the greatest of patriots then and now, thought Rano. He gathered further knowledge later that due to occupation of Burma by the Axis forces import of rice to Bengal was reduced by 25 per cent as per record and due to war condition the British diverted the food grains and all sorts of foods towards war emergency stocks by following a policy of denial to revolting Bengal.

The poorest sections of the city dwellers along with the villagers suffered the most. The people in the villages sold their home and hearth, cattle and chattel, and moved to the great city of British fame, Calcutta, hoping to slake thirst and satisfy hunger at least, died in turn in thousands. The middle class city dwellers somehow managed to gobble up two square meals a day. Certainly the purchasing powers were not matching the price line in a famine situation and war time scarcity when the rulers deliberately tried to keep the citizens famished as a matter of revenge. But it is not only a question of purchasing power, as the economist has suggested. Certainly the supply side of food items was reduced to a great extent thereby not allowing to feed all even if they had adequate purchasing power. So Rano agreed with some others that it was a 'Man made Famine' helped by Nature.

Coming to the political front, Rano considered that the situation was worst, matching with the natural calamity. The hero of Cripps Mission, Sir Stafford Cripps, was refused to go ahead with his policy of giving freedom to India with dominion status. Sri Aurobindo welcomed Cripps and sent his emissary to the leaders to accept the condition for the time being, hoping that the threatened partition might thus be avoided but M. K. Gandhi decided to launch his '*kareng* ye *mareng*' or 'Quit India' movement, determined to drive the British out of the country. It is to be remembered that many had wanted full freedom or 'Purna Swaraj' long before this call, even in 1906, like Sri Aurobindo. But he retired from active politics in 1910.

Subhas Chandra Bose did not only say '*mareng*' but really died suffering for the country to the extreme, sacrificing his life for the sake of his promise of '*Kareng*' though not exactly at that time; his Azad Hind Fauz though accused and brought to the bar with war criminal charges, roused the patriotic feelings and emotions of the country to an unprecedented pitch which was witnessed by larger numbers of people. Even Gandhi had to admit it. Naval force to Army men, all stood in revolt against the foreign rulers in such a way that they understood that they had lost all confidence and that they would never again get their help. In a war devastated country they could not manage their own affairs so they decided to go and before going did the worst thing; dividing the country with the direct and indirect help of those who were prepared to risk the future of the country with a fallacious move for the sake of keeping their position as accredited

leaders in free India, for availing the chance of becoming the rulers, enjoying power and everything concomitant.

The congress decided to pass the resolution of 'Quit India' in their working committee on 9 August 1942. This became immediately known and all the important Congress leaders were arrested on that date. On 7 August Shyama Prasad had met M. K. Gandhi at Allahabad station, on the way to Bombay. Gandhi advised Shyama Prasad not to join the movement but to remain behind to lead the country in the absence of the Congress leaders, as they would be in jail. Congress was the biggest party but Shyama Prasad was one of the biggest persons of the time and most trustworthy leaders to lead the country. He took the cudgel and disagreed with the policy of repression and suppression of the people by the Government. The Government of Bengal in a meeting with him and other Ministers asked them to either accept the Government policy and actions or to submit resignation. Instead of submitting resignation Shyama Prasad, on behalf of all the nationalist Indians, wrote a letter to the Governor General of India, Lord Linlithgow on 12 August 1942 with ten point proposals of transfer of power to the Indian National Government who would oppose the Axis Power with the British, raising its own army.

The principle factor would be that the British should make up its mind to transfer power to Indians. The proposal was not accepted. The viceroy even refused him permission to meet Gandhi in jail to persuade him to accept his plan of settlement. Mookerjee submitted his resignation from the cabinet to the Governor, Sir John Herbert, on 16 November 1942. Then the situation turned bad to worse and all the enemies to the idea of united India were given chance to thrive by the rulers which finally intrigued the leaders to agree to divide the country, contrary to the promise made earlier by M. K. Gandhi. Shyama Prasad's resignation was prompted by two situations; political and humanitarian as a protest, Rano agreed mentally.

It is needless to add that the 'Quit India' movement was not actually led by the callers as all of them were arrested. The movement was violent mostly, taking its turns at different points. I. N. A's works, revolt of the Naval force and the attitude of the Army, besides the national movement threatened the stay of the British for longer period so they made all out efforts in weakening the country while leaving as a bonus to their exploitation for about 200 years and they were successful with the help of the disruptive forces. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee organized relief committees and tried to give reliefs and shelter to the suffering people during the period.

