

Revolutionary Terrorism - An Obsolete Nomenclature

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Abstract:

The rise of revolutionary activities from the first decade of the 20th century gave an impetus to the freedom struggle and presented a strong challenge to the colonial power. Young revolutionaries particularly from the regions of Punjab, Bengal and Maharashtra dominated the political scene of the time through their heroism and infused a sense of pride for their motherland in their compatriots. Their activities not only gave a radical base to the national movement but they were also responsible for introducing various ideological strands like socialism, trade unionism etc. in the Indian freedom struggle thus permeating a fresh momentum against the colonial rule particularly at the time of political lull. Irrespective of these contributions and much more, the nomenclature which has been used for this branch of freedom fighters that defines them as “revolutionary terrorists”, takes away their due credit towards the freedom struggle. Often times the term terrorism which is loosely used for them presents them as rather negative elements of the national freedom struggle. This nomenclature has been used so frequently by historians so much so that the words revolutionary and terrorists are usually used as synonyms thus reinforcing the colonial narrative of branding Indian revolutionaries as ‘terrorists. Also, in the period post-independence and particularly in the recent years, the rise of anti-state elements is often justified by equating them with the revolutionary freedom fighters which takes away from the credibility and contribution of the young revolutionaries.

The present paper focuses on the need to study this nomenclature in the context of that historical space and time for its exact understanding. It is also an attempt towards interpreting the nomenclature and highlighting if the nomenclature is still suitable or not. This paper further strives towards revisiting the remarkable contributions of Indian revolutionaries, placing them within the center stage of the freedom movement and acknowledging them for their due contribution to the cause of Indian freedom.

Keywords: Nomenclature, Revolutionary Activities, Revolutionary Terrorism, Terrorists

The British rule in India had to face a violent resistance and this violent resistance is the most misrepresented strand of the freedom movement. The idea of a non-violent struggle for independence has had a significant impact both on the minds of the people as well as in the academic circles. While the role of Gandhiji continues to inspire many and dominate the western view of the Indian freedom struggle,¹ Gandhiji himself acknowledged the contribution of the revolutionaries even if he did not believe in their methods. In this regard, it becomes pertinent to bring out the real contribution of the revolutionaries and understand this contribution in parallel to the non-violent movement of Gandhiji.

¹ Heehs, Peter, 1993, *Terrorism in India During the Freedom Struggle*, The Historian, Taylor & Francis Ltd., pp. 469-482.

The argument here is related to the nomenclature attributed to the revolutionary elements. While mostly the term “Revolutionary Terrorism” has dominated the discourse, it hardly does justice to the sincerity and sacrifice of this section who was involved in the violent action.

To understand how this nomenclature came about, one needs to relocate the meaning of the terms revolution and terrorism.

The word terrorism owes its linkage to the reign of terror in France and was coined to condemn it.² It is something which is associated with extreme sense of fear. The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences also gives a description of the terrorism as an activity when an Organized group uses violence to achieve its aim or goal.³ Terrorism is also a manifestation of acts of violence that are socially unacceptable. From the above definitions it becomes quite clear that this term has a thoroughly negative connotation and in the modern sense also it is often associated with a violent activity which aims to create a law-and-order problem and provides a challenge to the government.

The term revolution however, has varying meanings. For example, the Marxists believe that revolution is a result of an inevitable class struggle between the Bourgeoisies and the proletariat⁴. The other idea of revolution calls it as an insurgency which aims to restore the liberties of the people which have been usurped by a despotic government.⁵ This perception of the revolution is certainly of interest. American as well as French revolution can be fitted into this idea and so can be the revolutionary activities of the Indians. If one goes by this definition, it becomes quite reasonable to refer to the violent activities during Indian freedom struggle as revolutionary and not terrorist as it can then be defined as an insurgency against the colonial rule which was despotic to the core.

