



The Flaming Shaft of Freedom

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on the Centenary of Masterda Surya Sen

Surya Sen — a Freedom Fighter Close to Us

WHAT was revealed in one of the last pronouncements — swerving and ardent and almost epiphanic — made by Surya Sen, popularly known as Master Da, was a dream for an independent India: "What I can possibly leave you with is a dream, a sweet dream, a dream for liberty..." This moment of dream and desire was the one that evokes the whole history of struggle for independence carried out by Surya Sen along with his compatriots, and also by his predecessors and successors. This dream, it needs emphasising, is an ancient one, but is to be born again and again, always to be pursued, and this is what Surya Sen strongly realized, meaning also that the need for a continuing struggle is indispensable: for, a dream is empty without its concomitant struggle. For Surya Sen — and also for revolutionaries, in general — "in dreams begin responsibility."

And to speak of this responsibility is to speak of Surya Sen's bold, charged, almost untrammelled activism spanning a time-stretch from the beginning of the twentieth century down to the thirties, and this was the time when India was in the grip of British imperialism and colonialism, and was at the same time experiencing both spurts and surges of anti-imperial, anti-colonial resistance. Surya Sen's point of departure was not certainly dissociated from historical and social realities which, in fact, not only shaped his dream and destination, but also defined and determined the rhythm of his actions. It would not be out of place to mention here that Surya Sen's activism was not only expressive of a visionary, dream-charged romanticism, but was also an example of irresistible realism, an honest fidelity to life and realities around.

Surya Sen was born in 1893

by Azfar Hussain

in a middle-class family in the village of Noapara in Chittagong. Not much has hitherto been known about his early life. His father's name was Rajmoni Sen, and that of his mother was Shashibala Devi. A very meritorious student, Surya Sen was educated at Chittagong College, and later, at Bahrampur College, and took his BA from Calcutta University in 1918. Since his school days, Surya Sen had been strongly aware of the kind of India he lived in — an India full of colonial domination, an India in the grip of British imperialism. Yes, "history was at his back" — to use Camus' words, in that a series of risings against, and various forms of resistance to, British colonial domination could be seen earlier in the nineteenth century; one could see the Bareilly rising of 1816; the Colebrook of 1831-1832, and other minor risings in Chhota Nagpur and Palamu; the Farayeeze movements at Barasat (Bengal) in 1831 under the leadership of Syed Ahmed, and Titumeer, and later in 1847 at Faridpur under the leadership of Deedo Meer; the Moplah outbreaks in 1849, 1851, 1852, and 1855; and the Santal insurrection of 1855-1857. And, of course, there was this revolt of 1857-1859, which considerably shook the mighty fabric of British imperialism and colonialism. Then, quite close to Surya Sen's time, there was already the incident of the partition of Bengal in 1905; and in 1908, Khudi Ram Profullah Chaki were martyred, and this incident provided yet other impetus to the secret armed struggle in India which, however, in 1915, was only momentarily defeated. History itself was a burning driving force, an organising principle for Surya Sen who, during his very college-days, decided that he would organise a revolutionary group

or party. After his graduation, Surya Sen returned to Chittagong where he began teaching mathematics at a junior school. But, this was not all what he did. He began to organise and mobilise people and students — first at the level of *gnosis*, or consciousness, and then at the level of *praxis* or action.

Surya Sen was outwardly an ordinary-looking man. He had a short, frail body, but there was something about him giving one the impression that he was steered in the impenetrable armour of resolution. He talked less; but when he talked he meant more than he talked, and he could amply animate the conscience and consciousness of the audience. Within an unusually short stretch of time, he could enkindle the spirit of the youths, and became popular among them, and came to be known as "Master Da." Soon, Surya Sen got married to Pushpa Kuntala, and this marriage did not at all prove to be a self-limiting, conjugal bondage; but it further strengthened Surya Sen's will-to-action and will-to-dream, as he continued receiving support from his wife, particularly in times of crisis. It deserves special mentioning that it was Surya Sen who, among the few revolutionaries and freedom-fighters in India, could accommodate space for women's participation in the struggle for freedom.