Subhas Chandra Bose's escape to Germany via different destinations and his launching of Azad Hind Fauz in South and South East Asia with new vigour, helped by Rash Behari Bose and some other colleagues, 'Quit India' movement in the absence of all stalwarts of the then Congress and the Bengal Famine; all overriding each other or happening simultaneously covered by the Second World War, created an extraordinary emergent situation in India as it was already in Europe, gradually covering the whole world. Through these upheavals the world with India was getting shaped differently. The following years amply proved that those few years of the century were the most momentous time in history leading to the liberation of the country though divided.

Recollecting everything in his memory long after the turbulent forties of the last century, Rano or Ranadev Roy Chowdhury, paused for long and then asked, as if to himself, an unknown Indian, "Who planned, who executed, what was or is the result?"

Further questions were brewed and welled up from his inside: "The whole world has changed including India. Natural resources of the earth have dwindled, money values have stumbled, kings are no longer in existence in any practical sense at least in any known big country, people have more or less freedom, great strides have been made in science and technology. But are we

happy in the midst of millions remaining unfed, mounting corruption specially in countries like India, brutalities being practised in different shapes, uncertainty and insecurity felt at every step in spite of apparent freedom?

Environmentally Indian cities and villages are very backward compared to developed nations. Statistics apart, India lags much behind in actual education when average people are taken into account. There is no use to add issues after issues, he thought, one basic thing is always dragging us down: inherent defects of human beings, specially the poison of jealousy, hatred, anger and ego engaged in superseding and down grading others and lust still rules the nature of human beings. These create ever engaging clash between them and bring their ruins. At one time India had great spiritual resources to rule over them; progressing with love, turning the poison into bliss, though such capacity was limited to some great ones who mostly guided. This is the divine gift which India inherits, still.

The greatest pitfall in India is that we are competing with the world, specially the developed material world, thereby losing our inherent inner resources. The problem lies in how to integrate the material progress with spiritual consciousness with a healing touch. Who holds the Key to this solution?

But these are too abstract ideas, Rano became conscious. We are where we are. It is sure that our history has been distorted not by facts by motives. Those who did manage the show after India became free but partitioned, now in three parts, were not the best to lead. That is why we could not do as much as desired. But what has happened has happened. Now it is time to ponder over the past events, analyse neutrally which is extremely difficult, and forge ahead as a country and nation.

Rano knows that his time is also passing fast. Rano knows that mental planning is one thing and doing actually is another. Rano knows that all changes brought to Nature by man may be reversed unpredictably, leaving the destructions in its trail and all forecasts and predictions are not likely to be fructuous. When something has to happen will happen. Who will plan, who will execute? Certainly the young men and women of India and even the whole world must have to be the actors in a new age, shoving the selfish activities of their predecessors off if something worthy is to be achieved but Rano thought that it is best to wait for the time to act for everything.

It's a desperate time again when all those who used to enjoy the resources of the country as left out by the colonisers are desperate to retain them with the same power and capacity but the time is going out of their hands. Time is often an active agent of change beyond all predictions, actually remaining a witness to everything.

Walking a long distance he stood fixed at the crossing of six big roads, unable to decide what to do next remembering that he had come out of the house long ago and that it was long past his usual time for joining office; long past his time of active service. He's still a thinking animal without the inhuman digital power at his command. For some moment he came to a position alike Toba Tek Singh of Saadat Hasan Manto's story where he stands in no-man's land between two countries, unable to understand either the partition or the reason for one country's spot becoming another country overnight; his village, Toba Tek Singh, lost forever to him. But Tek Singh died at the sunset after refusing to budge from the place which belonged to no country, unable to come to any other point of survival. Rano got a shake inside; shaken by someone holding his two shoulders. For a moment he felt bewildered and nervous. Looking up he saw a giant intently staring at him; a friend!

"Why feeling nervous! Why at the crossing of the roads? You have to take a road. Come to my house to seat and discuss the future, not the past. There are ways ahead, surely," he said.

Rano got back his nerve. Without a word he took his hand and the two octogenarians walked ahead steadily. After sometime he found himself walking alone but he was sure that his friend was with him on either side. He walked and walked towards the future.