Another definition of a revolution involves the overthrow of a legally constituted elite which has caused intense changes in political, social and economic spheres.⁶ Further, the idea to establish a democracy by replacing an elite by insurgents is also an important aspect of a revolution and are referred to as authority wars at times.⁷

Although there are many more definitions of a revolution and the writers have tried to create and give meanings to the word revolution so that they could fit in the popular revolts of France, America, Russia, etc. into those moulds and call them revolutions. Such efforts were never made to classify the Indian Insurgency during the freedom movement. Rather, the revolutionary activity has been snubbed as terrorist. As we have made an attempt to bring out the meanings of both the terrorism and revolution, it becomes quite apparent that the violent activities during the freedom struggle were certainly not terrorist. While they aimed to overthrow the government using a violent method, they never caused any fear among the masses, rather their activity is rightly described as “giving back the pride of our manhood”.⁸ Their main goal was to challenge the British oppression. The leading newspaper Yugantar wrote in April 1906 after the assault of the Barisal conference that 30 crore Indians must raise their 60 crore hands to end the curse of the British.⁹ This feeling of the Yugantar was echoed in the activities of the revolutionaries. They

² Waciorski, Jerzy, 1939, *Le Terrorisme Politique*, Paris, pp. 27-31. (Taken from the article of Martha Hutchinson, *The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism*, University of Virginia.)

³ Hardman, 1948, p. 575.

⁴ Tanter, Raymond, Manus Mildarsky, 1967, *The Theory of Revolution*, The Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol. 11, p.264.

⁵ Arendt, Hannah, 1958, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Cleveland Meridian.

⁶ Tocqueville, Alexis De., 1955, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, New York, p. 8.

⁷ Rosenau, James, 1964, *Internal War as an International Event*, Princeton University Press, pp. 64-65.

⁸ Mukherjee, Hirendranath, 1948, *Indian Struggle for Freedom*, Bombay, p. 96.

⁹ Haridas and Uma Mukharjee, 1958, *India's Fight for Freedom of the Swadeshi Movement 1905-1906*, Calcutta, p. 166.

believed that hands were now needed to challenge the British and words were no more an option. It seems that this sentiment of the revolutionaries is lost when the nomenclature terrorist is attached with their activities.

So, how does one draw the line between what is terrorism and what is a revolution? The answer lies in history. We need to analyse our freedom movement not just by understanding the activity of the extreme elements from the colonial lens but from the point of view of the Indian masses of those times and their needs as well as the political demand of that time in history.

The best way of understanding their activities would be to study them in association with the British atrocities. The Rowlatt Act of 1919 and the subsequent blood bath at the Jallianwala Bagh can not be separated from the reactionary activities by the young revolutionaries. The action of the British facilitated their reaction. The police brutality combined with official arrogance gave a popular support to the revolutionaries. After seditious trials and arrests, the common mood of the public was enraged and now they wanted to blow the minds of these bastards. Therefore, the activity of the revolutionaries had two-fold effect, one it gave the general public courage and second, it brought satisfaction to the people,¹⁰ and this is how revolutionaries needs to be relocated in the freedom struggle.

Another important aspect is to understand how these revolutionaries perceived themselves and not what the British called them.

The Indian extreme elements had been greatly influenced by the Italian revolutionaries, the Irish nationalist and Russian revolution and it is but natural that they were inspired by the “cult of violence” from the “Irish Seinfenners and Russian secret societies”.¹¹ Due to these reasons probably when the first violent incidents started taking place around 1907-1908 in Bengal in the times of the Swadeshi movement, the British press called them as “anarchists”. The same words were used by Lord Minto. He further referred to such activities as an “anarchical conspiracy originating in the west world” which basically meant that the Indians themselves were incapable of planning any such activities and relieve themselves from the oppressive British rule.¹² It seems that even today we have not separated ourselves from the idea that Lord Minto created of our revolutionary efforts. Here, it also needs to be stressed that it was not the violent activities of the revolutionaries that attracted the masses, it was the ineffectiveness of the moderates and the extremists that failed to provide a platform to the disgruntled youth that led them to the violent methods. So, to box the activities of the revolutionaries as just being terrorist is a colonial way of representing them.

Along with the perception analysis, an analysis of their activities also needs to be done. Their activities were aimed to create a sense of fear among the colonial authorities and their representatives like infamous police officers, arrogant administrators, racial judiciary, and their loyalists etc. Unlike the terrorists whose activities instill fear in the common masses, the activities of the revolutionaries were completely opposite and had mass support. Various examples like the assassination of Rand, the throwing of bomb at Lahore assembly, Chittagong armory raid, Delhi conspiracy case, etc. clearly showcase the real motives of the revolutionaries. These activities display that there was an organized attempt to challenge the British oppression.

Another aspect of their activities which is often ignored is the consequence on the freedom struggle. The Indian council Act of 1909, The Defense of India Act, 1915, were seen a direct result of the revolutionary

¹⁰ B. Ghose, Confession before Deputy Superintendent of Police, 3rd May 1908.