True, Surya Sen was long involved in a secret armed struggle against British imperialism; but, then his participation in the non-cooperation movement initiated and launched by Gandhi could not be lost sight of. He left his job at school and organised his friends and students around this movement which, however, could not dissuade him from other organising activities at the same time. With assistance from Nirmal Sen Ambika, Surya Sen formed a secret revolutionary group, and

established an *asrama* known as "Shammyasrama" in Dewan Bazaar — in the middle of the town of Chittagong. In fact, it was the centre of party activities in the guise of an *asrama*. Was it that Surya Sen could foresee the limit of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement which was soon withdrawn? Whatever may be the case, the withdrawal of the movement could not stop Surya Sen's responsibilities; he only continued his struggle, evolving strategies after strategies. He had direct armed encounters with the British police; he had to lead the life of a fugitive now and then; he was imprisoned more than once, and finally, he was hanged to death by the British Government on 12 January, 1934. It was a death; but was not the death of a dream, and thus, not the death of a Surya Sen who is still alive in the heart of the revolutionaries.

Indeed, it is possible to recount Surya Sen's direct armed encounters and prison-life as thrilling stories. But, they are more than stories, and they reveal more than mere romanticism. True, in 1923, when he was about to be caught by the British police at the end of his armed confrontation with them, both Surya Sen and Ambika Chakravarty attempted to commit suicide by drinking poison. Then, their unconscious bodies were carried by the police, and later, they came back to life. This attempt-to-suicide was not to be seen as a betrayal of life, but as an assertion of life at the expense of a physical surrender to the British government. In fact, Surya Sen did not want to be defeated, nor even destroyed or killed by the British. Such was his deep-rooted hatred for British imperialism — which was yet another expression of his love for independence, his love for people in India.

Odds and adversaries, as one could see, were Surya Sen's constant companions. On April 18, 1930, the Indian Republican Army, under the leadership of Surya Sen, attacked the police and railway armories, and they were brought under his control. However, this attack was not a

dramatic, one-off effort; it was an outcome of struggle with odds and adversaries in terms of physical and financial mobilisation. But, Surya Sen's determined and youthful leadership made it even possible to hoist the national flag in place of the British one on April 18, 1930. The famous Jalalabad confrontation, although it took as many as 12 lives, marked the energy, *elan* and enthusiasm of a youthful freedom-fighter as Master Da Surya Sen was, out and out. For freedom, and only for freedom, Surya Sen dreamt, organised, acted, fled, bled, and above all, fought to the end. It is, in fact, the youthful will-to-fight-to-the-end which visibly characterised Surya Sen who was more an active freedom-fighter than anything else. Indeed, it was not he who was hanged to death, but it was his body, his unconscious and blood-stained; for, when he was being taken to the gallows, he attacked the accompanying military who, in turn, had beaten Surya Sen to a coma. This means that Surya Sen fought even at the very last moment, even in the face of the epistemological certitude of his death.

Now, looking back at Surya Sen is, on the one hand, to derive inspiration from history, from time past, in terms of courage and youthfulness exhibited by this great freedom-fighter; but is, on the other hand, to press ahead with the unfinished task — the struggle for freedom. In Bangladesh, Surya Sen, today, is not a memory or a myth to be submitted to the spell of annual rhetoric and canonisation, but he is very much amidst us as one of those leaders and guides who never yield to the pressures of colonialism and imperialism, and other anti-liberation forces. True, British colonialism came to an end; but then colonialism has not. Imperialism has had its vicious grip over this country, and fundamentalism has risen as one of the deadliest enemies of freedom and democracy. But, Surya Sen remains as long as the struggle against such enemies continues — as long as the struggle for freedom persists.

Tributes to a Martyr

by Professor Abdul Mannan Chowdhury

SURYA Sen was one of those Bengalees who made supreme sacrifices for freedom and emancipation. He was the commander in chief of youth revolt against the British rule. He also headed the provisional revolutionary government that captured Chittagong armories and as such an idol of many freedom loving patriotic youths in this part of the world.

Surya Sen was born in the village Noapara of Rowzan thana in Chittagong on 21st March 1894. He was educated at Chittagong and Bahrampur. He was teacher by profession and therefore was known as Masterda (teacher-elder). He taught, involved himself in politics and revolutionary activities to set up an egalitarian society.

Masterda was a great organiser and a dedicated soul. He was a member of the Congress but had little faith in the non-violent non-cooperation movement to drive out British from the Indian sub-continent. He did not ever believe that only ouster of the British would ensure emancipation of the masses. Therefore at the age of 25, Surya Sen in collaboration with Anurup Sen, Nagen Sen, Ambika Chakravarty and Chakrabarti Dutta floated the revolutionary centre, Ananta Singh, Afsaruddin, Nirmal Sen, Promod Choudhury and others were its initial members. Later on, there were differences of opinion with some of his colleagues as to the strategy of the revolutionary centre. This caused Surya Sen to organise Indian Republican Army Chittagong Branch.

Surya Sen recruited the young students and those who boycotted British education at the onset of Swadeshi and Khilafat movements. He and his colleagues allowed them to read profusely and trained them to become physically strong and stout. They were also involved in target shooting at the hills and jungles. For his revolutionary activities, Masterda was sent to jail several times. He was released

sometime in 1929 when he became secretary general of Chittagong district Congress. That gave him yet another opportunity to organise the students, youths, girls and ladies for his revolutionary cause. Although he had little faith in peaceful movement, he found Congress to camouflage and strengthen his clandestine Indian Republican Army.

In that period, a number of things happened. The Anusilan and Joganter parties geared up their activities. There were news of raids, attacks, counter attacks on British, their troops and installations. The looting of arms and ammunitions, the capital punishments to the revolutionaries and news of supreme sacrifices made the air heavy. In a nutshell, the whole of India was boiling and there were tidings of uprising here and there. Surya Sen and his colleagues thought these as objective conditions to stage a revolution, drive out the British and or a revolutionary government initially at Chittagong.

The revolutionaries agreed to conduct armed-struggle and even blood-bath for the cause of the people and suffering humanity. Masterda and his colleagues were waiting for the D-Day.

As commander in chief, Masterda was making all-round preparations. Some time elapsed in collecting arms, ammunition and preparing the group for assaults. The group members were imparted training to handle various kinds of arms, ride bikes and even drive motor cars, as well the art of hectic attacks and tactical withdrawal. The detailed operations plan to capture the Chittagong Armory, Auxiliary Armory, European Club as well, setting up of revolutionary government was finalised by Masterda and his closest colleagues. The other members were asked to procure military uniforms. After three months' detailed plan, other members were told of the plan on 14th April 1930. A group of 67 revolutionaries

were picked up for the D-Day. The whole command was divided into Assault group and Support group. The Assault group had 21 members subdivided into five units and rest were divided into six units. The task forces were created to capture two armories, demolish the European Club, disconnect the telegraph and telephone communications and disrupt the railway communication at Dhum and Langalkot. Arrangements were there to massacre the Europeans and set up a revolutionary government with Masterda as head of it. Masterda, in anticipation of the victory, circulated a leaflet in his name, to demonstrate mass disobedience on April 21, 1930. This was helpful to keep British eyes on mass disobedience.

The assault was planned for 18 April, 1930 at 8 pm but delayed arrival of logistic support caused the group to shift the time to 10pm; however, due to the absence of communication, the rail lines at Dhum and Langalkot were removed at about 8 pm. The assault at telegraph office started at 9.55. After making the telegraph office and telephone office inoperative, the group joined the assault group at the police armory. By that time, the police armory was captured by a group of seven under the leadership of Ananta and Ganesh.

Another group attacked the Auxiliary Armory, captured it, lifted many sophisticated arms and set the depot on fire. The union jack was pulled down, a new flag was hoisted and a revolutionary government was declared which solicited support from the countrymen and abroad.

Contrary to previous arrangements, the group then retreated to the hilly areas with huge cache of arms and ammunition. The European community, being terrorised, evacuated themselves to the floating ships in the Bay of Bengal. Later on information came that Gurkha, Jath and Sikh regiments were moving toward Chittagong. Perhaps that was the reason for Masterda's tactical retreat. On 22 April, Masterda made a move towards the town with 52 of his colleagues when they came under fire near the Jalalabad hill. A severe battle ensued in which the commander-in-chief also directly participated. In the battle Masterda lost twelve of his valiant revolutionaries. Two revolutionaries were seriously wounded.