¹¹ Pal, Bipin Chandra, 1932, *Memories of My Life and Times*, Calcutta, 246-48.

¹² Minto to Morley, 27 May 1908, Minto Papers, National Library of Scotland.

activity. Although this might seem as an exaggeration by some but the contribution of the revolutionaries was a compelling force behind the legislative reforms. This view has been put forth by newspaper *Bande Mataram* which goes on to imply that the government announced the reforms of 1909 only after the revolutionary outbreak.¹³

Last aspect of the entire revolutionary activity is understanding them in comparison to the other revolutionary groups around the world and how they inspired the Indian youth. It also needs to be unwrapped as to how the revolutionaries of the west are perceived and how their Indian counterparts are assessed. By creating a parallel understanding, the usage of the terminology should be reconsidered and replaced.

NOMENCLATURE OF REVOLUTIONARY GROUPS OF THE WEST

While understanding the terminology associated with the revolutionary activities through-out the world the most interesting observation is the usage of the term terrorism for the Indian revolutionaries and absence of the same term for the young revolutionaries in the other parts particularly for the revolutionaries that inspired the Indian youth. So, when one does a comparative study between the young revolutionaries of western nations particularly Ireland and Italy, the terminology used for such elements is what separates them from the way Indian revolutionaries have been written about and interpreted. For example, the followers of Mazzini's Young Italy are called Radical Democrats,¹⁴ which is a stark contrast to the terms used for Indians.

The writers who have worked on the revolutions in the west use a very positive terminology for such acts. Tom Garvin has used the terms Nationalist and Revolution to highlight the radical Irish struggle.¹⁵ However, when any such struggle is studied in the Indian context, they are labelled as terrorist which undermines their positive contribution and are often separated from the national movement. Similar type of terminology has been used by C.H.E Philpin when he refers to the protest in the Ireland as national and popular.¹⁶ In spite of being violent, the activities of the Carbonari and Young Italy have been narrated as being responsible for the Unification of Italy and those involved in these secret organizations are hailed as national heroes.

This clearly showcases a bias with which the activities of the Indian young revolutionaries have been perceived. While the revolutions of the west be it French, American or Russian have been hailed as victories of popular sentiments, the same elements of popular revolts in India have been shunned as terrorist in nature. It seems like an irony that the term terror which represents the reign of terror of the French Revolution was used for the Indian revolutionaries even when they did not indulge in activities that were gruesome of that extent. Therefore, it becomes relevant to reanalyze the place of the revolutionaries during the freedom struggle and relocate their importance in this context.

CONCLUSION

The term revolutionary terrorism has been strategically used by the British authorities to undermine the efforts of the radical nationalists and was a way to discourage the youth who indulged in these acts of

¹³ *Bande Mataram*, 24 April 1908, cited in Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee, 1964, *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought in Indian Politics*, Calcutta, p. 376.

¹⁴ Whelehan, Niall, 2014, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 56, Cambridge University Press, pp. 934-966.

¹⁵ Gravin, Tom, 1986, *The Anatomy of a Nationalist Revolution: Ireland, 1858-1928*, Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 28, Cambridge University Press, pp. 468-501.

¹⁶ Philpin, C.H.E, 1987, *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland*, Cambridge University Press.

individual sacrifice as it was seen as a great threat to the image of the British Empire. The entire narrative which was created of the revolutionaries by the colonial writings continues to have a long-term consequence on the minds of the present-day history readers and how the Indian freedom struggle is perceived by the west. It also undermines the other strands or socio-political base provided by revolutionaries other than the non-violent movement. But, the most severe consequence of such a portrayal of the revolutionaries is on the present-day idea of terrorism that is a constant threat to our national unity. Various fundamental and fringe elements justify their anti-state activities by associating and aligning themselves with the names of the revolutionaries of the past. Such a situation leads to the crisis of identity of the Indian Revolutionaries and deny them their due place in the history of Indian freedom struggle. Therefore, the entire argument regarding the nomenclature rests on two aspects, first rethinking their position and contribution and second shunning the colonial construct of history writing in context of the freedom struggle. It will solve the twin problem of tackling the modern phenomenon of terrorism and give a long due credit to the sacrifices made by the revolutionaries. So, it should be taken as an opportunity to change this nomenclature which belittles their efforts towards the struggle for independence.