The set-back disintegrated the group and they could not stage any large-scale operation. But, the members on instruction from their commander-in-chief or in isolation launched many strategic attacks at Chittagong, Fenil, Chandpur and also at Calcutta. Masterda maintained a fugitive life and masterminded many small operations. The British administration rushed behind him and caught him four years after the Chittagong armory raid. Masterda was hanged.

Today, Masterda is no more with us, but his revolutionary zeal and determination to fight injustice, exploitation and imperialist forces will inspire the generations to come. Surya Sen was the idol of all revolutionaries and freedom fighters at least in this part of the world. He will remain an example as long as people will think of emancipation. He is our pride but his legacy is only visible in Dhaka University. Besides this, there is hardly any effort to immortalise him; on the contrary, there are concerted efforts to degrade him as a terrorist in line with the British imperialists. Recently, a group occupied his homestead and destroyed the bust erected after him. Fortunately again, the country is presently watching a move to immortalise him through a mass demand to create Surya Sen Memorial Museum and name roads after him.

I had come in touch with the terrorist party in 1929. I did not know Masterda even by name at that time. A short while before the Chittagong armory raid I was told by one of our associates: "When you go to Chittagong this time I shall take you to our leader, Surya Sen."

But I missed him that time. Before I could get back to Chittagong, the armory raid had taken place in April 1930. The papers were talking of the daring raid under Surya Sen's leadership.

All sorts of things used to go round about Masterda. How he slipped through a police cordon, dressed like an old mali (gardener). How he was seen talking to village-folk dressed like a *sanyasi*. How he walked through village after village, in broad daylight, talking carelessly to a police officer companion — who did not know who he was talking to. There were scores of stories like this about Masterda.

Uneducated village-folk used to say Surya Sen knows mysterious mantras — nobody can catch him, he vanishes into thin air. He was a *superman* — what else can you call a man who kept the government on tenterhooks all the time?

In fact people used to make fun of the police and make monkeys out of them when their manhunt was on. Soldiers had been brought in from outside and were camping at Patia village. They had heard that Surya Sen was in the village. One night 200 to 300 soldiers cordoned off "Surya Sen's" house and asked the landlord in the morning, "Who are you?" The reply came, "Surya Sen." There was excitement, "Surya Sen? — which Surya Sen?" They asked eagerly, "Master Surya Sen" — was the quiet reply. The soldiers were overjoyed and arrested the man. They sent for the intelligence

Profile of a Revolutionary through the eyes of a fellow comrade

political work?" I got the impression from his tone that he did not like slackness in studies.

It was past two o'clock at night. Masterda had to go away well before dawn. So he went away, telling me he would see me again.

I was overwhelmed by this first meeting with Masterda. I felt a sense of joy, deep respect, wonder, a touch of fear — I felt as if I could do whatever he wanted me to do at a moment's notice. I was bursting to tell anyone I met after that — "I have talked to Surya Sen!" I used to tell my comrade Preeti Waddard, who had not seen Masterda: "Do you know, I think our Masterda is greater even than Doctora" (Doctora was the famous terrorist character in Sarat Chandra's Pather Dabi). Preeti used to say "Yes, I too think so."

After this first meeting I met Masterda several times. It seemed to me that all the legends about Masterda were true. I had told him once about the popular legends about him. He answered "Not all the stories are true. But they show that our countrymen love us. That is why they don't want to hand us over to the police. And they try to drown the constant fear that we might be caught by attributing superhuman powers to us."

I was arrested in September 1932. When I came out on bail after two months, Masterda sent instructions that I should abscond. It was not easy for him to take this decision. He became a terror-

ist revolutionary in 1918. His guru was present at his wedding night and he never lived with his wife for ten years till her death in 1928. It was an iron rule for the revolutionaries that they should keep aloof from women. Masterda told me one day, "I just could not make up my mind about letting girl revolutionaries abscond. But their bravery and steadiness made up my mind for me." He never hesitated to change his mind when he found he was wrong.

When I was absconding with him, Masterda used to tell me about Ananta Singh and Ganesh Ghosh. I used to get a very vivid idea of these colleagues of his from the way he described them and the warmth with which he spoke of them. He used to say "Whatever I have been able to do is because of them." There was a common saying in Chittagong, "As long as there is a Surya Sen, hundreds of Anantas and Ganeshs will be made."

He used to tell us how India would become free by fighting the way the Irish fought. It was when I was with him that I read Dan Breen's *My Fight For Irish Freedom* several times. Dan Breen was Masterda's ideal. He named his organisation the Indian Republican Army, Chittagong Branch after the Irish Republican Army. He himself was its president.

In June 1932 he was staying in Dhalghat village. Nirmal Sen was with him and Preeti Waddard had come to see him. The police got on the scent somehow and cordoned off the house. Both sides

opened fire and after a while both Captain Cameron and Nirmalda were wounded. Preeti was unknown to the police, she was not an absconder, she had merely come to see Masterda. But she could not abandon her wounded comrade, Nirmalda. It was not easy for Masterda to tear himself away from his life-long associate. But he did not believe in self-immolation. He had greater responsibilities on his shoulders. He tore himself away from Nirmalda together with Preeti.

I have heard other stories of his presence of mind. When the Dakshineswar bomb factory was discovered by the police some time about 1925, a three-storey building in Sovabazar (Calcutta) was also raided by the police the same night. Masterda and his companions used to stay here and work at Dakshineswar. He was a light sleeper and woke up at the first sound of footsteps about the house. He got up quickly and escaped while the police were busy arresting others in the room! He just walked past them out of the room and jumped on to the roof of an adjoining house. When the police finally woke up to the fact that Surya Sen was involved in the raid, he had escaped.

Nobody could make out Surya Sen by his appearance. Nirmalda, who was a giant of a man, was usually taken to be Masterda. But even then all classes of people have given him shelter. He was very particular about not bothering those who gave him and his

comrades shelter. By the end of 1932, police vigilance had slackened. They thought that after two years of search they could not find Surya Sen — he must have gone out of the district. That is why they had slackened their watch. But after the Pahartali raid and after Preeti and I began absconding, they were convinced that he was still in Chittagong. Soldiers were brought in again from outside and camps were set up in the villages to smell him out. Everyone advised Masterda to go out of Chittagong. He said: "No, the whole purpose of this underground struggle here is to build up an organisation here. I don't see why I should go out of action and merely keep myself safe."

February 1933. Masterda and I were going together to keep an appointment — I was in front. After we had taken a few steps forward rifle bullets began shrieking past. We had walked into a police cordon. I tried to run back the way we had come and saw one of our boys go down after being hit on the head. Then I ran to Masterda again in the bushes. He said: "I know you don't know the ins and outs of this place — so I was waiting for you." Then, after a few steps forward, I slipped into a pond. The Gurkhas ran up from behind and caught Masterda by the waist. That was how Surya Sen was caught. I never saw him again.

Three months after Masterda was caught I was arrested together with Tarakeswar Dashtidar. All three of us were

tried together. When I went to jail I found Masterda had taken it for granted that he would be hanged and was busy handing over charge. He used to explain the job to be done to Tarakeswar sitting in the dock in the court-room — he had the impression that Tarakeswar would not be hanged.

On 14 August 1933 he was sentenced to death. He tried to put us on our feet by telling us that appeals would be made to the High Court and the Privy Council, if necessary. He also assured me that he would see me before he was hanged.

He was hanged on 13 January 1934. But I did not know it. Much later, in Rajshahi jail, Chittagong prisoners told me that he was hanged at midnight despite all conventions. His relatives were not given charge of the body. He left his torch behind for us to carry forward.

I just could not believe that Masterda was no more. But I had taken a vow: I shall carry forward your heritage!

In May 1939 I had just come out of jail. A hawk said, "The day they hanged Surya Sen the sun did not dawn."

The spirit of Surya Sen is still alive in Chittagong. But it has to fight an uphill battle against corrupt elements in our society who have grown strong and powerful profiteers, war contractors, those who trade in destitute women on mass scale. Those of us who worked with him are filled with shame that Surya Sen's Chittagong should be reduced to its present plight. But we have sworn never to give up the battle which Surya Sen began.

The writer, one of the revolutionaries groomed by Surya Sen, participated in the Chittagong Armory Raid. The above are excerpts from her book "Chittagong Armory Raiders."